

Jewish messianism culminating in the rise and dissemination of Sabbatianism

- An excursion into messianic *Kabbalah* and its theological enterprises -

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to Professor J. F. (Hans) Janse van Rensburg who opened the doors of the academic world for me. He understood when, initially, I ran away in fear; and supported me later, when I was ready to enter. Throughout, he has remained my dear friend and caring mentor. I'll never forget how, at our first meeting at a shopping mall, this highly respected scholar sat waiting for me on a bench with a scrap of paper upon which was humbly written "Hans".

In gratitude

I thank my supervisor, Professor Dirk Human, most sincerely for the boundless care and support he had shown me. He has gone far beyond the call of duty and his unique synthesis of professionalism and warm-heartedness will always be an inspiration for me. Professor Human is so much more than a supervisor, he is an archetype of the scholastic master and I am honoured to be his student.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

I discovered academic Jewish studies relatively recently. Many years after my initial yeshiva training and subsequent service in the rabbinate (which is still ongoing), I met some Jewish academics who opened up a vast and fascinating world I barely knew existed.

The first of these academics was Rabbi Dr Natan Slifkin who showed me that there actually was, within classical Jewish theology, a great clash between *Rationalist* and *Mystical* Judaism (Slifkin 2021). This basic, fundamental and core understanding of the distinction between these two very different streams of Jewish thought, left a lasting impression on me when I realised that *Kabbalah* was not the *raison d'être* of Judaism. Missing that point, makes everything else a montage, if not a blur, albeit a comfortable and reassuring one, living and thinking within the neat categorisations of the hierarchical structures of the spiritual and mystical realms without the awareness that an alternative system of Orthodox Jewish rationalist thought may exist.

Whichever side of the mystical/rationalist debate one chooses to take, I do not know how anyone can approach a serious study of Jewish theology without an acute awareness of this differential, and the spiritual tension and angst that follows in its wake. What I mean by this is that in any theological system, foundational concepts such as 'angels' or a 'supernatural messiah', for example, either exist or they do not. Mystical Judaism and *Kabbalah* claim they do, rationalist Judaism - as per Maimonides' (1135-1204) philosophical writings - claims that angels are perceived in the imagination and do not manifest as reality, and the messiah and messianic age are natural progressional developments and not supernatural revelations.¹ The outcomes and consequences of these two systems are fundamentally different. It must be clear that the events subject to investigation in this inquiry took place exclusively within the framework of mystical Judaism. They could not have transpired within a predominantly rationalist theological environment.

¹ Maimonides, Guide For the Perplexed, II:41 and 42.

Aryeh Kaplan, a rabbi and a nuclear physicist, who researched *Kabbalah* from original texts, similarly shares his discovery of the same polarity of theological *Weltanschauungen*:

“I gradually realized that Jewish philosophy [i.e. rationalist thought]² almost comes to an abrupt end in the 14th and 15th centuries. And from there on, almost all of Jewish thought and theology is dominated by Kabbalah” (Kaplan 2017:n.p.).

James Robinson similarly identifies the fifteenth century as the period when the abrupt demise of rationalist Jewish philosophy occurred. He writes:

“[W]ith [Yitzchak] Arama [1420-1494] and [Don Yitzchak] Abarbanel [1437-1508]³ we can recognize the beginning of the end for philosophical exegesis” (Robinson 2011:475).

It is, accordingly, quite evident that Jewish rationalist thought as championed by Maimonides had been all but obliterated from the theological discourse by the fifteenth century leaving mystical Judaism as the only viable option. Mystical groups like the sixteenth-century *Safed* and *Lurianic kabbalists*, as well as the seventeenth-century Sabbatians, flourished in such a theological environment, perhaps in part, because no rationalist alternatives were available to the people. This trend continued - bar for a small group of Yemenite Maimonidean rationalists known as *Talmidei haRambam*, or *Baladi* (Tobi 1999:113-114) - until relatively recently when academics began re-examining the lost philosophical and rationalist thought of Maimonides.

Matt Goldish (2004:ix), a student of Moshe Idel, writes about his first exposure to academic Judaism:

“Gershom Scholem’s magisterial work...was my introduction not only to the phenomenon of Sabbateanism, but in many ways also to academic Jewish studies...I marvelled at the annals of Jewish culture

² Parenthesis is mine. Rationalist Maimonidean thought is frequently referred to as ‘philosophy’ and Maimonides (1135-1204) is referred to as *haPilosoph*, *the Philosopher*, as he was influenced by Aristotelian (384-322 BCE) thought.

³ Parentheses are mine.

I encountered...the unexpected mirror of the Judaism I knew from my yeshivah experience. My private reading...about the strange intrigues of the kabbalists and Sabbateans captured my imagination and has never let go” (Goldish 2004:ix).

Although I lean to the side of the rationalists, I am intrigued by the expediency and sometimes audacity of mystical thought, while I know that some would say the same about its rationalist counterpart. I had a background exposure to a milder form of mysticism, through *Chassidic* thought, and initially viewed all of Judaism through that prism. My later academic interest in mysticism proved to be, like Goldish, my “*unexpected mirror of the Judaism I knew from my yeshivah experience*”. Understanding that Judaism was not just a mystical religion, spawned my interest to see just how far the mystics were prepared to go with their “*strange intrigues*”.

Sabbatianism, a movement I had only come across incidentally in my previous studies, was something I thought was exactly that: incidental, insignificant and inconsequential. Shaul Magid writes:

“It is safe to say that most college courses on modern Jewish thought, history, or culture do not begin with the mystical messiah Sabbatai Ẓvi. And it is even safer to say that most courses on modern religion in Europe do not include Sabbatai Ẓvi and the movement that arose in his wake” (Magid 2018:463).

Shabbatai Tzvi is an ignored footnote to Jewish history, a short flicker of a delusional flame that was soon extinguished, and he obviously (or, so I thought) had no foundational basis in any previous authentic mystical tradition, and certainly had no influence on any subsequent movements. However, my recent exploration of this Sabbatian phenomenon - with the roots of its mystical thought, according to Scholem (1941:285),⁴ deeply within mainstream *Lurianic Kabbalah* and its unlikely influence particularly on the Chassidic movement which followed immediately thereafter - has

⁴ Not all scholars, however, agree with Scholem on the pivotal role *Lurianic Kabbalah* played in formulating *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. The other dissenting views will be addressed later on in this investigation.

revealed that Sabbatianism was one of the most powerful forces of Jewish history. This Sabbatian phenomenon is the focus of my investigation.

It can be well argued that the cataclysmic advent of the false Messiah Shabbatai Tzvi (1626⁵-1676) was one of the most significant events in the early modern period⁶ of Jewish history (Barnai 2014: 94-570). This is also why I chose this subject as my field of investigation. The Jewish world was known to have been rife with, and infiltrated by, large numbers of secret Sabbatians who went underground after their leader's apostasy and demise, and they were determined to clandestinely spread the messianic and mystical fervour that were the hallmarks of Sabbatianism. According to Goldish:

"Many of the widely read English-language surveys of Jewish history suggest that after the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi to Islam in 1666, only a few followers continued to believe in Sabbatai's messianic mission... [however, s]cholars of Sabbateanism have long known that this is a misleading picture" (Goldish 2020:113-114).

Large numbers of secret Sabbatians permeated not just the general population but even the rabbinic world:

"A significant number of Jews, especially scholars, remained fully committed to Sabbatai and Sabbatean theology through both the apostasy and the expiration of their messiah" (Goldish 2020:114).

Before the seventeenth century, mysticism was largely elitist (Elior 2012:94-95) and the domain of only a few scholarly *kabbalists*. Shabbatai Tzvi, through his use (and abuse) of mysticism, had arguably created the largest Jewish mystical and messianic movement in history:

⁵ Scholem (1941:289) puts Shabbatai Tzvi's birth date at 1625.

⁶ The early *modern period* is usually defined as spanning from c. 1500 to around c. 1800. Online source: "The Early Modern Period." Encyclopedia of European Social History. Encyclopedia.com. 12 Jan. 2021 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>. Retrieved on 27 January 2021.

“It was the most widespread and influential Jewish messianic movement since Christianity” (Goldish 2018:419).

Although it failed to yield the awaited Jewish Messiah when Shabbatai Tzvi converted to Islam on September 15, 1667 (Scholem 1987:265), the masses had had a taste of mysticism and they wanted more. This study explores the history, influences, causes and mystical theology of the Sabbatian movement which left the Jewish world of the late seventeenth century in a state of upheaval and perhaps in one of the most precarious and vulnerable positions of its long past. It is my contention - which I leave for a further study - that this precariousness and vulnerability laid them potentially open for the next major movement which appeared on the Jewish horizon, Chassidism.

On a personal but important note: Constant nuances run intentionally like a thread throughout this investigation and should not be lost in the seemingly tedious details of the history and technicalities of the theology. I write this discourse as a practising Orthodox community rabbi, with *yeshiva* training from three continents in both the *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* camps, humbly aware of, and fascinated by, the tensions and currents of contemporary Jewish thought. In a very deep sense, I write about what I witness today through the idiom of this research on the past.

1.2 Motivation and relevance

I am drawn to this period of Jewish history on so many different levels. Firstly, in my view, Jewish religious history is not just history as interesting as that history may be. Jewish religious history forms the kernels of the *hashkafa* or *theological worldview* in which Jews live and operate today. Sabbatianism, for example, went on to influence future Jewish ideologies in various ways. Without knowledge of the genesis of current dominant theologies (which we sometimes take for granted as if they were always there without having undergone a process of development and evolution), we can never fully understand these theologies. Seen this way, particularly *theological history* is no longer just history, it becomes the very essence and core of the *theology* itself. Understanding where an ideology may have come from must inform our understanding of the relevance of the ideology itself, as opposed to a mere blind acceptance of that ideology.

Secondly, leaving theology aside for a moment – even (or especially) in religion, facts matter. Shabbatai Tzvi was generally recognised as a false Messiah after his apostasy to Islam, but very few know just how large and successful his movement once was. According to some estimates, the *majority* of the Jewish population in the world during the seventeenth century believed Shabbatai Tzvi to have been the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. We see, for example, that there is no record of any opposition to Sabbatianism in Poland (Scholem 1987:262).

In this study, I trace the developmental patterns of Jewish messianism. Judaism has a rich ancient and modern history of rabbis who claimed to have been the Messiah. I focus on the Sabbatian movement because it stands out as having an unparalleled influence on so many people. Messianic movements have always had large followings but never with numbers like this. Furthermore, this large number included respected rabbis and *halachic* leaders who expounded on religious law, yet they endorsed Shabbatai Tzvi, and as we shall see, many even adhered to his ideology after his death (Scholem 1987:265). This was later to become an embarrassment to the community and attempts were made to destroy some of the historical communal records, “*on the order of the rabbis*” (Scholem 1987:266).

Some scholars like Heinrich Graetz wrote much about Shabbatai Tzvi and general Jewish messianic expectations, but “*he was embarrassed by them and tried to attribute them to foreign influences*” (Goldish 2020/2021:71-2). However, scholars like Gershom Scholem show that Sabbatianism emerged as a direct consequence of *internal* mystical ideologies, particularly *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

Although Sabbatianism is often just ignored by Jewish history, in reality, it was the mould which gave form to almost every Jewish movement which followed, religious and secular; including orthodoxy, modern Zionism, and even (or particularly) Chassidism:

“Sabbatianism is the matrix of every significant movement to have emerged in the 18th and 19th century, from Hasidism to Reform Judaism, to the earliest Masonic circles and revolutionary idealism” (Carlebach 1990:15).

No religious movement springs from a vacuum. If this is true of religious movements in general, it is particularly discernible in mystical movements, especially as they begin to develop a sophisticated ideology and leave a written paper trail.

The earliest forms of Jewish mysticism, known as *Heichalot* and *Merkava* literature gave rise to the later thirteenth-century mysticism of the *Zohar*, which in turn paved the way for the sixteenth-century *Lurianic Kabbalah*. *Lurianic Kabbalah* is recognised as the crucible from which modern Chassidism was formed. Between *Lurianic Kabbalah* and Chassidism is the often ignored but highly prevalent and significant Sabbatian movement. And common to all these mystical movements throughout the ages are their inevitable “Messiahs” who become the human products and embodiments of the various theosophies.

This does not mean that all these movements are identical but rather that common structurally integral threads run through them. These subliminal bonds must be identified so that the entire assembly be understood within the context of its mystical content and setting, which predominantly is the people themselves.

The motivation behind this study is to show the effects of mysticism on messianism. I show that messianism, predominantly over the last one thousand years, is most often related to mysticism. Wherever mysticism flourishes, so does messianism. By digging deeply into the roots of Jewish messianism in general and Sabbatianism in particular, I trace their roots in mysticism and their expansion and acceptance within mainstream Judaism even when many thought the movements to be dead.

This excursus into messianic mysticism is relevant for today's times when messianic fervour is rife within the contemporary Jewish community. Belief in a Messiah is one thing, but as I demonstrate, the belief that the Jewish world has never before experienced messianic birth pangs like those of this current era is simply not in keeping with the historical record.

1.3 Research problem

Sabbatianism is a movement uncontestably regarded by Orthodox Jews today as a heretical and antinomian movement. Nevertheless, implicit throughout this study is the irony of Sabbatianism having been so deeply rooted within the mainstream community of the seventeenth century. I pay much attention to investigating the *causes* of the

movement and also allude to its significant *influence* on the future Chassidic movement (which I pursue in a forthcoming study).

The research problem becomes inherently complex because there is bitter controversy at both these junctures. Both the *causes* of Sabbatianism as well as its *influence* on future Judaism are mired in conflicting perspectives and oftentimes emotive points of view.

It is a sensitive and complicated matter because at one stage, “almost all” of the respected rabbis of that era gave their approbation to the Shabbatai Tzvi. The upper secular class supported it as well (Zeitlin 1979:100). Eventually, they were all to be disappointed and the rabbis, particularly, had to carefully retract later. Yet many rabbis remained ambivalent to the essential principles of the movement which continued to allure the rabbinic leadership as well as the followers even after the death of Shabbatai Tzvi (Kahana 2012:589-616). There were secret Sabbatian networks within the underground world of Sabbatian rabbis in important leadership positions, and this indicates how the movement continued to exert a significant influence on the mainstream:

“Seventy-five years after the death of Sabbatai Zevi in 1676 in remote Albania, Sabbateanism remained an issue of major public concern for Jewish society...But no less disturbing was the percolation of Sabbatean ideas into mainstream writings” (Kahana 2012:589).

And most tellingly:

“[T]here was no sharp differentiation between a *magid* or kabbalistic preacher, on the one hand, and a hidden Sabbatean heretic, on the other” (Kahana 2012:595).

This means that long after Shabbatai Tzvi’s death, there were still no clear boundaries that existed between Sabbatians and Jewish mystics or *kabbalists*. Sabbatianism was an extremely powerful ideological force that pervaded and must have influenced much of post-Shabbatai Tzvi Judaism.

The main research problem in this study, however, is the array of opposing scholarship as to the causes of the Sabbatian movement in the first place. Scholem insists on the sixteenth-century *Lurianic Kabbalah*, based on the teachings of R.

Yitzchak Luria, the Ari (1534-1572), as the key catalyst in the mixture of possible causes. *Lurianic Kabbalah* is pregnant with messianism and it created a culture of messianic tension which Scholem (1941:247) referred to as “catastrophe,” and which could only be neutralised by the actual appearance of a Messiah less than a century later. Scholem describes the rise of *Lurianism* as follows:

“The birthpangs of the Messianic era, with which history is to ‘end’ or (as the apocalypics would have it) to ‘collapse,’ were therefore assumed to have set in with the Expulsion [from Spain in 1492]⁷” (Scholem 1941:247).

Scholem explains that with time, the post-expulsion messianism began to wane until they were fanned and “recast” by the new *Lurianic Kabbalah*, and:

“once the catastrophic had been sown as a fertile seed in the heart of this new [Lurianic]⁸ Kabbalah, its teachings were bound to lead to that further catastrophe which became acute with the Sabbatian movement” (Scholem 1941:247).

Scholem, in general, always writes about ‘catastrophic’ messianism:

“Jewish messianism in its origins and by its nature - this cannot be sufficiently emphasized - is a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future” (Scholem 1979:7).

If this was true of traditional Jewish messianism it was even more relevant to Lurianic and Sabbatian messianism. However, Scholem’s elegant arguments create a host of controversy and research problems.

Moshe Idel, parts ways with Scholem’s view of messianism and claims that Scholem was too ‘apocalyptic’ and overly concerned with messianic ‘catastrophe.’ Idel suggests that redemption on a more personal level, in terms of the individual reaching

⁷ Parenthesis is mine.

⁸ Parenthesis is mine.

'perfection' is already redemptive and that this was indeed the focus of earlier *Kabbalah*. Idel also introduces the notion of astronomy which was an important component of this earlier *Kabbalah* and maintains that Shabbatai Tzvi would have been cognisant of these cosmic patterns (see section 5.3).

Joseph Citron also challenges Scholem and claims more generally that messianic ideas were always pervasive within the Jewish communities as part of their basic tradition:

"[T]he anticipation of the messiah was an essential component of the religious faith of Jewish communities of Europe and North Africa... My main thesis argues that despite Shabbatai's idiosyncrasies, the popular willingness within European communities to follow him was not primarily a reaction to desperate circumstances or even a reflection of an emergent mysticism but was due to their continued loyalty to normative Judaism" (Citron, undated thesis:5-6).

Citron (n.d) thus advocates for a return to more traditional Jewish beliefs as being primary influences in the Sabbatain movement (see section 5.4).

Yehuda Liebes (1993) introduces the notion of the Sabbatian idea of spiritual redemption *from* religion and it extended to the very redemption *of* God Himself (see section 5.5).

Matt Goldish, like Idel his teacher, points out that:

"Lurianic Kabbalah is also not nearly as focused on exile and redemption as Scholem suggests. Another major point Idel makes is that Sabbatai was not a student of Lurianic Kabbalah at all, but of the older works, the Zohar, Kanah, and Peli'ah" (Goldish 2018:506).

Goldish goes on to speak of social influences including an "*outbreak*" of prophetic experiences which took hold of the masses. These common '*prophetic*' events were then spread by mimicry throughout the population (see section 5.6).

Stephen Sharot adds to the chorus against Scholem:

"Only some of the Lurianic books published in Europe stressed the messianic implications of the doctrine, and no evidence indicates that

the notion of tikkun spread beyond small groups of mystics...To explain the movement as a result of contact with the Lurianic cabbalah, one must show that the small cabbalistic circles had a considerable influence on the Jewish masses in 1666” (Sharot 1983:101).

Scholem writes that there was a large demand for mystical books in Poland during the sixteenth century and that many *kabbalistic* works were published in the printing houses of Cracow and Lublin (Scholem1973:77). However, according to Bernard Weinryb, only about 10 per cent of the almost three hundred works produced in Cracow and Lublin between 1547 and 1660 were mystical (Weinryb, 1972: 225-26). I would argue that considering the demand for copious liturgical and other basic *Halachic* and *Talmudic* publications, ten per cent of all those publications being of a mystical nature is indeed a substantial number.

Either way, David Ruderman (1993) is of the view that instead of *Lurianic Kabbalah* being an influence on Sabbatianism, rather it was the Sabbatians who spread *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see section 5.7).

Stephen Sharot (1982) suggests that because support for Sabbatianism can be traced to geographical areas when *Sefaradim* and *Marranos* were dominant, there must have been some antagonism to their ‘new’ religion when they ‘converted back’ to Judaism as, being raised as Christians, they expected a broader type of ‘biblical Judaism’ based on their reading of the Bible. They did not understand rabbinic Judaism or its *Halacha*. This led to a spiritual unease that they felt could only be cured by a redemptive and messianic process. Later, there was also something in Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy that resonated particularly with them, as they too had been forced to baptize.

Jacob Barnai (1992), as if to complicate the research problem even further, is of the view that the main investigations into Sabbatianism in the recent past were conducted by specialists in Jewish mysticism and not by historians. Goldish points out that Barnai is hinting at Scholem. Barnai lists twenty-one possible influences and causes of Sabbatianism which he collected from various scholars. They are as follows:

“[T]he spread of Kabbalah (particularly the Lurianic strain), the decline of Torah scholarship, wars in Europe and the Ottoman Empire,

political shifts around the globe, Christian millenarian expectations, Muslim mysticism and messianism, the movements of mass prophecy, oppression by Christians, Jewish messianic expectations, the Khmelnitsky uprisings of 1648–9, improvements in communications, the impact of conversos, economic crises, the Land of Israel as an active center of Jewish life, the messianic proclivities of Sephardic and eastern Jewries, the advent of print, the personality of Sabbatai Zevi, ideological shifts in Europe such as the Renaissance and Reformation, the influence of Sabbatai's wife, astrological thinking, and social tensions within Jewish society" (See Goldish 2018:507).

All this adds to the research problem. There were some Sabbatian 'exposers' such as R. Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) and R. Yakov Sasportas (1610-1698) who identified a number of the influential rabbis still clandestinely harbouring Sabbatian loyalties who contributed to the development and leadership of the Jewish world at that time, even when many thought it was all over. As we begin to discover the identities of these rabbis and realise just how powerful and influential they were, it makes it all the more necessary to unravel these research problems to attain a critical understanding of the foundations, structure, and significant impact of the Sabbatian movement.

In this study, I return to the classical view of Scholem, albeit with some moderation, and thereby attempt to harmonise many of the disparate views on the causes of the Sabbatian movement.

1.4 Aims and objectives

The main aims of this investigation are:

- Firstly, to identify the causes, behaviours, attitudes and consequences of Jewish messianism, their related theologies and resultant messianic claimants from 500 BCE up to the seventeenth century, culminating in the emergence of Shabbatai Tzvi and the establishment of the Sabbatian movement.
- Secondly, to examine the causes and influences of Sabbatian ideology and practices, with a particular focus on the *Lurianic* mystical movement and its *Kabbalah* immediately preceding Sabbatianism. I argue for a return to the

classical view of Scholem but with some modification to his argument, based on my observation of the process of rabbinic authority.

- Thirdly to show that, although marginalised, there is another theological stream running parallel to *Jewish mysticism* and that is *Jewish rationalism* as advanced by the early rationalist rabbis such as Maimonides. These two very different approaches have a direct bearing on the definition and nature of messianism, Messiah and redemption.
- Fourthly, to determine whether or not a potential for further Sabbatian influences continued to exist by the end of the seventeenth century that was sturdy enough to contain seeds for further perpetuation into the next century. In this study, my intention is only to show a potential for this influence which is something I shall develop further in a future study.

The objectives of this study are:

I. To present an introduction, discuss motivation and relevance, define the research problem, outline the aims and objectives, define the research methodology, advance a hypothesis, present a chapter division, describe terminology and orthography, and provide a list of abbreviations:

- The Introduction explains why I became interested in academic Judaism and the rather obscure topic of Sabbatianism. It elucidates the importance of understanding that Judaism has both a mystical and rationalist component and I argue that messianic movements are always related to the mystical stream. In the absence of a viable rationalist Jewish theology which had been all but obliterated by the mystical revival and opposition to Maimonideanism, messianism began to flourish, eventually culminating in the largest Jewish messianic movement, Sabbatianism. This movement, in my view, was quintessential in forming certain foundational theological layers upon which the Chassidic movement was soon to establish itself.
- The research problem deals with the difficulty of researching Sabbatianism, which could aptly be described as the ‘elephant in the room’ of Jewish history. The emotive issues involved in researching a religious phenomenon that, within a short period of time, went from being endorsed by most of the respected

rabbis of the generation - to being regarded as a pariah, yet still maintaining an inescapable allure for the leadership as well as the followers (Kahana 2012:589-616), make for a difficult topic to research. The research problem is compounded by much of post-Scholem scholarship, which disagreed with his claim of a strong Lurianic influence as a major cause of the Sabbatian movement. I argue for a return to the older and unpopular view of Scholem, but with some modification, and propose that the mysticism of *Lurianic Kabbalah* had a direct and powerful influence on the Sabbatian movement.

II. To portray the history of Jewish messianism and messianic claimants from 500 BCE up to the seventeenth century and the advent of Shabbatai Tzvi.

- To introduce the concept and theology of early Jewish messianism as it evolved from around 500 BCE.
- To examine the enterprises of messianic claimants from 132 CE up until just before Shabbatai Tzvi; including Bar Kochva, Moshe of Crete, the Messiah of Pallughtha, Severus, Abu-Isa, Moshe Al-Dari, David Alro'i, Avraham Abulafia, David Reuveni, Shlomo Molcho and Asher Lemlein.
- To discuss the theoretical difference between 'false' and 'potential' Messiahs.
- To show how theurgic and messianic study circles began to develop immediately after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in the late fifteenth century.

III. To describe the battle for the soul of the Ari. *Lurianic Kabbalah* is not a monolithic system because the various students of the Ari often claimed to represent their master more authentically than the other. This, coupled with the fact that the Ari did not commit his teachings to writing, makes it impossible to speak of one *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

- To describe the different *Lurianic* teachings of Yosef Ibn Tabul, Chaim Vital Calabrese, Moshe Yonah, Yisrael Sarug, Natan Nata Shapira and Meir Poppers.
- To discuss new innovative mystical prayers and practices that resulted from *Lurianic* influences.

IV. To present an account of the rise of the mystical Sabbatian movement with attention to the following:

- The ancestry of Shabbatai Tzvi; his religious education and proficiency in Torah study; his personality, charismatic leadership, personal life, asceticism; his veneration as the 'Messiah'; the fifteen quiet years; his time in Salonica, Athens, Cairo and Jerusalem; his endorsement by Natan of Gaza; Sabbatian innovations and emphasis on particularistic customs; their questionable morality; R. Chaim Benveniste and the blurring of boundaries between Sabbatianism and mainstream Judaism; Shabbatai Tzvi's fame spreading from Smyrna to the world; R. Shmuel Primo; Shabbatai Tzvi's apostasy to Islam; excommunication of those who did not believe in Shabbatai Tzvi and religious terrorism; and the elevation and redemption of women.

V. To discuss the root causes of the Sabbatian movement including a literature review of the various perspectives:

- To present Gershom Scholem's view of *Lurianic Kabbalah* as a direct cause of the Sabbatian movement; Moshe Idel on the notion of personal redemption and astronomy; Joseph Citron's view of a more traditional belief in a Messiah; Yehuda Liebes on the Sabbatian concept of redemption; Matt Goldish and the centrality of the belief in prophecy; David Ruderman and the Sabbatian movement as a catalyst for the spread of *Lurianic Kabbalah*; Stephen Sharot and the powerful *Marrano* lobby; my arguments in favour of the (unpopular) view of Scholem; the *Kabbalistic* work *Gali Razaya* as an influence on Sabbatianism

VI. To present Maimonides' natural Messiah as opposed to the mystical Messiah of the *Tosafists*:

- To discuss the mystical *Tosafists*; Maimonides and his rationalist conception of the messianic era; Maimonides and his Thirteen Principles of Faith.

VII. To present a Synthesis of the above study.

- To provide a complete Bibliography.

1.5 Research methodology

1.5.1 Descriptive

This is primarily a literature study. The research methodology I adopt is both descriptive and evaluative. I present a historical and theological study of the milieu leading up to, surrounding and enduring after Shabbatai Tzvi, and then try to evaluate how these facts and ideas are related to the larger picture of Jewish theology. In so doing, I investigate relevant historical sources, to place this research on a solid factual foundation.

Additionally, because this is also a theological inquiry, traditional sources, as well as academic research sources, are consulted in an attempt at gaining a fuller and more critical understanding of Sabbatian ideology and its place within the mystical schema.

1.5.2 Evaluative

The study will show where various descriptive approaches to Sabbatianism overlap and where they contradict each other. Sources and views are evaluated and analysed for their relevance to the various arguments and particularly for their bearing on current theology.

1.5.3 Explanative

Within the descriptive methodology, I also employ an explanative approach by showing how the empirical history may have shaped, and been shaped by, mystical considerations and messianic pressures.

1.5.4 Textual

Various earlier texts are evaluated with the view to show possible influences on *Sabbatian Kabbalah*.

1.6 Hypothesis

I hypothesise that there is always a relatively direct link between each major successive mystical movement in Judaism. I argue that mysticism always precedes

messianism. Therefore Sabbatianism, essentially, had to be the resultant force of its mystical predecessor, Lurianic Kabbalah. If my hypothesis is correct, it follows that Sabbatianism had, in some manner, to have been the predecessor of the mysticism that followed in its wake: - Chassidism. Esotericism always spills over into the public domain (Scholem1979:69) making these influences relatively easy to trace.

1.7 Chapter division

Chapter 1 contains the introduction, motivation and relevance, the research problem, an outline of the aims and objectives, the research methodology, the hypothesis, the chapter division, an explanation of the terminologies and orthography, and a list of abbreviations.

Chapter 2 is a historical and theological examination of Jewish messianism and messianic claimants from 500 BCE up to just before Shabbatai Tzvi. It discusses Bar Kochva, Moshe of Crete, the Messiah of Pallughtha, Severus, Abu-Isa, Moshe Al-Dari, David Alro'i, Avraham Abulafia, the messianic duo of David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho, and Asher Lemlein. This is followed by a discussion on the apologetics of 'false' and 'potential' messiahs. The chapter concludes with an investigation into the messianic study circles which began to emerge in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, and which continued to exert their influence right up to the time of the Chassidic movement.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of what is known as "*the writings of the Ari*"⁹ and shows how there was a veritable battle for the soul of the Ari. This was because of the many lenses through which *Lurianic* teachings were reflected by the students and editors of the Ari. It is for this reason that there is no single authoritative version of *Lurianic Kabbalah* - which by all accounts was at least a significant influencing factor in the rise of the Sabbatian movement. It discusses the tensions between Yosef Ibn Tabul, Chaim Vital Calabrese, Moshe Yonah, Yisrael Sarug, Natan Nata Shapira, and Meir Poppers. The chapter concludes with a brief presentation of some of the new mystical

⁹ R. Yitzchak Luria (1534-1572), also known as the *Ari*, or *Lion*, was the founder of what became known as *Lurianic Kabbalah* or *Kitvei haAri*, the *writings of the Ari*.

prayers and practices which were introduced to the mainstream in the aftermath of the *Lurianic* movement.

Chapter 4 is a biographical account of the rise of the seventeenth-century Sabbatian movement, touching upon the ancestry, religious education, personality, charisma, personal life, asceticism, travels, and eventual apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi. It shows how he was endorsed as the Messiah by a leading kabbalist, Natan of Gaza, and introduces other leading personalities in the movement. After discussing the backlash against all those who tried to oppose the movement and who were forced to endure excommunication and religious terrorism, the chapter concludes with a look at the elevation and ascendancy of women in Sabbatian ideology.

Chapter 5 is the theological heart of this study, analysing the possible root causes of the Sabbatian movement. 1) It begins with a presentation of the classical view of Gershom Scholem that *Lurianic Kabbalah*, with its intense mystical and messianic tensions, was the primary influencing factor that led to the mysticism and messianism of the Sabbatian movement. A scholarly debate follows with opposing opinions by: 2) Moshe Idel, who speaks to the notion of personal redemption over cosmic redemption and astrological considerations as an influencing factor; 3) Joseph Citron, who proposes the view of the already extant traditional belief in a Messiah as an overarching influence; 4) Yehuda Liebes, who suggests the Sabbatian concept of redemption was more in line with *personal*, *mystical* and *spiritual* redemption, not necessarily *national* redemption; 5) Matt Goldish, who describes the centrality of prophecy and mimicry as a dominating sociological phenomenon at that time; 6) David Ruderman, who takes the position that instead of *Lurianic Kabbalah* influencing Sabbatianism, it was Sabbatianism that acted as a catalyst for the spread of *Lurianic Kabbalah*; 7) Stephen Sharot who sees a strong *Marrano* component in the followers of the Sabbatian movement; 8) My argument for another solution which leans heavily in favour of the (unpopular) view of Scholem - although with some modification. I propose the notion that in the rabbinic world all that is necessary to tip the scales, is a 'critical mass' (not by *numbers* but by rabbinic *authority*) to sway the theology of a generation. In the case of Sabbatianism, that critical mass was already profoundly under the influence of *Lurianic Kabbalah*. This way *Lurianic Kabbalah* can once again be considered a major influence, but with a different dynamic. 9) The chapter

concludes with a look at another mystical influence besides *Lurianic Kabbalah*, the *kabbalistic* work, *Gali Razaya* as a possible theological inspiration for Sabbatianism. This supports my hypothesis that mysticism of any genre, always precedes some eschatological event.

Chapter 6 is an excursus into the rationalist world of Maimonides and shows how he differed from his contemporary and mystical *Tosafists* on the matter of messianism. While the mystics were expounding their conception of a supernatural Messiah and a cataclysmic and apocalyptic messianic age, Maimonides described a more natural, this-worldly messianic era achieved by a natural and intellectual evolution of humankind. It touches on the seemingly contradictory issue of Maimonides incorporating a messianic belief in his Thirteen Principles of Faith and discusses the reception of the Principles by the wider rabbinic world. I incorporate the rationalist view to act as a theological counterweight to popular and radical messianism which commands the underlying attention of this investigation.

Chapter 7 is the summary, synthesis and conclusion of this study. I try to show how the four primary aims of this study have been achieved: 1) the examination of Jewish messianism and messianic claimants between 500 BCE up to Shabbatai Tzvi; 2) the examination of the causes and influences of Sabbatian ideology, with a defence of Scholem's view of *Lurianic Kabbalah* as the major influence with my proposed modification of a rabbinic critical mass as the means of vertical transmission of tradition; 3) the examination of a rationalist Maimonidean messianism to counter the popularist mystical version; 4) the examination of a significant residual underground Sabbatian influence during the period between Sabbatianism and Chassidism, to prepare a foundation for a future study.

1.8 Terminology and orthography

1.8.1 Terminologies

Terminologies used in this study are explained as follows:

Aggada

The non-legal aspects of rabbinic literature. “*Ancient Jewish lore forming especially the nonlegal part of the Talmud*” (Merriam Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary).¹⁰

¹⁰ Online source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Aggadah>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Amora

A sage from the Amoraic period (210-450/500 CE) *“A term which designates the ‘interpreter,’ who communicated audibly to the assembled pupils the lessons of the rabbinic teacher. It is also used as a generic term for the rabbis of the post-Mishnaic period, whose activities were centred on the interpretation of the Mishnah”* (Shmuel Safrai, Jewish Virtual Library).¹¹

Ashkenazim

Jews of German origin. *Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew word for Germany. Today the term is loosely used to apply to all western Jews, to distinguish them from Hispanic and eastern Jews from West Asia, known as *Sefaradim*. *“The name Ashkenaz was applied in the Middle Ages to Jews living along the Rhine River in northern France and western Germany. The centre of Ashkenazi Jews later spread to Poland-Lithuania and now there are Ashkenazi settlements all over the world. The term ‘Ashkenaz’ became identified primarily with German customs and descendants of German Jews”* (Shira Schoenenberg, Jewish Virtual Library).¹²

Chassidei Ashkenaz

A mystical movement founded by R. Yehuda heChassid (1150-1217) that flourished in Germany and France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The movement was influenced by some of the earlier *Merkava* techniques and included some folk Germanic superstitions. *“A Jewish mystical, ascetic movement in the German Rhineland during the 12th and 13th centuries”* (Wikipedia).¹³

Chassidism

The mystical movement that followed in the wake of the ‘revelation’ of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), and continues to this day. Also sometimes referred to as *Hasidism*.

¹¹ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/amora>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

¹² Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ashkenazim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

¹³ Online source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkenazi_Hasidim. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Converso

A Converso is a Jew who outwardly converted to Catholicism but inwardly continued to remain loyal to Judaism. *Conversos* were also known as *crypto-Jews* and *New Christians*. The *Converso* began to emerge in Spain from the time of the persecutions between 1391 and 1492, all those Jews remaining openly true to their faith were expelled from Spanish soil by the Alhambra decree. The *Converso* was also known by the pejorative *Marrano* which means 'swine'. “[*Converso is the*] designation used in Christian Spain and Portugal for Moorish or Jewish converts to Christianity. It was sometimes applied also to their descendants. Unlike the epithets *Marranos*, *alboraycos*, or *tornadizos*, the term *Conversos* has no derogatory implications” (Jewish Virtual Library).¹⁴

Diachronic

“[R]elating to the changes in something, especially a language, that happen over time.”¹⁵ The diachronic approach can be described as a historical-critical approach.

Gaon

See Reish Galuta and Gaon.

Ger

A convert to Judaism.

Hashkafa

A term describing a cultural or popular form of theology often representing various religious and political factions. *Hashkafa* may also mean ‘worldview’.

Halacha

Jewish legal and ritual law.

Halachic

Of a legal and ritual nature.

¹⁴ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/conversos>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

¹⁵ Cambridge Dictionary. Online source: [DIACHRONIC | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary](#). Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Haskalah

The Jewish Enlightenment movement was dominant in Central and Eastern Europe between around 1770 and 1881, ending with the rise of Jewish nationalism. “*Literally, Haskalah comes from the Hebrew word sekhel, meaning ‘reason or intellect’ and the movement was based on rationality. It encouraged Jews to study secular subjects, to learn both the European and Hebrew languages, and to enter fields such as agriculture, crafts, the arts and science*” (Shira Schoenenberg, Jewish Virtual Library).¹⁶

Kabbalah

Jewish mysticism. In *talmudic* times (0-500 CE) and post-*talmudic* times until the thirteenth century, Jewish mysticism was known as *Heichalot* (*Palaces*) and *Merkavah* (*Chariot*) literature. It later took the form of *zoharic* literature with the publication of the *Zohar* in around 1290. From the sixteenth century, the *Zohar* was largely presented through the prism of R. Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572) and became known as *Lurianic Kabbalah*. From the time of the Baal Shem Tov, *Kabbalah* was made more accessible to the masses with the development of *Chassidut* (the mystical literature of the Chassidim).

Kelipot

The mystical notion of negative *husks* or *shells* which cover up and hide the inner essence.

Marrano

A pejorative for converso (see Converso).

Merkava and Heichalot literature

An early, pre-*Zoharic* form of mysticism as practised in *talmudic* and post-*talmudic* times up to the thirteenth century.

¹⁶ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-haskalah> Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Midrash

Pl. *Midrashim*. A style of biblical exegesis which expands the text from its narrow and literal meaning. The earliest *Midrashim* come from the second-century AD, although much of their content is older.

Reish Galuta and Gaon

Reish Galuta is Aramaic for *Rosh Galut* (Hebrew), the *Head of the Exile* or *Exilarch* (Greek loan translation). While the Jews were in exile in Babylonia in post-Second Temple times, the leadership was divided between a religious figure, the *Gaon*, and a political figure, the *Reish Galuta*. Technically the *Reish Galuta* had roots going back to the First Temple era. The *Reish Galuta* was held in high esteem as he represented the Davidic dynasty. “*The government of Babylonian Jewry for the first 12 centuries C.E. lay in the hands of the exilarch*” (Jewish Virtual Library).¹⁷

Sabbatianism

The mystical movement which followed in the wake of the ‘revelation’ of the messianic claimant Shabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676) and which continued long after his death and well into the twentieth century.

Sefaradim

Jews of Spanish origin. Today the term is also used to describe eastern Jewish communities of West Asia. “*The descendants of Jews who left Spain or Portugal after the 1492 expulsion are referred to as Sephardim. The word “Sephardim” comes from the Hebrew word for Spain, Sepharad...*” (Rebecca Weiner, Jewish Virtual Library).¹⁸

Siddur

Prayer-book.

Shabbat

The Jewish Sabbath.

¹⁷ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/exilarch>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

¹⁸ Online source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sephardim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Synchronic

“[R]elating to something, especially a language, at a particular point in time, without considering how it developed to that point” (Cambridge Dictionary).

Tanna

Pl. Tannaim. A sage from the *Tannaic* period (10-220 CE). *“The period of the Tannaim, which lasted about 210 years (10-220 C.E.), is generally divided by Jewish scholars into five or six sections or generations...”* (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia).¹⁹

Tikkun

The mystical notion of *restoration* or *fixing*, often of holy sparks which had fallen from their former glory.

Tosafist

A rabbi of the *Tosafist* period - spawned by Rashi (1040-1105) - lasted about two hundred years, encompassing the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and ending with R. Meir of Rothenburg (d. 1293). The term *Tosafists* generally refers to the rabbis of the early period of the *Rishonim* (1038-1500) who lived specifically in *Ashkenaz* (Northern France and Germany). The word *Tosafot* can also refer to a body of exegetical literature defined as: *“Critical and explanatory glosses on the Talmud, printed, in almost all editions, on the outer margin and opposite Rashi's notes. The authors of the Tosafot are known as Tosafists (‘ba’ale ha-tosafot)”* (Joseph Jacobs and M. Seligsohn, 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia).²⁰

Tzitzit

A four-cornered garment with ritually wound fringes on each corner.

Yeshiva

Pl. *yeshivot*. A Jewish religious school or academy.

¹⁹ Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14240-tannaim-and-amoraim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

²⁰ Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14457-tosafot>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

Zohar

A foundational mystical work that was first published in Spain around 1290. Traditionally the work is said to have been authored by Shimon bar Yochai an early *Tanna* in the second-century CE. Academic research, however, indicates it may have been authored one thousand years later by Moshe de León (1240-1305):

“I have come to accept in substance the contention of Graetz – itself only the most articulate expression of a whispered tradition of centuries – that the Spanish Kabbalist Moses de Leon must be regarded as the author of the Zohar” (Scholem 1941:159).

This was the dominant scholarly view until it was challenged by Yehuda Liebes in the 1980s who suggested instead that:

“The Zohar is the fruit of a whole group that together dealt with the Kabbalah on the basis of a common tradition and ancient texts” (Liebes 1988:5).²¹

The authorship of this important mystical source remains a contentious issue today.

1.8.2 Orthography

- To make for easier reading, I do not use a key for transliteration instead I spell all Hebrew words the way they sound and are generally pronounced in *Sefaradit* (modern Hebrew). Thus, *Halakha* is spelt *Halacha*, and *Zadik* is spelt *Tzadik*.
- All Hebrew words are italicised.
- All theological concepts are capitalised and italicised, as in *Tikkun*.
- Titles of biblical works, reference books, texts, and manuscripts are italicised.
- This study will make use of footnotes.
- Longer quotations are indented with inverted commas and are not italicised. Shorter quotations are placed within the regular text but in double inverted commas and italicised.

²¹ Cited by Oded Yisraeli (2016:1).

- Words, sentences, or phrases omitted from quotations are indicated by three full stops without spaces between the last word and the full stops.
- The chapter headings, headings, subheadings, and bibliography, start with upper-case letters.
- The method of reference that will be used in this study is the adapted Harvard reference system, also called the author-date reference system.
- In the text, only the author(s) and date of publication are provided in brackets, followed by the page reference (Ben-Amos & Mintz 1994:192).

If there is no pagination, this will be indicated by 'n.p.' where the page number usually occurs, as in (Kaplan 2017:n.p.). If there is no date, this will be indicated by 'n.d.' where the date usually occurs, as in (Liebes n.d.:14). If the source is a lecture or oral transmission, the name is provided in brackets followed by a dash, as in (Van Selms 1970-) and (Steinsaltz 2012-).

- The list of references to books contains the full bibliographical particulars, under the title Bibliography as follows:

Ben-Amos, D. & Mintz, J.R., 1994, *In praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, Jason Aronson, New Jersey/London.

- References to Journals are as follows:

Studemund-Halévy, M., 2016, 'What Happened in Izmir Was Soon the Talk of Hamburg, Shabbetai Şevi in Contemporary German Press Reports', *El Prezente Journal for Sephardic Studies*, vol. 10, 155-172.

- References to articles in books are as follows:

Scholem, G., 1979, 'Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea', in *Messianism in the Talmudic Era*, Edited by Leo Landman, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 51-74.

- Online references are as follows:

Online source: [Joseph Caro - My Jewish Learning](#). Retrieved on 24 January 2021.

- References from an encyclopaedia entry are as follows:

Online source: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14240-tannaim-and-amoraim>. Retrieved on 24 February 2022.

- References to other sections or chapters within this investigation are in brackets as follows:

... rather it was the Sabbatians who spread *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see section 5.7).

1.8.3 Abbreviations

BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
Cf.	Compare
Ed or Eds	Editor of Editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i>
Ps.	Psalm
Pss.	Psalms
R.	Rabbi
v.	verse
vv.	verses

Honorifics such as Rabbi, Doctor and Professor are often omitted in keeping with the academic style of writing and in no way is this an indication of disregard or disrespect. 'R.' is, however, commonly used in this study to refer to a rabbi to emphasise that the individual is acting within the official capacity of the office of the rabbinate.

CHAPTER 2:

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF JEWISH MESSIANISM FROM 500 BCE, INCLUDING MESSIANIC CLAIMANTS FROM 132 CE, LEADING UP TO SHABBATAI TZVI.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is an overview of Jewish messianism and messianic claimants beginning from Deutero-Isaiah²² in 539 BCE right up to the seventeenth-century CE to show the little-known yet ubiquitous messianic trends in ancient, as well as the relatively recent history leading up to the time of Shabbatai Tzvi. Through an understanding of the history together with the *Sits im Lebben*, or *sociological setting* in which the Sabbatian movement was birthed, it will become clear that Sabbatianism did not suddenly arise in a void. The Sabbatians believed that each age had its 'potential' Messiah (Goldish 2004:147) and that each failed Messiah had his specific role and function in the unfolding of the larger messianic schema.

We examine several messianic claimants including Bar Kochva, Moshe of Crete, the Messiah of Pallughtha, Severus, Abu-Isa, Moshe Al-Dari, David Alro'i, the messianic duo of David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho, Abulafia and Asher Lemlein. I touch upon the theological differences between 'potential' and 'false' Messiahs. This is followed by an investigation into the proliferation of messianic study circles in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain.

Judaism is well-known for its rejection of the Christian Messiah, yet it embraced numerous other messianic claimants and developed an intricate and complicated relationship with messianism. With the current resurgence in messianism in the Jewish world in general and in movements like Chabad in particular, it may come as a surprise that this rejuvenation is nothing new. We see that throughout Jewish history there has

²² The traditional view is that all sixty-six chapters of the Book of Isaiah were written by one man. The academic world based largely on the work by Bernhard Duhm (1875), proposes the three-part division of Isaiah with three authors over different periods: Proto-Isaiah, or the 'original' Isaiah (chapters 1-39) in the eighth-century BCE, Deutero-Isaiah (40-55) in the sixth-century BCE and Trito-Isaiah (56-66) after the return from exile (Joachimsen 2011:15).

always been the belief by significant numbers of the population, that they were on the cusp of the great eschatological event heralding the imminent arrival of an identifiable and righteous Messiah.

2.2 Early messianism from 500 BCE

Although the concept of a Messiah is so ingrained in Judaism today, the fact is that its origins are extremely obscure. Whether accurate or not, some theories even question whether the messianic origins are to be found in Jewish sources. Leo Landman rejects such theories because, he argues, Isaiah speaks of a human redeemer and hence a Jewish origin to the messianic idea (Landman 1979:xi). Nevertheless, the details surrounding this Messiah and the messianic age he is said to usher in were the subjects of extreme debate.

The pre-exilic prophets before Deutero-Isaiah (who is said to have prophesied just before Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE) believed that the order of the future world would not be all that different from the way it had always been²³ (Sharot 1982:47).

With Deutero-Isaiah, however, a new era began where the belief was that the future world would be transformed on a cosmic scale vastly different from anything seen before. This dramatic understanding of the future was followed by most of the later prophets. And particularly between 200 BCE and 200 CE, when the classical apocalyptic works were produced, the vision of the future world involved cosmic shifts both on earth and in heaven.

From the third-century CE, with the transmission of Jewish leadership from Palestine to Babylonia, as if hopes for a political return to the Land of Israel seemed further out of reach, messianic imaginations took on a more fanciful and mythical character at the expense of political redemption.²⁴ This mystical messianic worldview went on to inform the mindset of medieval Jewry²⁵ (Sharot 1982:47). There were some

²³ The pre-exilic prophets may have had supernatural premises, but their vision of the future order was not that it be essentially different from the earlier order.

²⁴ The roots of this change would have already begun a little earlier, from the failure of the Bar Kochva revolt (132-135 CE) (see section 2.3.1.).

²⁵ Sharot (1982:45) explains that the early Christians nurtured the idea that the second coming was imminent. However, from the fifth-century, the new orthodoxy of the church taught that salvation was not a collective event destined for some point in the future. Rather it was a personal experience to be achieved by a righteous individual after death. The belief in the

exceptions, as we shall later note, but as a rule displays of militaristic messianism were rare.

It was also around the medieval period that the role of redemption through a human Messiah had gained normative status:

“This was a gradual development. For a long period the concept of a messiah was either absent or of little importance beside that eschatological salvation. Many prophetic books spoke of no messiah: God alone was the redeemer” (Sharot 1982:51).

Other prophetic books spoke of the “House of David” alluding to the idea that the Messiah was not a *redeemer* but, instead, the collective of *future kings* who would rule over the envisaged future kingdom.

2.3 Early messianic claimants from 132 CE

2.3.1 Bar Kochva (d. 135 CE)

An early messianic claimant was Bar Kochva. His name was changed from the original Bar Koziva to Bar Kochva (son a star) during the revolt he led against the Romans between 132-135 CE. The reason for the name change was to allude to his messianic expectations based on the biblical verse (Num. 24:17): “*There shall step forth a star out of Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel; It smashes the brow of Moab.*” The Aramaic translation known as *Onkelos* translates “star” as “*malka*” (king) and “scepter” as “*meshicha*” (Messiah). “*Bar Kochva*” was sometimes the general *midrashic* term used to describe the Messiah.²⁶ According to the *Talmud Yerushalmi*:

רבי עקיבא פד הוה חמי ליה להדין בר כוזיבא הוה אמר היינו מלכא משיחא, אמר
ליה רבי יוחנן בן תורתא עקיבא יעלו עשבים בלחיד ויעדין אינו בא

“When R. Akiva beheld Bar Koziva, he would say: ‘*This is the Messianic King.*’ [Not everyone agreed with R. Akiva, and] R.

coming of a millennium was declared a superstitious error by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This means that the later medieval Christian millennial movements were technically considered heretical.

²⁶ Online source: [Bar Kokhba | Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-and-reference-works/encyclopedia-of-judaism/article/bar-kochba/103499). Retrieved on 22 March 2022.

Yochanan ben Torata challenged him by responding: ‘*Akiva, grass will grow on your cheeks, and the son of David will still not have come.*’”²⁷

It must be noted that the story is usually recounted in a way that it is only R. Akiva who considers Bar Kochva to be the Messiah and that Bar Kochva himself was not a messianic claimant. Yet there is a *Talmudic* text that clearly defines Bar Kochva as a messianic claimant:

בר כוזיבא מלך תרתין שנין ופלגא אמר להו לרבנן אנא משיח

“Bar Koziva ruled for two and a half years. He said to the Sages: ‘*I am [the] Messiah.*’”²⁸

From the nineteenth century, the name Bar Koziva which was used most often in classical sources was excluded from academic and popular discourse in favour of Bar Kochva. Then in 1960-1 archaeological discoveries of ancient letters revealed his real name to be בר־כוסבא, בר־כוסבה, or בר־כשבה which is much closer to Bar Koziva than to Bar Kochva. Yet Bar Kochva still dominated the academic discourse. According to Haim Weiss, this was often due to the Zionist historiographers who wanted to project the warrior image of the man:

“In fact, a fascinating process has occurred in which the scholarly world actively suppressed one of its own most important discoveries [of the real name being Bar Kosibah],²⁹ in order to privilege - sometimes intentionally and sometimes not – the mythical image of Bar Kokhva over the historical one of Bar Kosibah” (Weiss 2015:102).

Koziva may have been a place name like *Chezib* (Schürer 1891:293, note 84) or even a family name. In rabbinic literature, Bar Koziva is used to designate “*son of a lie*” (*Seder Olam Rabbah* 20). Either way, after the failure of the Bar Kochva revolt, the subsequent humiliation and persecution lead to the abandonment of militaristic ambition and a general passivity within Babylonian Jewry. The Babylonian rabbis now suggested that redemption lay in the hands of God and not man. The idea of an

²⁷ y. *Taanit* 24 ch. 4. See also *Eicha Rabba* 2:4.

²⁸ b. *Sanhedrin* 93b. Translation is by Sefaria.

²⁹ Parenthesis is mine.

imminent Messiah appears to have waned. Also, it was at that time that the warrior *Mashiach ben Yosef* was substituted by the more spiritual *Mashiach ben David* (Sharot 1982:50-53).

2.3.2 Moshe of Crete (fifth century)

After the Bar Kochva/Koziva defeat, active messianism seemed to have waned for about three hundred years until the incident involving Moshe of Crete which occurred around the fifth century. At that time, Crete, the largest of the Greek islands, had a significant Jewish population. When Moshe of Crete pronounced himself as the Messiah, he attracted a large following. Many Jews left their homes and businesses (this was to be a common feature of messianic supporters) and like the biblical Moses, they followed Moshe of Crete to the sea where they awaited a “*keriat Yam Suf*” (splitting of the Red Sea) event, to herald the new messianic era. Some of the faithful threw themselves into the water and drowned. Others were saved by local fishermen and sailors (Sharot 1982:53).

According to the account by Al-Makīn ibn al-‘Amīd:

“Then he said to them: Verily, I will cross the sea with you (like Moses crossed over with the children of Israel), and many of them rushed into the sea and drowned. When the others saw this, and the fact that he did not save them from drowning, they wanted to seize him. He fled, but they seized him and killed him. And then many of the people became Christians” (Seleznyov 2019:n.p.).

This reaction of converting out of Judaism was also to become a common theme in the future stories of failed messianic claimants. According to an account by the fifth-century Socrates of Constantinople:

“On the appointed day the false Messiah, followed by the whole Jewish population of Crete, marched toward the sea. When they had arrived at a certain promontory Moses commanded them to throw themselves down, as the water would be divided before them. The Jews obeyed, and many of them lost their lives in the sea while others

were rescued by mariners. Moses is said never to have been seen again" (Socrates, "*Historia Ecclesiastica*," vii. 36).

This event was most likely precipitated by the popular predictions surfacing that the Messiah would arrive four hundred years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. That corresponded to the amount of time spent in the biblical Egyptian exile. There were also Christian predictions that the Messiah would appear between 440-470 (Sharot 1982:53).

2.3.3 The Messiah of Pallughtha (645)

In 645 there was an uprising headed by a Jew from Pallughtha, which has been identified as Pumbedita (modern-day Fallujah, Iraq):

"That year there appeared a certain Jewish man from the village which is called Pallughtha...who claimed that the Messiah had come. He gathered around himself a vile crowd of weavers, barbers and fullers, about four hundred strong, who burned down three sacred edifices and killed the local governor. But there came soldiers from the city of Akula and slew them, their wives and their children, while their leader was crucified in his own village" (*Chronica Minora*³⁰).

2.3.4 Severus (720)

Around 720, Severus (also known as Serenus), a Christian Syrian convert to Judaism active in Mardin, led a rising in Syria and promised to restore Palestine to the Jews. There is some debate as to whether he claimed to be the Messiah or just the harbinger of the Messiah. Severus began to change some of the laws of the Talmud (but he did not try to change biblical law).³¹ He changed the *Yom Tov Sheini shel Galuyot*, where in the Diaspora Jews observe two days of a festival - due to the vagaries of the date of the new moon - to just one day as they observed it in the Land of Israel. He instituted new prayers and changed some of the dietary laws as well as marriage and divorce laws. His innovation with the prayers indicates that his:

³⁰ *Chronica Minora*, translated by I. Guidi, *Scriptores Syrii* series 3, vol. 4, fasc. 1 (Paris 1903), 27-8.

³¹ Online source: [Severus | Encyclopedia.com](#). Retrieved 23 March 2022.

“militant messianism also needed rabbinic sanction for acceptance by the synagogue” (Sharf 1971:66).

Severus also attracted a Christian and Muslim following and he managed to inspire Jews as far away as Spain (Sharf 1971:63). He persuaded the community to give him their belongings and eventually he was arrested and executed (Sharot 1982:53).

It is possible that the cataclysmic series of Muslim victories in the seventh century, culminating in the great Arab siege of Constantinople (717–8), served as inspiration for similar Jewish conquests involving “militant messianism” spreading possibly all the way to Spain (Sharf 1971:64).

Severus left a powerful legacy, as his movement persisted for at least a hundred years after his death. There were some issues regarding those followers who may have converted out of Judaism, because the Gaon, Natronai bar Hilai, a century later, had to rule on proper procedures for accepting them back into the fold of Judaism (Sharf 1971:64).

2.3.5 Abu-Isa and the Isawites (eighth century)

In the eighth century, the Persian Jew, Abu-Isa announced himself as the Messiah and he led a revolt. The revolt was quickly suppressed but his influence began to spread eventually turning into a sect spanning as far as Syria and Palestine. This irritated both the Muslim authorities as well the rabbis. It adopted a universalist messianic approach and while essentially preaching a Palestinian nationalism, it acknowledged both Jesus and Mohammad. Two hundred years later, the followers were still active in Damascus (Sharf 1971:63).

Abu-Isa led an armed attack against Calif Merwan II but he was defeated and killed in 755. Many of his followers refused to believe he was dead (another common messianic characteristic), claiming he was hiding in the mountains and that he would return to complete his messianic mission. The followers became the sect known as the *Isawites*. Some of the followers proclaimed his student, Yugdān, as the new Messiah and they formed another sect known as the *Yudganites*. When Yugdān died, the followers in turn appointed his student, Mushka, as the next Messiah but he was killed in battle (Sharot 1982:54).

Abu-Isa then changed some of the laws and introduced various ascetic innovations to Judaism, such as frequent fasting, and seven daily prayer services instead of the usual three. He also prohibited divorce, eating meat and drinking wine. This very regulated asceticism was believed to hasten the coming of the messianic age. Their essential ideology was *redemption through nationalism and violence*. It is interesting to note that the later Sabbatians adopted a very different approach by permitting the prohibited and encouraging promiscuity, essentially *redemption through sin*.

2.3.6 Moshe Al-Dari (1120-27)

In his *Iggeret Taiman* Maimonides records the incident of Moshe Al-Dari preaching in Fez, Morocco, that the Messiah was to arrive on the eve of Passover. Al-Dari was a pious scholar, a student of Yosef ibn Migash, known as the Ri Migash, from Spain. The Ri Migash was also the teacher of Maimonides' father, R. Maimon. Maimonides writes:

"He informed them that the Messiah had come, as was divinely revealed to him in a dream... Many people became his adherents and reposed faith in him. My father and master, of blessed memory, endeavored to dissuade and discourage people from following him. However only a few were influenced by my father, while most, nay nearly all clung to R. Moses, of blessed memory."³²

Maimonides continues to emphasise that "*the majority of the people put their trust in him*", another indication of the mass responses that always accompany these messianic movements. Al-Dari encouraged his followers to sell their property and contract debts to the Muslims agreeing to pay back ten dinars for each dinar they borrowed to make extravagant preparations for the Passover festival:

"...for they will never see them again, and so they did" (Maimonides, *Iggeret Teiman*).

³² Online source: [Iggerot HaRambam, Iggeret Teiman 13 with Connections \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Iggerot-HaRambam-Iggeret-Teiman-13-with-Connections). Retrieved 25 March 2022.

After Passover, the “majority of the people” were overcome with tremendous debt as they endured the fallout resulting from the excitement of their messianic throes.

Strangely, one notices an air of respect within Maimonides’ recoding of the Al-Dari incident. This is evident, amongst other indications, by Maimonides referring to Al-Dari by the honorific “*may his memory be for a blessing*”. Robert Kraynak (1992:127) picks up on this and suggests that the:

“scholar named Moses Al-Dari from Morocco [who]³³ made false predictions about the coming of the Messiah but reportedly was admired by Maimonides, apparently because he preached return to the land of Israel and died in Eretz Israel.”

Kraynak highlights this against another messianic leader, this time from Yemen, who Maimonides also references, but not in such glowing terms:

“[I]n 1172, a Messiah pretender appeared in Yemen, who was severely condemned by Maimonides apparently because he was a kind of socialist revolutionary rather than a ‘Zionist.’”³⁴

Kraynak is probably correct in his assumption because we know that Maimonides had an extremely non-mystical approach to the messianic era and its physical realisation, particularly regarding the return to the Holy land. This was all to be predicated upon natural means and human effort (see chapter 6).

2.3.7 Rabbi David Alro'i (d.1163)

R. David Alro'i (or Al Ruchi, or Al Ruji³⁵) was a messianic claimant who was active around the early to mid-twelfth century. He was born in Iraq under the name Menachem (not David) ben Shlomo and was a student of Chasdai the *Reish Gaulta* (Exilarch, or political leader) as well as Ali the *Gaon* (religious leader) of Baghdad. He was well versed in *Talmud*, Jewish mysticism, and acquainted with matters of the

³³ Parenthesis is mine.

³⁴ Sharot (1982:59) makes the technical distinction between *millenarianism* and *messianism*. The former is more politically motivated and militaristic, while the latter is more eschatological. The Al-Dari event in Fez would be considered a *millenarian* incident while the “*certain man*” in Yemen would be a *messianic* event.

³⁵ Ruj is a region near or part of Aleppo.

occult. With time he built a reputation amongst the masses as a kind of wizard and miracle worker (Steinsaltz 2012-).

Politically, these were very unsettled times because the early Crusades had begun to weaken the Caliphate in Persia, and David Alro'i seized on the opportunity and led an uprising against Sultan Muktafi. According to the chronicles of Benjamin of Tudela, at that time forty thousand Jews were living in Baghdad (Adler 1907:60) and there were twenty-eight synagogues (Adler 1907:64).

Historically, there had already been precedents of several successful Jewish revolutions in Persia with Jews capturing whole areas and ruling over them. In one early instance, Josephus (b. 37 CE) records that two brothers Chasinai and Chanilai ruled over a section of Iraq (Holtzmann 1865:39). In another case, Mar Zutra (596-520) the *Reish Galuta* led an army of four hundred Jewish warriors, expelled Mazdak (d. c.524) from Machoza, and ruled over an independent Jewish state within Persia for about seven years (Graetz 1894:1).

The charismatic Alro'i wanted to free the Jews from Muslim rule, and he encouraged them to follow him to Jerusalem where he would declare himself the Jewish King. This grand messianic plan would have involved a great revolt against two powerful entities, the Muslim Caliphate and a subsequent battle against the Crusaders to wrest Jerusalem from their grip.

Alro'i was influenced by his father, R. Shlomo, who claimed to be Elijah the prophet, and whose role was to declare that his son was the Messiah. He (either the father or the son) changed the name 'Menachem' to 'David' in keeping with the messianic mission and vision to restore the House of David.³⁶ According to one account, his father Shlomo also professed to be the Messiah which makes the messianic claims an apparent family affair (see the account of Ovadia the Ger, below). However, Golb (2009:8) is convinced that the father:

³⁶ Alternatively, it is also plausible, as Moshe Gil explains, that Abu Da'ud - being the nickname for Suleiman (Shlomo/Solomon) in Arabic - became somehow conflated with the father's name Shlomo. Thus, the full name of Menachem would have been Menachem ibn-abu-Da'ud Suleiman ibn al-Ruji, which was later recorded only as Da'ud, or David (Golb 2009:3).

“Solomon ibn al-Ruji was the one who, supported by his cohorts, claimed to be the Messiah; while his son Menahem took up the banner after Solomon’s death...”

Either way, it didn’t take long for Alro’i to have a considerable following and a fighting force was soon assembled. Many Jews of that time were known to have been fierce fighters. In nearby Azerbaijan, there lived many warlike mountain Jews who were also co-opted to join the battle apparently as mercenaries. The Jewish rebel force was encouraged and supported by the Yazidis.

The Jewish fighting force attacked the citadel of the strategic town of Amadiya which was on the Crusader route. They dressed like *Talmud* scholars assembling to listen to their sage Alro’i but with hidden swords concealed beneath their robes. What happened next is uncertain. According to some accounts, the fighters were defeated and Alro’i was killed. The chronicles of Benjamin of Tudela (1130-1173), however, tell a different story. According to the account of Benjamin of Tudela, when the Sultan heard that there was a ‘*King of the Jews*’ in his realm, planning a great revolt, he cast Alro’i into prison. Alro’i subsequently escaped and the story is embellished with miraculous legends – but essentially the Sultan threatened to kill all the Jews if Alro’i did not give himself up to the authorities.

The Jewish leadership in Baghdad and Mosul then encouraged Alro’i to ‘*give up his messianic aspirations*’ but to no avail. The governor of Amadiya then bribed Alro’i’s father-in-law to assassinate him - which he did - and the revolt was quelled. The remaining Jews of Persia now had to pay a large indemnity to appease the authorities to be allowed to remain there (Adler 1907:54-81).

The earliest version of these events is recorded by Ovadia the Ger, an Italian Catholic priest who converted to Judaism during the early twelfth century. This account would have been written between 1130 and 1140, describing events taking place around the beginning of the twelfth century (Golb 2009:2). Ovadia the Ger writes about how the Jews of those days were very militaristic and refers to them as the “*children of the violent*”. He records how letters were dispatched to “*all the Jews near and far in all the lands*” indicating that this was not just an unknown or isolated event.

“All of them said that the time had come when the Lord would gather his nation Israel from all the lands unto Jerusalem the holy city, and that Solomon b. Ruji was the King Messiah” (Golb 2009:1).

Ovadia the Ger writes about how the Jews rejoiced and spent not just days or months but years waiting for the expected messianic revelation. They spent their time in prayer, fasting and dispensing charity but:

“[w]hen they failed to see anything, their hearts were utterly broken within them, and the Jews became ashamed before all the gentiles (Muslims). For all the gentiles and the uncircumcised ones (=Christians) heard the rumors that came to the Jews, and they would all laugh and mock at the Jews and would say, ‘Behold the Jews want to fly, yet they have no wings with which to fly to their land!’” (Golb 2009:1).

It is important to note that according to *Ovadia the Ger*, the fame of this pseudo-Messiah was not just localized but had indeed spread throughout the entire Jewish world at that time, because “**All of them** said that the time had come when the Lord would gather his nation...” and “**all the Jews** residing in the various lands... rejoiced greatly.” This is an observable pattern that was to repeat itself, as we shall see, countless times throughout Jewish messianic history.

Significantly, even after David Alro'i's death, many Jews continued to believe that he was still the Messiah. Capitalizing on this messianic sentiment, two impostors possessing a forged letter that they claimed was from Alro'i, persuaded his followers to hand over all their possessions and they were to meet on a certain night, dress in green,³⁷ and then ‘fly’ from Baghdad to Jerusalem. According to Steinsaltz (2012-), it was Alro'i himself who made this promise while he was still alive. Either way, the followers waited up all night and even the Muslims:

³⁷ They were “*green garments*” as we read later in the account of Shlomo ben Yachya. Shlomo Molcho, another messianic claimant, similarly wore green ritual fringes known as *tzitzit* (see section 2.3.9.3). It is interesting to note that some of the followers of Shabbatai Tzvi also wore green garments: “*The Sephardi youth came dressed in their best finery and decked in broad green silk sashes, the color of Shabbatai Zevi*” (Saperstein 2015:649).

“were so amazed at what had happened that they refrained from opposing (the Jews) until the result of their vain expectations had revealed itself (in the morning)” (Perlman 1964).

There is a third account³⁸ of the events surrounding David Alro'i, this time by Shlomo ben Yachya or Samau'al al-Maghribi³⁹(1130-1180). He was the son of a Moroccan rabbi, Yehuda ben Abbas, a friend of Yehuda haLevi. Shlomo hid his conversion to Islam for some time in fear of offending his father, until eventually openly embracing Islam in 1163 (the year of David Alro'i's death) after he allegedly had a dream instructing him to do so. When his father eventually heard about his conversion, he immediately set out to find his son but he died on the way in Mosul. Shlomo ben Yachya became an anti-Jewish polemicist. Perhaps he had been negatively affected and disillusioned by the messianic fervour that he had personally witnessed (Perlmann 1964:20). Shlomo ben Yachya (now known as Samau'al al-Maghribi) wrote about the Alro'i incident which I quote in full to emphasize his vitriolic account:

“[T]wo Jewish tricksters, cunning elders, decided to forge letters by Menahem to the Jews of Baghdad bringing them the good tidings which they had been expecting since of yore; that he would appoint for them a certain night in which all of them would fly to Jerusalem. The Jews of Baghdad, their claim to sagacity⁴⁰ notwithstanding, were all led to believe it. Their women brought their monies and jewels in order that it all might be distributed, on their behalf, as charity to those whom the elders considered deserving...They donned green garments, and on that night gathered on the roofs expecting, they asserted, to fly to Jerusalem on the wings of angels. Women began to weep over their nursing infants. What if the mothers should fly before

³⁸ In addition to the previous two accounts of Ovadia the Ger and Benjamin of Tudela.

³⁹ Shlomo ben Yachya is also known to have been a great mathematician and although he did not invent logarithms, he did explain the law of exponents, which is the basis of logarithms. He also studied the binomial theorem, the arithmetic triangle (usually called Pascal's triangle), and mathematical induction (J. J. O'Connor and E. F. Robertson, School of Mathematics and Statistics University of St Andrews, Scotland. Online source: [Al-Samawal \(1130 - 1180\) - Biography - MacTutor History of Mathematics \(st-andrews.ac.uk\)](https://www-history.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistMath/biographies/al-samawal.html). Retrieved 29 March 2022.

⁴⁰ The Babylonian Jews were known to have introduced the analytical and dialectical style in their argumentation as seen in the style of the Babylonian *Talmud* (Secunda 2009: 45-69).

their children or the children before their mothers?... At the time, the Muslims there marvelled so greatly at what had befallen the Jews that they refrained from opposing them... The Jews kept crowding together for the flight until the morning disclosed their frustration and ignominy... They named that year 'the year of the flight' and began to reckon the years of their old and young as from that year: it is the era of the Jews of Baghdad at the present time. This affair should suffice to cast shame and disgrace upon them forever" (Perlmann 1964: 73-74).

However, as we shall see in this study, Shlomo ben Yachya was wrong because it did not suffice. Instead, this event was just one of many other such fantasies casting "*shame and disgrace*" that gripped hold of the collective Jewish messianic imagination since then.

After that fateful night, the remaining followers became known amongst the Jews as *Menachemim*, as David's real name was, as mentioned, Menachem. These followers perpetuated their belief in Alro'i's messianic claims for about a generation or so after his death. This, once again, significantly indicates that even after a dramatic messianic failure, there is still a groundswell of support for the messianic claimant, which perpetuates itself well into the future, despite there always being a dramatic fallout after such events.

Messianism was rife at this time. All in all, in the short period between 1060 to 1172, for example, there are seven millenarian or messianic events amongst the Jews (Sharot 1982:55).

2.3.7.1 Synthesis

I need to point to the messianic patterns that are beginning to emerge because they are to repeat themselves time and time again. As we shall see, the endurance and sometimes resurgence of these messianic movements continue unabated long after the demise of their leaders. Steinsaltz (2012-) suggests that the origins of the *Magen David*, or *Star of David* go back, not to King David, but to David Alro'i - who, being a practitioner of the 'magical arts', used it on his shield as a possible magical or theurgic symbol. This further meshes with the common theme we will confront throughout this

study where the supernatural realm is never far removed from the messianic arena. To illustrate some of these ideas further, we now turn to another messianic claimant, Abulafia.

2.3.8 Avraham Abulafia (1240-1291)

Avraham ben Shmuel Abulafia was born in Zaragosa, Spain, in the Hebrew year 5000. He is regarded as one of the ‘*neglected mystics*’, who delved into *Kabbalah Nevu’it* (prophetic *Kabbalah*) and *Kabbalat haShemot* (linguistic and ecstatic *Kabbalah*). He was an enigmatic personality because not only did he try to convert the Pope to Judaism, but he also claimed to have been the Messiah. Avraham Abulafia’s teacher was his father, Shmuel, who ensured that his son was well educated in *Talmud*. Idel (1988:1), however, considers him to be of “*poor halakhic education and a mediocre thinker if judged as a philosopher.*” Hamburger (1989:69) also suggests that he studied “*a little Talmud.*”

From the age of eighteen, when his father died, he began to travel, seemingly aimlessly, and he arrived in Acco (Acre), Israel, in search of the elusive mystical river known as *Sambation*.⁴¹ He also tried to search for some of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, as rumours abounded that, at that time, they had begun to return to Israel. Abulafia wanted to visit Biblical places and ‘re-experience’ some of the ancient events that had taken place there. This was all in preparation for the anticipated imminent revelation of the Messiah (Idel 1998:499) which he believed would occur in the year 1290 (Idel 2008:16). According to Idel:

“Abulafia conceived himself as a messenger to an entire nation rather than only to an elite and travelled from country to country in order to fulfill his ‘mission’ ...” (Idel 2008:7).

However, upon arrival in the Land of Israel, he found it in turmoil as a result of the Crusades and he was forced to return to Europe. He then went to Capua, southern Italy, where he began - surprisingly for a mystic - a relentless study of Maimonides’

⁴¹ The *Sambation River* is, according to rabbinic tradition, a torrential flowing river, comprised of stones, which stopped its movement on Shabbat (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*. Exodus 34:10). According to tradition, beyond this ‘*Sabbath River*’ were the Ten Lost Tribes which were exiled in 721 BCE by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V.

most rationalist work, *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide of the Perplexed), under the tutorage of R. Hillel of Verona. He later taught the *Guide* to students in Greece.

Mainstream *Kabbalah* was not deep enough for him and when he returned to Spain, he began experiencing 'visions' while studying under Baruch Togarmi who specialised in *Tzeruf*, or letter combinations involving linguistic manipulations and permutations known as *gematria*, *notrikon* and *temurah*. He additionally read Nachmanides' mystical teachings, which, at that time were only studied in small secret groups. At one stage, Abulafia claimed to feel the messianic 'anointing oil' being poured over him and:

"[i]t will appear to him as if his entire body, from head to foot, has been anointed with the oil of anointing, and he was 'the anointed of the Lord' [Mashyiah YHWH]..." (*Sefer Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, Ms. Paris BN 777, fol. 109).⁴²

Abulafia started his scholarly career with a strong influence from the rationalist Maimonides, who had died just thirty-six years earlier. He then moved on to the mysticism of *Kabbalah*. Then, at the age of thirty-one, Abulafia created a surprising synthesis between Maimonides' rational philosophy and the mysticism of *Kabbalah*, particularly that of R. Elazar of Worms (the last major member of *Chassidei Ashkenaz*). This mysticism is somewhat 'magical' and emphasizes linguistics, letters and the power of language. He moved from centre to centre absorbing different religious cultures to unite and combine them. Thus, he developed a powerful synthesis between the two dominant but opposing forms of Jewish religious culture, mysticism (from Nachmanides) and rationalism (from Maimonides), which had flourished during the generation preceding him. Abulafia did this because he believed that he was a prophet and he also believed that he was the Messiah (Idel 2009-).

According to Landauer (1845:46), the authorship of the *Zohar* s even attributed to Abulafia.⁴³ While his *kabbalistic* colleagues were exploring the *Ten Sefirot* (mystical spheres), Abulafia criticised this approach. He considered the concept of *Sefirot* as

⁴² See Idel (2020:138). Translation is by Idel.

⁴³ Abulafia was the same age as Moshe de León, another candidate for the authorship of the *Zohar*.

having gone even further than Christianity with its emphasis on the Trinity and had replaced it with not *three* but *Ten Sefirot* (Matt 1983:20).

In 1280, just before *Rosh haShana*, Abulafia arrived in Rome in an attempt to convert Pope Nicholas III to Judaism. This was based on a spiritual experience he is said to have had, and the Pope's conversion would have been a prerequisite for the imminent messianic age he envisioned. The Pope, however, happened to be at his summer palace in Soriano which was not far from Rome, and Abulafia followed him there. But when The Pope heard of Abulafia's arrival, he issued an order to have the 'fanatic' burned at the stake. Abulafia walked boldly past the pyre which had been set up for him, and then discovered that the Pope had suddenly died the previous night, August 22 1280, from a stroke (Idel 2012:3).

Here is an interesting Zohar:

"And on the sixth day [Friday] on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month⁴⁴ [Elul - i.e.: just before Rosh haShana]⁴⁵...three high walls of the city of Rome will fall, and the great palace there will collapse and the ruler of that city will die" (Zohar vol. 3, fol. 212b).⁴⁶

In his *Sefer haOt*, Abulafia writes:

"His [God's] adversary died, unrepentant, in Rome by the power of the Name of...God...His Name fashioned my tongue into a spear with which I killed them that deny Him, and I killed His enemies by a righteous judgement" (Jellinek 1887:67).

Abulafia was thrown into jail by the Franciscans as they suspected he had something to do with the Pope's death. He was held for 28 days and then released.

Idel (2008:16) questions the notion of Abulafia wanting to convert the Pope. Instead, he suggests that he may have wanted to discuss matters of authentic religion with the Pope. Pope Nicolas III was a friend of St Francis of Assisi who was the founder

⁴⁴ Elul is the twelfth month of the Jewish civil year but the sixth month of the ecclesiastical year, starting from Nisan.

⁴⁵ Parentheses are mine.

⁴⁶ According to the view that the *Zohar* was authored by Moshe de León, it is interesting to note that he lived between 1240 and 1305. This would coincide with our date of 1280 when Abulafia journeyed to the Pope.

of the Franciscan order. It is possible that Abulafia was interested in meeting the Pope as he was aware that in Franciscan circles, meditation on the names of Jesus was becoming a popular technique at that time. After the incident with the Pope, Abulafia made his way to Sicily proclaiming himself not just a Prophet but the Messiah as well.

When word reached Shlomo ben Aderet, also known as *Rashba* (1235-1310) about some of Abulafia's messianic enterprises, he immediately excommunicated Abulafia in around 1290. This may be the reason why Abulafia's works have only been published relatively recently (Hofer 2013:257). Rashba was also a Spanish *kabbalist* but Abulafia was considered far too radical for the mainstream *kabbalists*. Nevertheless, Abulafia had a significant following and many of his works were translated into Latin by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and were taught during the Italian Renaissance (Lelli 2000:66).

As a result of being excommunicated by *Rashba* who had little patience for messianic claimants, Abulafia was excluded from official Spanish schools of *Kabbalah*. When Abulafia realised that he had so much Jewish opposition, he decided to turn to the Christians and teach them his mysticism. He writes in his *Sefer haOt*, one of the few autobiographic books in *Kabbalah*:

“And God commanded that he [Abulafia]⁴⁷ speak to the Gentiles of uncircumcised heart and flesh, and so he did. He spoke to them, and they believed in the message of God. However, they did not return to God, because they trusted in their swords and bows and God hardened their impure, uncircumcised hearts.”⁴⁸

Abulafia then settled on the tiny island of Comino (in the archipelago of Malta) and no one is sure what happened to him afterwards. Comino was a common place of exile for knights and other leaders who had fallen out of favour. Abulafia wrote four commentaries on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*,⁴⁹ three commentaries on *Sefer*

⁴⁷ Parenthesis is mine.

⁴⁸ Ms. Oxford, Mich. 143 (Neubauer, 1582) fol. 3r, 76 (see Idel 1988:47).

⁴⁹ *Sefer haGeulah*, *Sefer Chayei haNefesh*, *Sefer Sitrei Torah* and *Moreh haMoreh*.

*Yetzira*⁵⁰ as well as a commentary on the Torah.⁵¹ Additionally, he wrote practical manuals on prophetic experiences.⁵²

2.3.8.1 Synthesis

Of particular interest to us is the view of Goldish (2004:62) who shows that Natan of Gaza, Shabbatai Tzvi's prophet, made use of Abulafia's prophetic *Kabbalah*. Idel (1995:53-65) is of the view that early Chassidism was similarly influenced by Abulafia. He suggests that the writings of Abulafia may have circulated in Eastern Europe in manuscript form at around the time of the emergence of Chassidism. Mayse (2015: Introduction) writes:

"The phenomenological affinity between early Hasidic thought and Abulafia's linguistic is certainly quite striking, particularly in the realm of language, but his writings are never cited."

Although Abulafia is regarded, even by other *kabbalists*, as somewhat of an outlier, it does not change the common theological denominator running through all the messianic claimants, that intense mysticism and messianism go hand in hand. The more steeped the claimant is in mysticism the more he believes he has the power to speak to kings and popes and has the tools to immediately effect a change in the cosmic order. In my view, as I shall try to show and emphasise throughout this study, it is this very connection to mysticism that naturally creates a resultant messianic tension, and the deeper the mystical component - the more dramatic the messianism. Jewish history was to produce a host of other messianic claimants such as the 'messianic duo' of David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho to whom we shall now turn our attention.

2.3.9 David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho – A Messianic Duo

2.3.9.1 Introduction

⁵⁰ *Otzar Eden Ganuz*, *Gan Na'ul* and a third which is untitled.

⁵¹ *Sefer Maftehot haTorah*.

⁵² *Chayei haOlam haBa*, *Or haSechel*, *Sefer haCheshek* and *Imrei Shefer*.

In the early sixteenth century, soon after the expulsion of practising Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497, two rabbis who were friends and colleagues simultaneously claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. These were the fascinating personalities of R. David Reuveni and R. Shlomo Molcho. We will begin with David Reuveni.

2.3.9.2 Rabbi David Reuveni (1490-1535)⁵³ – The only black Jewish messianic claimant

No one is quite sure where the adventurer, traveller and *kabbalist* David Reuveni was born. Nor are we sure of his true name and identity. Weisberger (2019:n.p.) describes him as “*one of the most bizarre and still-unexplained characters in Jewish history.*”

Scholars disagree as to Reuveni's origins. According to *Shalsholet haKabbalah*,⁵⁴ David Reuveni was “*a man of dark complexion, like an African...*” and only spoke Hebrew and Arabic. When he visited Portugal, he needed an interpreter, so this would eliminate the possibility that he was born in Portugal. Birnbaum (1958:3) 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. Motti Benmelech (2011:36), 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 traveler whose identity is still unknown.”

Perhaps the most compelling account is by Reuveni himself who claimed that he was born in Khaybar - perhaps identical to the Khaybar in central Arabia - which was inhabited and ruled by Jews.⁵⁵ Reuveni, whose diary is held in the Bodleian Library in Oxford,⁵⁶ claimed that he was the representative of his brother Joseph, who was the

⁵³ Some accounts put his death at 1541.

⁵⁴ Gedalya Ibn Yachya (1515-1587), *Shalsholet haKabbalah*, Jerusalem 1962, 112.

⁵⁵ Joseph Jacobs entry on “David Reuveni” in the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, 338-339.

⁵⁶ Ms. Heb. f. 14.

King of Khaybar (also known as *Habor*)⁵⁷ and that this independent Jewish kingdom, in the middle of the Arabian desert, had 300 000 Jewish subjects. According to Aescoly, Reuveni introduced himself as:

“a Jew from the wilderness of Habor, [and part of]⁵⁸ an envoy sent by the seventy Elders” (Aescoly 1993:31-33).

On the matter of the diary, Hillelson takes the view that it was:

“the exact transcript of an oral narrative, perhaps given in another language and taken down in Hebrew by a German Jew” (Hillelson 1933:55).

David Reuveni had a grand scheme to convince three Christian kings to create an alliance with his brother the King of Khaybar, to conquer the Moslems. *Marranos* (secret Spanish and Portuguese Jews), particularly, would be encouraged to serve in this army which would eventually free the Jews of the Holy Land from Moslem rule. Weisberger (2019:n.p.) refers to this alliance as a “*joint Jewish-Christian crusade*.” Reuveni, the *kabbalist* and mystic, 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 managed to raise much funding for his travels from a Venetian Jewish painter, Moses da Castellazzo (1467-1527), and another wealthy Jewish merchant. He was also supported by Benvenida, the wife of Shmuel of the famous Abravanel family. He told the Pope about the Jewish kingdom in Arabia and claimed that they lived near the legendary Sambation River. He brought letters of reference from influential people who claimed to verify his statements (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009:132). This is what Reuveni told the Pope:

⁵⁷ Possibly as in I Chronicles 5:26.

⁵⁸ Parenthesis in mine.

“I am David, the son of the late King Solomon⁵⁹ 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 he had the ear of the Pope, the latter declined to get involved in the messianic mission and instead referred Reuveni to the King of Portugal, who also happened to be related to the influential King Charles (who had married the Portuguese king’s sister). This connection promised to be a potentially powerful and widespread alliance. Initially, King Joao (John) of Portugal agreed to Reuveni’s plan and even offered him eight ships and four thousand 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. However, the Portuguese king 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.

Nonetheless, Reuveni’s intended destination for the ships he hoped to secure was the port of Jeddah (Benmelech 2011:41). The problem was, however, that Reuveni had now declared himself the Messiah. There is some debate as to whether he declared himself the Messiah or whether his followers, especially the crypto-Jews in Portugal, regarded him as the Messiah (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009:143). Either way, Reuveni had garnered massive support from the Portuguese *Marrano/Converso* community and the King feared a popular uprising.

Reuveni was eventually asked to leave Portugal as the king feared he would not be able to contain such a revolt (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009:143). The *Conversos* did indeed play an important role during the 1520-1521 popular Revolt of the Comuneros against the Spanish monarchy (Hernando 2005:71-102). Reuveni’s expulsion did not curtail his continued strategy to form his alliance with the Christian world to liberate Jerusalem by expelling the Moslems.

⁵⁹ Not to be confused with the biblical King Solomon.

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 expulsion, and 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).

This Jerusalem *kabbalist* had written on two occasions about messianic redemption predicted to take place close to Mecca in Gadya (Jeddah?) in 1522 (Benmelech 2011:44). This, typically, underscores my hypothesis concerning the relationship between radical mysticism and messianism - a pattern that repeats itself throughout this inquiry.

Benmelech (2011:48), however, maintains that Reuveni was more focussed on preparing for redemption by political rather than ‘magical’ means. In a technical sense, one could perhaps say that Reuveni inspired more of a millenarianism (militaristic and political) movement than a messianic (eschatological) one. Nevertheless, eschatology and mysticism provided the backdrop to the militaristic means through which the movement was to find its fulfilment. Benmelech (2011:60) 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.”

This notion of a “pressure cooker” from a pre-existing mystical and messianic ideology is also something that repeats throughout this study and fits my argument that every mystical movement has some incubation effect on the next one following in its wake.

Let us now turn our attention to the second messianic character in this duo, Shlomo Molcho.

2.3.9.3 Shlomo Molcho (1501-1532)

During the short period of respite, while the Portuguese king was negotiating with David Reuveni (see previous section 2.3.9.2), 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.

Diego Pires then changed his name to Shlomo Molcho (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009:144). This name was no accident as the names *Shlomo* (Solomon who built the Temple) and *Molcho* (*Melech* = King) both indicated universal messianic aspirations. David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho became friends and together they engaged in the study of mysticism and were filled with a spirit of messianism. Later, however, while in Italy, they quarrelled and each Messiah was to independently go their own way.

Rachel Elior finds convergence between the sixteenth-century messianism of David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho which followed from the expulsions of 1492 and 1497, and the dissemination of the foundational mystical work known as the *Zohar* (first published around 1290):

“The ‘revelation’ of the *Zohar* in the late medieval period was considered by the 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. The tribulations were construed as apocalyptic birth pangs which would culminate in the inevitable coming of the Messiah, delivered from heaven through the study of the *Zohar*” (Elior 2004:15).

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.

Shlomo Molcho was born in Portugal in 1501 to a noble family of *Conversos*. At twenty-two, he became the official scribe to King Emanuel I of Portugal. After being inspired by David Reuveni, he then travelled to Salonica where he joined the *yeshivah* of Yosef Taitazak, known as the *Maharitats*.⁶⁰ According to Aryeh Kaplan, the *Maharitats* was influenced by the extreme esotericism of Abulafia and became one of the most mystical of all the *kabbalists* of the generation. He made generous use of amulets and magic squares.⁶¹

Besides a mystic, the *Maharitats* was also regarded as an authoritative *talmudist* of his age - with R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575) acknowledging his authority. Besides Shlomo Molcho, another student of the *Maharitats* was R. Shlomo Alkabetz who composed *Lecha Dodi*.⁶² Later Shlomo Molcho journeyed to Turkey where he met Shlomo Alkabetz as well as Yosef Karo. Molcho was thus associated with very mystical and authoritative circles, which inevitably lead him to a heightened form of messianic expectation (Benmelech 2016:31).

Although R. Yosef Karo authored perhaps the most authoritative *halachic* or legal code of Jewish law known as the *Shulchan Aruch*, he was also as his diary, *Magid Meisharim* attests, very steeped in esoteric mysticism. The journal was compiled over fifty years of nocturnal visits from what is said to have been 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 2011:1).

Shlomo Molcho then travelled to the Holy Land and became engaged to a woman in Safed⁶³ although it is not known if he married her. On his return to Europe, Molcho started giving fiery speeches encouraging his listeners to do actions which would hasten the coming of the Messiah. Interestingly, both Jews and Christians - including members of the Christian clergy - would attend his talks (Ruderman 1992:308). 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 not happy with his emphasis on messianism,

⁶⁰ *Maharitats* is the acronym for **Moreinu haRav Yosef Taitazak**.

⁶¹ Online source: [Joseph Taitazak - Wikipedia](#). Retrieved on 09 March 2022.

⁶² The liturgical poem recited at the onset of the *Shabbat*.

⁶³ Some accounts have it as Greece.

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. However, Molcho was protected by the Pope who hid him, and sadly the wrong man was burned at the stake instead of him (Benmelech 2016:34).

Shlomo Molcho wrote a book called *Sefer haMefoar* which was a collection of his lectures, mainly from his time in Italy. It had many *kabbalistic* and messianic references. There were twenty-two essays on the topic of redemption in accordance with the secrets of *Kabbalah* - and it also mentioned that he was reluctant to publish the work because he was aware of its controversial nature. Theologically, as we shall see, this pattern is typical with mystics who indulge in esoteric *Kabbalah*, who then become messianically inspired, and as a result thereof often need to hide their eschatological aspirations. Nevertheless, *Sefer haMefoar* was indeed eventually published in Salonica in 1527 during the lifetime of the author. In the book, Molcho mentions another work which dealt with the mysteries contained within the words of the sages but it is not extant and may never have been published. Yet another indication of his predilection for mysticism. In his book, Molcho predicted that the Messiah would appear in the year 1540.

The Jewish Museum of Prague has some items on display which belonged to Shlomo Molcho. His unique *tzitzit*, or *ritual fringes*, with dyed green⁶⁴ strings, have disappeared over time.

Just how seriously some *halachic* leaders took Shlomo Molcho can be seen by the fact that he is quoted by the legalist Avraham Abele Gombinger (c.1635-1682) known as the *Magen Avraham* regarding his view on the number of windings on the *tzitzit* (10, 5, 6, and 5 which correspond through *gematria* or numerology to the name of God, ה, ו, ה, י) - a custom followed by some *Sefaradim* to this day (Green & Kahn 2011:113). R. 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 he saw the actual *tzitzit* belonging to Shlomo Molcho in the Pinchas Synagogue in Prague. This is further evidence that Molcho was well

⁶⁴ This is another reference to the colour green relating to messianic *kabbalists* (see Saperstein 2015:649). 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 1993:96).

acquainted with and even quoted by, highly respected and authoritative *halachists*. This pattern of messianic claimants and their brushing with respected rabbinic leadership was similarly and typically to be repeated, as we shall see, in many other instances of future messianic history.

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*, or *Who is like You God among the gods?* This flag was also incorporated into his signature.

Eventually, David Reuveni was arrested and taken to Spain where he died in prison, probably after being poisoned. Shlomo Molcho had suggested to King Charles that he convert to Judaism to fit in with the messianic scheme, but the king 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 King Charles. Shlomo Molcho was then burned at the stake at the age of 31, in Mantua Italy on 5 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. R. Yosef Karo said of him that he envied his 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).

Not all rabbis endorsed Molcho in such glowing terms. R. Chaim Vital (1543-1620), the foremost student of the great *kabbalist* Yitzchak Luria, also known as the Ari Zal (1534-1572) is said to have rebuked Molcho for having a so-called angelic being as a teacher and abusing mysticism for his messianic pretensions. The only vague yet possible reference I could find to this is in Chaim Vital's Introduction to his *Sha'arei Kedusha* where he writes about unnamed rabbis:

"Later, there arose men who sought to attain spiritual levels by invoking the angels through the power of incanting their holy names. However, they hoped for light and behold darkness; for the angels they conjured were of a very low order who were appointed to affect matters of this, lowly world. This being the case, they are composed of good and evil and themselves perceive neither Truth nor the

supernal lights. Therefore, they revealed matters that were admixed with good and evil, truth and error and vain things; matters, such as mystical cures, alchemy... amulets, oaths and incantations. Furthermore, these people fell to imbibing wine and strong drink” (Sha’arei Kedusha. Introduction: 4, translation is from Sefaria).

Another rabbi who takes a more open and forthright critical approach to Molcho is Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo (1591-1655) of Crete, known as the *Yashar mi’Kandia*. He does not hesitate to mock Molcho and his “*supposed Kabbalistic powers*”. Delmedigo refers to Molcho as a *shoteh* or *fool* (Weisberger 2019).

2.3.9.4 Synthesis

Theologically, this fame and reverence bestowed upon yet another false messianic claimant by so many leading *halachic* jurists do not sit well with first principles. As we shall see later, even in the time of Shabbatai Tzvi, many leading rabbis similarly respected and revered him.

I contend that an important lesson can be gleaned from the study of the history of Jewish messianism. Throughout messianic history, there is commonly a wide acceptance of so many messianic claimants by the populace and rabbinic leadership. In contemporary Judaism, this history is often overlooked if not largely unknown. At a time when new messianism is once again rife across the board and on so many levels, it is sobering to realize that as popular as contemporary messianic movements are, this is not the first time the world has been caught up in the fervour of *Ikveta deMeshicha* or *messianic birth pangs*. Of course, this does not take away from the very genuine principle of the Messiah within Judaism – but history teaches us that mass fervour is not an indication of immediate messianic redemption, nor is it a confirmation of accurate foundational theology. A study of the surprisingly large numbers of false Messiahs within rabbinic Judaism, and particularly the widespread following by the masses, shows how ubiquitous, theologically strained, yet powerfully influential these multiple messianic movements were - and still are.

We now turn to another messianic claimant from around the same time as David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho, namely R. Asher Lemlein.

2.3.10 Asher Lemlein (fl. 1500) – the first Ashkenazi Messiah

Until the sixteenth century, messianic claimants were *Sefaradim*. The first *Ashkenazi* messiah was R. Asher Lemlein (Reutlinger) (fl.1500). He was active in Italy where he devoted himself to the study of *Kabbalah*. There were many rabbinic predictions as to the year of the arrival of the Messiah, with R. Yitzchak Abravanel predicting 1503, and R. Avraham Zacuto predicting 1504. There was also a prediction for the year 1500.

Rabow (2003:58) suggests that Lemlein may have had his redemptive aspirations ignited, growing up as he did, in a milieu of 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 the date for the Messiah to reveal himself at 1502. 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. An example of just how seriously people took Lemlein, can be seen in an incident recorded by R. 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 R. 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).

There is some disagreement as to whether Lemlein called himself the Messiah or just his proclaiming prophet. According to David Gans, he just claimed to be the messianic *mevasser*, or *proclaimer*. Lemlein secluded himself in a room within a room and performed ‘miracles.’ 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).

According to the sharp condemnation by R. Yosef haCohen (1496-1575), author of *Emek haBacha*, Lemlein was “*insane and a foolish prophet*.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, *Emek haBacha* acknowledges that:

“[t]he 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.’”⁶⁶

However, according to Lemlein’s townsman and colleague, R. Avraham Farissol (c.1451-1525/6), author of *Magen Avraham*, he was the Messiah and the Messiah, therefore, had already arrived.⁶⁷

The Lemlein 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 2003:58).

2.3.11 False Messiahs and potential Messiahs

At this juncture, after dealing with some prominent examples of false Messiahs, an analysis of the very notion of a ‘false Messiah’ is in order. Some traditionalists 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 2012-). The messianic claimant is therefore not held accountable, as his intentions were good - and perhaps under different circumstances, things could have turned out better.

There is even a *Chassidic* 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

⁶⁵ *Emek haBacha*, Krakow 5654, p.109.

⁶⁶ *Emek haBacha*, *ibid.* Translation is mine.

⁶⁷ *Magen Avraham*, ch. 24.

to time to keep the messianic dream alive (Steinsaltz 2012-). Ironically, support for this may be found in Maimonides' *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 a very 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, *Iggeret Teiman*).⁶⁸

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 to be the view of the later Sabbatians (Goldish 2004:147).

On the other hand, one could take the position that a false Messiah is just that - *a false Messiah* - especially when considering the utter and sometimes unimaginable physical and theological turmoil that always followed in the wake of such messianic claimants. 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. And, in my view, the Messiah - if he is the Messiah - by the very definitions and requirements of the messianic principles, does not fail.

2.3.12 Synthesis

Based on my research and observations in this study, I propose that the typical chain of reaction which usually occurs with messianic claimants is along the following lines:

- The student begins with a study of some intense form of pre-existing mysticism.

⁶⁸ Online source: [Iggerot HaRambam, Iggeret Teiman 12 with About \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Iggerot-HaRambam-Iggeret-Teiman-12-with-About). Retrieved 24 March 2022. Translation is by Sefaria.

- The student becomes a mystic and a mystical practitioner. The practitioner then becomes intrigued by the mystical process of redemption which is no longer a theory but a real achievable state, both personally and universally.
- The practitioner becomes a redeemer by believing himself (or pretending) to be at the centre of the redemptive process.
- This is followed by a focus on achieving imminent redemptive results.
- Many followers are attracted to this great developing cosmic drama - which they have always been told to expect - and want to experience it personally and first-hand.
- In time, the group transforms into a movement. The movement grows as the leader wants to lead and the followers want to follow.
- A defining moment or tipping point is reached when the leader is unable to deliver on his promise of universal redemption.
- Some hold on to the original ethos by citing mystical technicalities as to why the Messiah failed or died.
- The majority of the members of the movement are individually faced with a spiritual crisis of faith.
- The result is some form of dramatic fallout from which recovery is difficult at best and impossible at worst.
- The process is then started again by another student of intense mysticism.

Four observations and conclusions are evident thus far: 1) Some form of mysticism usually preceded, and served as a catalyst for, the nascent messianic movements; 2) There are predictable and repetitive patterns in these messianic movements and the leadership rubric is similar throughout; 3) Even after the death of the respective messianic claimants there is some lingering of loyalty to the original ideology; and 4) The demise of the movements herald an era of spiritual turmoil, crises of faith and general disorientation.

Having dealt with some important messianic claimants up to the sixteenth century, we now move on to an analysis of messianic circles in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain. These circles were to be a precursor to a later form of mysticism, *Lurianic Kabbalah*, upon which, as I shall argue, the Sabbatian movement was able to find a precedent and a foothold.

2.4 Messianic study circles in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain

In this section, I examine how the expulsion of the Jews from Spain triggered an emphasis on redemptive and messianic fervour which was to become a theological mainstay of future Judaism. Of course, earlier Jewish literature had dealt with messianic matters, but after the expulsion, it took on a new and elevated urgency. The expulsion of the practising Jews from Spain was initiated by the Alhambra Decree which was issued on 31 March 1492 by the joint Catholic Monarchs of Castile and Aragon. The Jews were to have left Spanish soil by 31 July of that year.

As a direct spiritual and theological reaction to the expulsion, many intensely mystical and messianic schools, or *yeshivot*, were established in attempts at theurgically (through magical or supernatural means) bringing about a state of immediate redemption:

“Some of the most intense messianic spirituality was centered in the many yeshivot and study circles established in the period after the Expulsion for the express purpose of hastening the redemption” (Carlebach 1992:208).

The pre-existing *mitzva* (religious obligation) of Torah study began to take on an urgent and overt messianic accentuation. Torah study served not just as spiritual edification but also as a theurgical tool through which the redemption may be realised. Even secular aspects of Jewish life - including the mundane politics within the expelled community - became spiritualized (Elior 2004:11). This way everything was imbued with omnisignificance⁶⁹ and messianic overtones. This point has been largely ignored by historians as Carlebach explains:

“[T]he significance of messianism as a central and fundamental response to the Expulsion remains unremarked” (Carlebach 1992:208).

⁶⁹ ‘Omnisignificance’ is a term coined by James Kugel (1981:103-4) where every single and individual word, every deed, event and anomaly are believed to teach something. Kugel was referring specifically to the Hebrew Bible, but the term has taken on meaning in the broader world as well specifically with regard to how individual divine providence is viewed.

It is important to remember that these redemptive study circles were not unique to the Spanish Jews of the post-expulsion era, but they continued in one form or another to dominate the religious study landscape, well into the future, and their influence was later felt deep within *Ashkenazi* circles as well. Carlebach shows how the influence of these *Sephardi* redemptive study circles spread to the *Ashkenazi* world and transformed their study ethos to also include a redemptive component. Torah study was no longer just about acquiring knowledge but it took on a pressing theurgic dimension. Like the rise of messianism after the expulsion, the turn to a theurgical or 'redemptive' component of Torah study has also been largely ignored by students of history:

"Of all the messianic pathways taken by Iberian [Spanish and Portuguese]⁷⁰ Jews as a consequence of the persecutions and expulsions of the fifteenth century, this one has been least explored, although it lasted for centuries and spread beyond the Sephardic community..." (Carlebach 1992:208).

Kraemer (1986:103), however, suggests that these study circles may have been influenced by similar schools and study circles that flourished in medieval Islam. The Spanish Jews may have adopted that structure of study and adapted it as their own.

Cohen (1967:143) contends strongly that persecutions of Jews have no discernible bearing on millennial movements because, according to him, these movements arose in periods of relative stability. Sharot (1982:65) responds that this may be true of *Ashkenazi* Jewry where their persecutions between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, were not generally followed by a rise in messianism:

"[M]illennarianism was almost unknown among the Ashkenazim, who were subject to a greater number of disasters and periods of persecution...The Ashkenazim emphasized sin, guilt, humility, and asceticism; their quiescence and passivity not conducive to millenarianism. The Sephardim emphasized pride, nobility, [and] self-assertiveness..." (Sharot 1982:68-9).

⁷⁰ Parenthesis is mine.

Sharot explains that with *Sefaradi* and Italian Jews, instances of messianism did indeed often follow persecution.

Either way, the *Sefaradi* redemptive *yeshiva* was often called a *hesger* which was a *closed circle* of not more than ten elite scholars. In a large community, there would be many such study circles. While *Ashkenazi* rabbis usually sought positions of rabbinic leadership and authority, the *Sefaradi* rabbis were more interested in the prestige that came with heading a redemptive study circle.⁷¹

The funding for these study circles was from the wealthy within the communities who were happy to be able to contribute and thereby, they believed, vicariously gain a share in bringing about the anticipated messianic state of redemption. These messianic study circles did not just study Torah but developed specialized mystical curricula which, they believed, would bring the redemption closer. Additionally, these circles were rather elitist and in the words of R. Raphael Treves:

“Our redemption...cannot be attained by the masses, only by the elite”
(Barnai 1982:63).

The spread of *Lurianic Kabbala* during the sixteenth century also contributed to the messianic urgency as it similarly imbued the study and practice of Torah with theurgical significance.⁷² Many practitioners within these study circles maintained that *kabbalistic* study should be elevated over traditional *talmudic* study (Idel 1986: 141-157).

While many believed that the Holy Land was the ultimate geographical location to host messianic study circles, some maintained that centres within the Diaspora were crucial to prepare the world for the imminent messianic manifestation (Carlebach 1990:62-63). For those who favoured the Holy Land, there was much debate over which particular region of the Holy Land was best suited for these messianic circles. Besides the obvious choice of Jerusalem, some preferred Safed (particularly during the sixteenth century), Tiberius, Chevron and even Gaza. Actually, Safed was

⁷¹ Based on this, I would suggest that this difference in the way each group asserted its authority had bearing on the fact that generally, *Ashkenazi* rabbis ruled stricter in *halachic* matters than their *Sefaradi* counterparts.

⁷² *Lurianic Kabbalah* formulated by the Ari (1534-1572) following so soon after the expulsion from Spain (1492) would have absorbed the same messianic urgency and certainly did perpetuate urgent messianism in its teachings as we shall later see. *Lurianic Kabbalah* arose in Safed, northern Israel, and Safed was a haven for many fleeing Spanish Jews.

dominant as long as it held its strong economic position but, as soon as it lost that dominance, Jerusalem took over.

These messianic and redemptive study circles were perpetuated well into the future. Two hundred years later, in the eighteenth century, the great mystic R. Chaim ben Moshe Abulafia (1660-1744) (not to be confused with Avraham Abulafia) founded a redemptive *yeshiva* in Tiberius called *Mashmia Yeshua* or *Harbinger of Redemption*. He told the Jews of Tiberius that:

“[T]he messiah would soon arrive and come from the Sea of Galilee”
(Barnai 1982:40).

Chaim Abulafia’s son-in-law R. Yakov Berav described various miracles that were said to have occurred with this father-in-law’s mystical study circle (Carlebach 1992:211). R. Chaim Benattar (1696-1743), known as the *Ohr haChaim*, was attracted to Chaim Abulafia in Tiberius. He specifically wanted to establish a redemptive *yeshiva* to hasten the arrival of the Messiah and he later moved his *kabbalistic* circle to Jerusalem. Some believe he was the inspirational model for the nascent Chassidic movement (Angel 1991:89-94).

The Diaspora communities often supported the messianic *yeshivot* of the Holy Land. Only selected candidates qualified to be sent to the Holy Land. It was very expensive to travel during the eighteenth century as the fare was twice the annual income needed to live in the Land of Israel. Carlebach (1992:212) explains:

“The attempts to establish redemptive centres of Rabbinic scholarship [in the Holy Land] began with the first exiles [from Spain],⁷³ and continued for centuries. They tended to cluster around certain redemptive dates, such as 1575, 1700-1706, and 1740...Rabbinic circles were similarly established all over the Sephardic Diaspora, in Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. While some were simply traditional centers of study, many had esoteric agendas which transformed their activities into intense theurgic dramas.”

⁷³ Parentheses are mine.

Significant to our inquiry is the fact that these post-expulsion messianic study circles continued to flourish for centuries. Initially, they maintained their elitist nature but gradually, after being adopted by the Sabbatians and later by the Chassidic movement, they opened up to the masses who were encouraged to participate in the enterprise of study for redemptive purposes. Thereafter, this messianic ethos slowly wound its way into the general mainstream.

“The curriculum proposed by the Sabbatians did not differ from that of many of their predecessors – they championed an almost exclusive reliance on kabbalistic texts, beginning with the Zohar, and particularly the study of Lurianic Kabbalah. What distinguished them was their strident insistence that any other pursuit of Torah studies was only irrelevant, but actually impeded the redemption” (Carlebach 1992:214).

Bear in mind that the Sabbatians were not just a fringe movement. Their numbers included the majority of the Jewish population at that time. Many of their leaders were prominent rabbis. After Shabbatai Tzvi was shown to be a false Messiah and the movement went underground, it was very difficult to distinguish a secret Sabbatian from a mainstream religious Jew. The secret Sabbatians were known to have established secret cells. Carlebach (1992:212) writes:

“Many prominent Sabbatians, some with messianic pretensions of their own, planned to build redemptive yeshivot.”

During the time of the secret Sabbatians, similar redemptive study circles were established in Jerusalem by R. Avraham Rovigo in 1702,⁷⁴ and by R. Isaiah Chasid who established a ten-scholar Sabbatian *yeshiva* in Mannheim, Germany.

Another example of this desire to create redemptive study cells, is the secret or crypto-Sabbatian, R. Raphael Mordechai Malchi. Malchi intended to make Jerusalem the centre of Sabbatian ideology and his primary tool for so doing was to establish a redemptive *yeshiva*. R. Raphael Malchi wrote:

⁷⁴ Some accounts have it in 1701.

“At the end of days...they [the Jews of the Diaspora] will establish a midrash [yeshiva]⁷⁵ in Jerusalem of seventy scholars over them. The Lord will bring many settlers out of oppression who will cultivate the land...The era of this restoration...is the time of the approach of the redemption...The King Messiah will emerge from them” (Rivlin 1955:46).

This is a clear example of the belief that the study circle brings redemption that much nearer.

R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (1626–1706) was born in Spain to a *Marrano* family. According to Goldish (2004:97), he was a *Converso* who, together with his brother, Yitzchak, escaped from Spain in 1648 and then reverted to Judaism. He spent two years studying Christian theology and later, spent some time in Livorno, Italy, and then went to Egypt where he lived for five years and studied. He settled in Tripoli (Goldish 2004:97). In 1703, he arrived in the Holy Land and also wanted to establish a redemptive *yeshiva* in Jerusalem, in competition with R. Raphael Mordechai Malchi. He was an interesting personality because he had lived as a crypto-Jew in Spain until around his twentieth year and then became a crypto-Sabbatian. He hired copyists to disseminate his writings in Jerusalem to counter the other Sabbatian literature that was popular there. Cardozo wrote in no uncertain terms:

“In the Academy on High there are two yeshivot, one for Elijah and one for R. Simon bar Yohai. And I will establish a third one...for I possess a veritable treasury of esoteric lore.”⁷⁶

The anti-Sabbatian Rabbinate of Jerusalem, however, blocked Cardozo from establishing his *yeshiva* in Jerusalem. In 1708, his student, Nechemya Hayon collected funds from Smyrna to establish a redemptive *yeshiva* in Israel but it was also blocked by the Rabbinate (Carlebach 1992:13).

These redemptive and mystical study circles continued to command a pivotal position throughout the period of the Sabbatian movement. The same may be said about its important role during the subsequent rise of Chassidism:

⁷⁵ Parentheses are mine.

⁷⁶ Elijah Kohen, 1912, *Sefer Meribat Kadesh*, in *Inyanei Shabtai Zevi*, Berlin, 18-19.

“These vehicles of rabbinic messianism preceded the Sabbatian movement, influenced its adherents, and outlived its last vestiges” (Carlebach 1992:216).

2.5 Synthesis

As Carlebach points out, history has overlooked the fundamental and powerful influence of the messianic study circles that sprung up in the aftermath of the expulsion and continued to shape messianic Judaism before and even after the Sabbatian movement.

- These redemptive attempts at turning mystical study into theurgical catalysts for the dawning of the messianic era were the springboard from which many of the more modern messianic movements sprung.
- What the redemptive study circles did after the expulsion from Spain in the fifteenth century, was to transform the traditional view of Torah study into an urgent and powerful tool to bring about ‘*immediate redemption*’. It was a mystical attempt to ‘rectify’ the ills of the expulsion.
- This messianic ethos, almost like a manifesto, was then capitalized upon by the *Lurianic kabbalists* of the sixteenth century who also maintained these study circles.
- A similar mystical character and tenor was then adopted and reworked by the followers of Shabbatai Tzvi in the seventeenth century.
- The same thread found its way into the Chassidic Movement of the eighteenth century which also had exclusive messianic study circles such as the *Chevraya Kadisha* of the Baal Shem Tov.

The nature of these closed messianic study circles was to hasten the redemption. This corresponds to my hypothesis that the common denominator running throughout this entire study is that mysticism begets the extreme spiritual expectation of imminent messianic redemption. The historical evidence shows that this was the case in the past. It is the case in the present because most of the Jewish world today (including non-Chassidim) has generally adopted a mystical worldview (although not all are necessarily mystics). There is no reason why this should not continue into the future.

Understanding the earlier mysticism and messianism that we have examined in this chapter is important because it highlights the messianic tendencies, tensions,

behaviours and patterns that are so ingrained within the collective psyche of the Jewish people. While Jews are known for their outright rejection of the Christian Messiah, the irony is that history shows an almost desperate messianic vulnerability and gullibility running as a common thread throughout the ages up to and including this present generation. Whether one calls them ‘false’, ‘failed’, ‘potential’, ‘Messiahs-in-waiting’ or ‘messianic pretenders’ the sheer number of them is astounding and significant. Shabbatai Tzvi, although perhaps the best known, was by no means the only such individual upon whom the hopes of the people rested.

From the fifteenth century, the mystical movements had overwhelmed the attempts at Jewish rationalism. And all indications are that this will also be the case in the future, as it seems unlikely that Maimonidean or rationalist model will ever be adopted by mainstream Judaism (See Chapter 6). In the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, mystical and theurgic study circles began to evolve in an attempt at hastening the redemption and Torah study today has adopted this theurgic element.

After examining early messianism and messianic claimants, as well as messianic study circles in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain - we now proceed to the third chapter which is an analysis of the rise of sixteenth-century *Lurianic Kabbalah* which was to become so germane to the question of influences on the seventeenth-century Sabbatian movement.

CHAPTER 3:

BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF THE ARI

3.1 Introduction

The expulsion from Spain in 1492 and its pursuant upheavals brought the once elitist and exclusive study of *Kabbalah* gradually into the open, and also located the focus of messianism more urgently within its core mystical ethos:

“This combination of mysticism with messianic apocalyptic[,] turned Kabbalah into a historical force of great dynamism” (Scholem 1987:68).

In the introduction to his *Or haChama al haZohar*, R. Avraham Azulai (c.1570–1643) quotes an unknown *kabbalist* who writes:

“The decree from above that one should not discuss kabbalistic teaching in public was meant to last only for a limited time – until 1490. We then entered the period called ‘the last generation’ and the decree was rescinded...And from 1540 onward the most important mizvah will be to study it in public, both young and old, since this, and nothing else, will bring about the coming of the Messiah” (Scholem 1987:68-69).

While the detailed, mystical and technical *concepts* of the new and more messianic *Kabbalah* were still out of reach of the average person, its essential radical ideas and *aims* lent themselves to popular and widespread acceptance. Four decades after the expulsion from Spain, a new centre of mysticism began to emerge in Safed, in the Galilee region of the Holy Land, then known as Ottoman Syria. This new *Kabbalah* was personified by R. Yitzchak Luria (1534-1572).

Scholem, famously claiming Gnostic origins for *Kabbalah* in general, writes that the:

“Gnostic reaction in the Kabbalah, and...the mythical tendency in the Kabbalah, reached its highest point in Luria, while at the same time its

relationship with the philosophical trends of Spanish Kabbalah...was at its most tenuous” (Scholem 1987:74).

This new emerging *Lurianic Kabbalah*, placing more emphasis on messianism and theurgy, and less weight on classical theosophy, was to become a major force shaping much of future Judaism.

We must remember, though, that what we refer to as *Lurianic Kabbalah* is not a monolithic mystical literature. Although the Ari’s (Luria’s) writings are referred to as *Kitvei haAri*, or *writings of the Ari*, they are instead the writings of his students. The Ari intended his original teachings to remain only within his small mystical circle, who were worthy of these deep secrets. Exactly what the Ari wrote is not certain because he left very few writings of his own (Scholem 1987:76). His minimal extant writings comprise a commentary on *Sifra deTzniuta* (a section of the *Zohar* which shows influences from R. Moshe Cordovero), a collection of pious customs as well as some *Shabbat* hymns (Faierstein 2007:6).

In other words, when we refer to *Lurianic Kabbalah*, which *Lurianic Kabbalah* are we referring to? We know the names of about thirty of the Ari’s students and we know that some who applied to study with him were rejected. These included R. Moshe Alshekh and R. Yosef Karo (Scholem 1987:421-2).

We will now examine *Lurianic Kabbalah* through its various lenses as presented by some of the Ari’s students. The purpose of this excursion into the battle for the soul of the Ari, is to show that there is not one version of *Lurianic Kabbalah* but many - and therefore it becomes difficult to exclude or minimise its influences on the soon-to-emerge Sabbatian movement because *Lurianism* was more pervasive than particularistic.

3.1.1 R. Yosef Ibn Tabul (c.1545-early seventeenth-century)

An important student of the Ari was R. Yosef Ibn Tabul from north Africa, known as *Yosef haMa’aravi* or *Yosef from the West*. He spent time in the Ari’s *kabbalistic* circle in Safed, and as common amongst the students of the Ari, he kept his written notes out of public circulation. This inability to ascertain the actual writings of the Ari’s foremost students, let alone the Ari himself, makes it very difficult to precisely define *Lurianic Kabbalah*:

“The ban on the public teaching of Lurianic Kabbalah and the copying and publication of Luria’s mystical teachings made the accurate transmission of these teachings close to impossible” (Faierstein 2013:101).

3.1.2 R. Chaim Vital Calabrese (1543-1620)

R. Chaim Vital Calabrese, whose family hailed from Calabria, Italy, was born in Safed and there he studied under R. Moshe Alshich, R. Yosef Karo and R. Moshe Cordovero. However, although the Ari only spent the last two or three years of his life in Safed, R. Chaim Vital claimed to be the foremost student of the Ari. According to Faieirstein (2007:9):

“After eventually joining the Ari, Vital quickly asserted himself as Luria’s most important disciple. Vital even claimed that Luria had only come to Safed for the purpose of teaching him.”

In reality, however, the student and disciple only spent just over a year together because, of those two years or so, for the first nine months after the Ari’s arrival, R. Vital “*did not value him*” as Vital thought he knew more *Kabbalah* than the Ari (Meroz 1993:267).

Meroz explains that the relationship between the Ari and R. Vital was never a typical hierarchical teacher-student relationship. R. Vital acknowledged the Ari as his teacher, but simultaneously the Ari recognized the messianic potential of R. Vital’s soul. This implies a degree of independence between the two, perhaps allowing space for Vital’s original contributions. Furthermore, R. Vital did not allow his writings and interpretations of his master’s teachings to be copied. He kept them locked in a cabinet and wanted them buried with him at his death. In fact, as Faierstein (2007:7) points out, the general tendency and legacy of *Lurianic Kabbalah* were that:

“[t]he aura of esotericism and secrecy that surrounded Luria’s kabbalistic teachings continued for centuries.”

Many other students of the Ari also recorded his teachings in various forms, making it very difficult to know exactly what the Ari’s original teachings were. When these

writings were first published in printed form in 1630 - a decade after R. Vital's passing and almost sixty years after the passing of the Ari - they could no longer have been reflective of the original and pure *Lurianic* teachings.

In R. Vital's autobiographical notes (known as the *Book of Visions*) from between 1610-12, he describes his teacher, the Ari, as a potential Messiah and doesn't exclude himself from such a role either. Both the Ari and R. Chaim Vital claimed the title of *Mashiach ben Yosef* (Goldish 2004:71).

The Ari was expected to be proclaimed the *Mashiach ben David* in 1575 (when it was commonly believed that the Messiah would appear) but after he had passed away three years earlier in 1572:

“his status was reinterpreted as a Messiah of Joseph figure whose death would be an early part of the messianic drama” (Faierstein 2007:6).

This way, the Ari continued, even after death, to retain a key position in the unfolding of the messianic story. In 1575, the year the Messiah was expected to appear, R. Chaim Vital gathered a group of twelve other students and in an attempt at appointing himself as the sole heir and successor to the teachings of the Ari, they signed a Pledge of Allegiance, committing themselves to only study the teachings of the Ari as taught exclusively by Vital. But when the Messiah did not arrive:

“the significance of the year was reinterpreted to mean that it was the beginning of the period when the advent of Messiah could be expected at any time” (Faieirstein 2007:9).

These are examples of manipulation of vicissitudes of reality to promote and maintain *Lurianic* messianic tension no matter what. To fan the flames of messianic fervour, outrageous (if not egocentric) claims were adduced to keep the focus on R. Vital's personage. He saw himself as a reincarnation of some important earlier figures in history (Faierstein 1999:156) and he wrote of himself:

“half the world exists through my merits” (Faierstein 1999:43-44).

The other half existed because of the merits of his father. R. Vital claimed he was told by:

“a woman who was an expert in divining by dropping oil into water...[that] – you will undoubtedly rule over all of Israel in the future [and she said: “I]⁷⁷ never saw anyone, in my practice of oil divination, on such a high level in this whole generation” (Faierstein 1999:44).

R. Vital wrote that it was predicted that he would start as *Mashiach ben Yosef* and then, later, assume the role of *Mashiach ben David* (Faierstein 1999:46). Writing like this about himself clearly shows the fundamentality of the messianic concept in his theology.

3.1.3 R. Moshe Yonah (sixteenth-century)

An early student of the Ari was R. Moshe Yonah, who published his own manuscripts in Europe, under the title *Kanfey Yonah* (Wings of the Dove). There appears to have been some friction between Moshe Yonah and Chaim Vital as there is evidence of them both making disparaging remarks about each other. R. Vital suggests that this was R. Yonah’s first transmigration as a “*human being*” and therefore he must be excused for his unseemly behaviour.⁷⁸ At the same time, R. Jonah is recorded (in the *kabbalist* R. Menachem Lonzano’s work, *Omer Man*) as asking the Ari on his deathbed whether Chaim Vital understood the *Lurianic* doctrine – to which the Ari is said to have responded: “*a little*”.⁷⁹ This open rivalry amongst the students of the Ari contributed to the multifaced if not fragmented nature of what became known as *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

3.1.4 R. Yisrael Sarug (1590-1620)

R. Yisrael Sarug, also claimed to be a foremost student of the Ari, although according to Scholem (1939-40:214-241) he certainly was not. There is some scholarly discussion over whether R. Sarug was even a student of the Ari (Shatil 2011:158). Unlike R. Vital and Ibn Tabul, R. Sarug did hold back on publicising his interpretations of the Ari, due to his “*missionary zeal*”. According to some accounts (Eldridge 2010:9-

⁷⁷ Parenthesis is mine.

⁷⁸ *Sefer ha-Gilgulim*, 1875, 66.

⁷⁹ Online source: [Jonah, Moses \(JewishVirtualLibrary.org\)](http://JewishVirtualLibrary.org). Retrieved on 16 May 2022.

10), R. Yisrael Sarug obtained stolen copies of R. Vital's writings and between 1592 and 1598, published them in Italy. According to Shatil (2011:158-159):

“there is no argument that the tracts that Sarug brought with him to Italy were the first available sources of Lurianic kabbalah in Europe and dominated its kabbalistic output through the seventeenth century.”

R. Sarug was a very important influence on future mysticism with his ideology affecting:

“the Sabbatean movement, the school of the GRA [the Vilna Gaon]⁸⁰, and the Hassidic movement, in particular within Chabad's unique strand of kabbalistic speculation” (Shatil 2011:159).

With the students of the Ari in apparent conflict and competition with each other, it makes accurate lines of *Lurianic* transmission very difficult to authenticate. We will now examine how these early “*writings of the Ari*” were later edited even further by R. Natan Nata Shapira and R. Meir Poppers.

3.1.5 R. Natan Nata Shapira (c.1585-1633)

Most of the “*so-called Lurianic writings*” were edited by R. Natan Nata Shapira, the chief rabbi of Cracow who later settled in Palestine (Scholem 1973:73). Besides a *kabbalist*, he also seems to have been a social activist in terms of criticising the wealthy (of the Diaspora) and championing the poor (of Jerusalem). He never took a salary during his tenure as chief rabbi.

The number of rabbis claiming to represent the authentic *Lurianic* line was obviously a contentious issue because R. Natan Nata Shapira's student, R. Berachya Berach wrote:

“I have seen a scandalous thing in the matter of kabbalistic studies ...[T]here have appeared presumptuous men who abuse the crown [of heavenly wisdom]...They write books on kabbalistic subjects,

⁸⁰ Parenthesis is mine.

obtain permission to print them, and then hawk them around...They reveal hidden and secret things to great and small, and even mingle the inventions of their hearts with [authentic] kabbalistic teachings, until it becomes impossible to distinguish between the words of the kabbalist masters and their own additions..."⁸¹

By 1650, *Lurianic Kabbala* had become a well-known and well-accepted composite and blend essentially of Vitalian and Sarugian interpretations (Scholem 1973:25).

3.1.6 R. Meir Poppers (1624-1662)

Besides R. Natan Nata Shapira, there was also another active editor of the Ari's teachings, R. Meir Poppers. Cooper (2018:129) explains that even though R. Vital was a major conduit for the transmission of *Lurianic* teachings, he hid one central work, entitled *Sefer Eitz Chaim*, with orders that the manuscript not leave his house even after his death. The work could only be studied by certain visitors to his Damascus home. Then, after R. Vital's passing in 1620, R. Meir Poppers used titles that R. Vital had coined, including *Eitz Chaim*, and he used Vital's manuscripts to produce a "product that was truly a new work." Cooper adds that while R. Poppers edited the works in Poland, R. Natan Nata Shapira (d.1633) had done a similar thing in Italy, with his most noted work entitled *Me'orot Natan*. This work was often copied without attribution in works like *Pri Eitz Chaim* which purported to teach *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

Cooper (2018:134) shows how, for example, an edition of *Pri Eitz Chaim* - the title Poppers had taken from Vital - and which contained extracts from Shapira's *Me'orot Natan*, was printed in Koretz in 1782. That edition contained references that were not in the same work - also entitled *Pri Eitz Chaim* - of an edition published just three years later in 1785 in the very same town, Koretz. Additionally, the very same work was again published in 1804 in Dubrowna, and it resembled the earlier edition of *Pri Eitz Chaim* published in Koretz in 1782. Yet, to the untrained eye and the unsuspecting reader of the multiple editions with extracts from the various editors, it would have been thought that whichever version was being used, represented the pure and original thoughts of the Ari.

⁸¹ Introduction, *Zera Berach*, II (Amsterdam, 1662). Translation is by Scholem (1973:86-87).

3.1.7 Synthesis

I have tried to demonstrate just how difficult it is to define *Lurianic Kabbalah*, and how in the process, there was a battle for the soul of the Ari. This was a pattern that was to repeat itself later as Maciejko (2014:xxi) points out that in the years following the death of Shabbatai Tzvi, the later Sabbatian schools also:

“vied with each other over competing claims to have had exclusive possession of the mystery...”

This is a common phenomenon related to the dissemination of messianic and mystical ideology in general. Considering the uncertainty as to which tradition was the authentic *Lurianic* tradition, the problem was later compounded by the similar notion of which Sabbatian tradition was authentic. Add to all that, the explosive urgency of messianism and redemption, and one begins to understand that the world was poised on the cusp of a very difficult theological era.

3.2 Introduction of new mystical prayers and practices

Although not exclusive to *Lurianic Kabbalah* but certainly under its influence, many new mystical practices were instituted, and became part of mainstream Judaism. Most of these were in keeping with the ascendancy of ascetic principles which followed in the wake of *Lurianic Kabbalah* (Scholem 1961:285).

We find innovations affecting communal observances such as the Fast of the Firstborn before *Pesach*, the all-night vigil on *Shavuot* and *Hoshana Rabba*. The conversion of *Hoshana Rabba* from a festive day to one of penitence and linked to *Yom Kippur*. The transformation of the last day before the new month into a *Yom Kippur Kattan*, or *minor Day of Atonement*. The mystics included the famous *Lecha Dodi* hymn, composed by R. Shlomo Alkabetz from the Safed circle, into a major feature of the Friday evening service at the onset of Shabbat. The study of *Mishnayot* in memory of those deceased with emphasis on the relationship between the similar words *mishna* and *neshamah* or *soul*. Scholem (1941:285) writes that:

“[a] multitude of new prayers...gradually made their way, at first into the prayer books of private conventicles and later into the generally accepted form of prayer.”

This is further evidence of the ever-advancing influence of mysticism in general, and *Lurianic Kabbalah* in particular, on normative Judaism, in the era immediately following the Ari.

3.3 Synthesis

It was the intention to demonstrate that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was not monolithic, neither in its essence nor in its dissemination. However, there is no doubt that whatever *Lurianic Kabbalah* represented to the beholder, it was regarded as one of the most important developments in the history of Jewish mystical theology. Moreover, the *Lurianic* doctrine was:

“more likely than any other to increase messianic tension among the people” (Scholem 1973:26).

The basic *Lurianic* doctrine was built upon the mystical assumption that the process of *Tikkun*, or *restoration* of the fallen spiritual sparks had almost been fully accomplished, and messianic redemption was at hand:

“Once the doctrine of *Tikkun* had entered into the popular consciousness, the eschatological mood was bound to grow; it could hardly be otherwise” (Scholem 1941:284).

Everything was now dependent upon the holy mystic who alone knew how to affect the final rectifications. Against this backdrop, *Lurianic Kabbalah* emerged as the mystical literature of “*almost unchallenged supremacy*” (Scholem 1973:25). Its widespread acceptance set the stage for the inevitable emergence of not just a ‘potential’ messianic figure, but the ‘real’ Messiah, in the form of Shabbatai Tzvi. In one way or another, the “*general consciousness*” of the people had been readied for some type of eschatological manifestation or event. However, not everyone agrees that blame for all this can be laid squarely at the door of *Lurianic Kabbalah* (see Chapter 5).

We now proceed to sketch the biography of the face of the Sabbatian movement, Shabbatai Tzvi, as well as examine other early leaders of the movement.

CHAPTER 4:

RISE OF THE MYSTICAL SABBATIAN MOVEMENT

4.1 Introduction

Shabbatai Tzvi's story is intricate and controversial. His legacy is even more so. He touched not just the Jewish world, but the non-Jewish world as well. According to Scholem (1987:246), Shabbatai Tzvi is, historically speaking, one of the most documented personalities in Jewish history; yet the irony is that, as Magid (2018:463) points out, Shabbatai Tzvi and Sabbatianism are perhaps the least taught topics in classes on Jewish history.

Wiesel (1972:266) describes Shabbatai Tzvi as:

“[t]he most prestigious of the false messiahs.”

In the West, his followers persisted for at least a century after his death, while in the East, his cult continued until the twentieth-century. His influences, in one form or another, remain until this day. We shall examine and try to understand what it was about this movement that gave it such an enduring allure.

4.2 Ancestry of Shabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676)

Shabbatai Tzvi was born in 1626 on the Ninth of Av in Smyrna (now Izmir) in the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey). That day was also the *Shabbat*, hence his name Shabbatai. Jewish tradition speaks of the Messiah being born on the Ninth of Av.⁸² It was a time when much of the world was transfixed by the anticipation of the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Some non-Jews expected the redemption to take place in the year 1666 and many Jews expected the Messiah to arrive in 1648, the year the Khmelnytsky massacres began.

Shabbatai Tzvi is said to have been of Spanish descent. Scholem (1987:246) suggests that his father was probably of *Ashkenazi* descent, while Goldish (2004:2) believes that his family were Levantine (Romaniote) rather than *Sefaradic* Jews.

⁸² y. *Berachot* 2:4.

The majority of Smyrna's Jewish community were former *Conversos*. This may be significant as he would have spent time in a city full of descendants of Jews, who, during the expulsion from Spain and Portugal, had converted to Catholicism. Many of their ancestors would have been raised as Catholics and only later reverted to Judaism after their escape and exile. It is most possible that the Smyrna Jewish community retained vestiges of Christian ideas and that Shabbatai Tzvi knew a great deal about Christianity (Goldish 2004:2). This community must have influenced him tremendously because he spoke Spanish and not Turkish, and he was known to have loved singing Spanish *romanceros*. He also attended a Spanish *yeshiva*.

Shabbatai Tzvi's parents died before the Sabbatian movement began. His father's tombstone as well as that of his uncle, Yitzchak Tzvi, still existed around the time of the First World War. Both his brothers, Eliyahu and Yosef, died in 1663 and their epithets describe them as "*aged, wise and esteemed*" (Galanté 1935:71).

The following is an account of the venerated gravesite of Shabbatai Tzvi's mother, written by the Dutch minister in Izmir, Thomas Coenen:

"[Shabbatai Tzvi] told the Jews of Izmir, 'that anyone who goes up to the tomb of his mother (and why the tomb of his mother I was unable to determine) and places his hand upon it, will merit reward as if he went up to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.' Believe me that barely any Jews from his adherents, if any at all, refrained from traveling to that tomb. With intense religious fervor they arrived at the grave site to merit such a great reward, as well as the forgiveness of their sins. From the day the Jews received this instruction, no man or woman was seen who didn't rush to merit this expiation, just like people are wont to do in Italy and elsewhere."⁸³

Goldish (2004:4-5) suggests that:

"Coenen's comparison with the Catholic practice of pilgrimages to the graves of saints is quite apt - Shabbatai appears to have seen his

⁸³ Thomas Coenen, *Ydele verwachtinge* der Joden getoont in den Persoon van Sabethai Zevi, trans. A. A. Langebeer and E. Shmueli, ed. Y. Kaplan [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Dinur Center at the Hebrew University, 1998). Translation is by Goldish (2004:4).

mother as a holy figure... Like the Virgin Mary, his saintly mother had prepared the way for her son to lead the ascetic life demanded of the future messiah.”

4.3 Religious education and proficiency in Torah study

Shabbatai Tzvi was the second of three brothers and the only one not to go into business. Instead, he was encouraged to study at a *yeshiva* and was ordained as a rabbi by the age of eighteen by the *Rosh Yeshiva* Joseph Eskapha of Smyrna, author of *Rosh Yosef*, and a recognized *halachic* authority. Eskapha was “*the most illustrious rabbi of Smyrna at that time*” (Scholem 1987: 246). His other teacher was R. Isaac de Alba. This is all corroborated by Leib ben Ozer, the notary of the *Ashkenazic* community of Amsterdam who recorded that Shabbatai Tzvi was eighteen years old when he received the title *Chacham* which is the *Sefaradic* honorific for *Rabbi*. Based on this Scholem (1973:111) writes:

“We may infer that Sabbatai received a thorough religious and Talmudic training and that he fully mastered the sources of Rabbinic culture.”

This is how John Evelyn, in his seventeenth-century English, describes the early rise of Shabbatai Tzvi in Smyrna:

“Sabatai Sevi addicting himself to Study, became a notable Proficient in the Hebrew and Metaphysicks; and arrived to that point of Sophistry in Divinity and Metaphysicks, that he vented a New Doctrine in their Law, drawing to the Profession of it so many Disciples, as raised one day a Tumult in the Synagogue; for which afterwards he was by a Censure of the Chochams (who are Expounders of the Law) banished from the City” (Evelyn 1669:23)

Even though Shabbatai Tzvi’s detractors may have referred to him as insane, they never called him an ignoramus. His study partner, Moshe Pinheiro said there was “*none like him.*” Moshe Pinheiro also testified that Shabbatai Tzvi had a wart on his

left arm, and according to the Zohar,⁸⁴ King David had a similar sign on his right hand. This led to much messianic speculation amongst the followers (Scholem 1973:113).

However, according to Graetz (1895:118) he “did not attain to great proficiency” when it came to his Talmud study. Instead, of Talmud, “[t]he more was he attracted by the confused jumble of the Kabbala.”

Throughout his life, even after his later conversion to Islam, he would always encourage scholars to debate with him on matters of *halacha*, especially when he was about to break those very laws (Scholem 1973:112). However, Scholem points out that, as a scholar, Shabbatai Tzvi never raised himself above mediocrity, and:

“[h]e has left no writings and...is not credited with a single unforgettable word, epigram or speech” (Scholem 1941:293).

Nevertheless, he was drawn to the mystical tradition of the Ari and he seized upon the spirit of messianic fervour by declaring himself the Messiah. He had two main ‘prophets’, R. Natan of Gaza and R. Avraham Miguel Cardozo (who was also a student of Moshe Pinheiro). Each differed in their approaches to *Kabbalah*. Natan attempted to align the new movement with *Lurianic* mysticism, while Cardozo wanted to root it closer to the *Zohar* (Scholem 1973:171).

4.4 Personality

Scholem (1987:246) describes Shabbatai Tzvi as being particularly attached to his mother and not very outgoing because he developed an “*intense inner life*.” As a child growing up, he did not play with other children but kept to himself.

Scholem also considers him to have suffered from cyclothymia or manic-depressive psychosis. His vacillation between states of depression and euphoria are well documented and were to manifest throughout his life. His followers had a more mystical and *kabbalistic* way of seeing their master, moving from the dark state known as the “*hiding of the face*” or “*the fall*”, to crescendos of “*illumination*”. During his periods of “*illumination*”, he would perform his *ma’asim zarim*, or *strange acts* and sometimes pronounce the Tetragrammaton. Scholem (1987:247) explains that

⁸⁴ *Zohar* II, 73b.

initially, these bursts of “*illumination*” evoked more compassion than animosity. Maciejko (2017: xiii) writes:

“In 1648, in a moment of ecstasy, he pronounced aloud the Ineffable Name of God and proclaimed himself the messiah. Nobody took this claim seriously; most of those who knew him considered him mentally ill...The cycles of depression and euphoria were [believed to be]⁸⁵ external expressions of the messiah’s internal struggle against the powers of darkness.”

In 1665, a follower of Shabbatai Tzvi, Samuel Gandor, was sent from Egypt to Gaza to investigate the messianic rumblings taking place there. He wrote:

“It is said of Sabbatai Zevi that for fifteen years he has been bowed down by the following affliction: he is pursued by a sense of depression which leaves him no quite moment and does not even permit him to read, without being able to say what is the nature of this sadness which has come upon him. Thus he endures it until the depression departs from the spirit, when he returns with great joy to his studies. And for many years already he has suffered from this illness, and no doctor has found a remedy for it, but it is one of the sufferings which are inflicted by Heaven” (Halberman 1940:208).

During one of his ecstatic cycles, Shabbatai Tzvi celebrated the three festivals of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot* all within the same week (Scholem 1987:248). Whilst in Constantinople, he became associated with the *kabbalist* R. David Chabillo (d. 1661) and he tried to exorcise what he believed to be his demons by utilizing practical *Kabbalah*.

4.5 Charismatic leader

Shabbatai Tzvi is described as a charismatic leader. According to Graetz (1895:118):

⁸⁵ Parenthesis is mine.

“He was tall, well formed, had fine dark hair, a fine beard, and a pleasant voice, which won hearts by speech and still more by song...[H]e had an enthusiastic temperament and an inclination to what was strange, especially to solitude.”

He led the morning prayer services with a pleasant voice, he gave away a lot of money to charity, and he would rise at midnight to immerse in the sea as part of his ritual ablutions (Scholem 1987:253). Shabbatai Tzvi enjoyed pomp and ceremony which he used for great effect as evidenced by his circling of Jerusalem seven times on horseback, his appointment of ‘kings’ for each Tribe of Israel, his predilection for great pronouncements, his attire, and his general audacity.

4.6 Personal life

Shabbatai Tzvi married twice between 1646 and 1650. These marriages were not consummated and they ended in divorce (Scholem 1987:247). On one occasion while in Salonika, he even ‘married’ a *Sefer Torah* (Scroll of Law). According to Goldish (2004:5):

“Shabbatai, unable to form a sexual bond with a human wife, sought instead to reify the symbolism of the Jews’ loving relationship with the Law through this strange ceremony.”

According to Graetz (1895:119):

“In early manhood he presented a contrast to his companions because he felt no attraction to the female sex. According to custom Sabbatai Zevi married early, but avoided his young, good-looking wife so pertinaciously, that she applied for divorce, which he willingly granted her. The same thing happened with a second wife.”

Then in 1664, he married his third wife, Sarah. Goldish refers to this as a “*successful*” marriage. Sarah had a rather promiscuous reputation, but it was interpreted as a

mystical 'rectification' (along the lines of the biblical prophet Hosea).⁸⁶ Sarah died in 1674 and he married again to Ester (or Yocheved) who was the daughter of R. Yosef Filosof, a respected rabbi from Smyrna (Scholem 1987:268). Shabbatai Tzvi thus married at least five times if one includes his 'marriage' to the *Sefer Torah* (Goldish 2004:89).

It was his wife, Sarah, however, who drew the most attention. A six-year-old orphan girl by the name of Sarah was discovered after the Khmelnytsky massacres and taken to a nunnery where she was raised as a Christian. When Jews later found her, they sent her to Amsterdam where she located her brother. Eventually, she made her way to Leghorn and:

"as credible witnesses aver, she put her charms to immoral use"
(Graetz 1895: 129).

This story somehow captivated the Jewish world and made its way to Cairo. When Shabbatai Tzvi heard about Sarah he claimed he had been promised her in a dream as his spiritual wife. He sent a messenger to Leghorn, and Sarah, who also had messianic aspirations, was brought to Cairo. They were married at the home of R. Rafael Yosef Chelebi, who offered the groom all of his immense wealth and became one of his influential followers. The addition of R. Rafael Yosef Chelebi and his celebrity status brought more people into the rapidly expanding circle of Shabbatai Tzvi. According to Graetz (1895:130):

"[Sarah's] beauty and free manner of life attracted youths and men who had no sympathy with the mystical movement. With a larger following than when he started, Sabbataï returned to Palestine, bringing two talismans of more effective power than Kabbalistic means - Sarah's influence and Chelebi's money."

R. Yakov Emden, using what Goldish (2015:168) refers to as "*credible evidence*", describes how the respected Smyrna physician Dr Koron told him of an incident that

⁸⁶ The eighth-century BCE prophet Hosea married a woman who proved to be unfaithful to him. Hosea apparently knew she would be unfaithful but believed that the marriage was necessary to serve as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to God due to their 'adulterous' relationships with other gods.

had occurred when he paid a house visit to Shabbatai Tzvi. The doctor's handsome son happened to be with his father on this visit, and Shabbatai Tzvi told him to go to the room where Sarah was and to do whatever she tells him to. The doctor thought she would look after his son, but instead, she gave some very uncomfortable instructions to the boy who eventually yelled out to his father. The doctor broke down the door and when he saw what was going on, he began to curse Shabbatai Tzvi and his wife. Shabbatai Tzvi responded by saying:

“What have you done? If you had followed her wishes it would have made a great cosmic repair [tikkun gadol].”⁸⁷

4.7 Asceticism and veneration of the ‘Messiah’

According to Graetz (1895:119):

“He mortified his body, and bathed very frequently in the sea, day and night, winter and summer. Perhaps it was from sea-bathing that his body derived the peculiar fragrance which his worshipers strongly maintained that it possessed.”

As a result of his extreme asceticism, he became the subject of much curiosity and began to attract a following of disciples. Graetz (1895:135) describes how the Sabbatians were caught somewhere between extreme ascetic practices and wanton joyous gatherings:

“On the one hand, they subjected themselves to incredible penances - fasted several days in succession, refrained from sleep for nights...On the other hand, they abandoned themselves to the most extravagant delight, and celebrated festival after festival in honor of the Messiah, whenever Sabbatai Zevi showed himself - always with a large train of followers.”

Somehow this blend of asceticism and abandonment contributed to the allure that drew the people towards Shabbatai Tzvi.

⁸⁷ Jacob Emden, *Zot Torat Ha-Kena'ot* (Amsterdam, 1752), 46.

4.8 The fifteen quiet years

When his messianic ambitions became known, his former teacher R. Joseph Eskapha placed him under a ban around 1651, and he and his followers were banished from Smyrna. Things quietened down for about fifteen years while Shabbatai Tzvi kept himself 'hidden' until the time was right. No one is sure where he spent that time although it is believed he was in Constantinople (Graetz 1895:123). In Constantinople at around 1653, he made his acquaintance with the *kabbalist* R. Avraham Yachini who was a student of R. Yosef di Trani, known as *Maharit*, one of the foremost *Talmudists* of the time and author of the three-part responsa work entitled *She'elot uTeshuvot*.

4.9 Salonica, Athens, Cairo and Jerusalem

Shabbatai Tzvi was influenced by the mystical ways of R. Avraham Yachini and probably with his encouragement decided to go to Salonica which at that time was a haven for *kabbalists* and mystics. He was most grateful to R. Yachini and promised to make him a leader of his new empire which he was beginning to envisage. In Salonica, Shabbatai Tzvi performed his mystical 'marriage' to a *Sefer Torah*. When the Rabbis of Salonica found out about the event, they banished him from their city in 1658 (Scholem 1987:247).

Shabbatai Tzvi then moved on to Athens where he had some family. By then his mystical escapades were well-known and he was not made welcome in Athens. However, he regarded this opposition as a necessary burden that the Messiah had to bear.

Later, Shabbatai Tzvi moved to Cairo where he made his acquaintance with the *Lurianic Kabbalist*, R. Rafael Yosef Chelebi, who held an important position in government but also supported a mystical circle of "[f]ifty learned *Talmudists* and *Kabbalists*" who "*dined at his table*" (Graetz 1895:124). R. Chelebi was the rabbi who officiated at the wedding of Shabbatai Tzvi to Sarah. While R. Chelebi rode on royal chariots and wore royal robes on the outside, his undergarments were sackcloth and he practised a style of asceticism known as *Tikkun Luria*, or *rectifications according to Luria*, which was said to hasten the arrival of the Messiah.

Shabbatai Tzvi's next move was to Jerusalem where the Jewish community was very poor because "*the best men emigrated, leaving the government of the*

community to thorough-going Kabbalists” (Graetz 1895:125). In Jerusalem, Shabbatai Tzvi gathered around him a following of admirers who extolled the virtues of their master. They spoke with great reverence about Shabbatai Tzvi, claiming that he cried “*floods of tears in prayer*” and that he sang the Psalms all night long with his beautiful and melodious voice. He also distributed “sweet-meats” to the children when he walked through the street thus gaining even more support, particularly from their mothers.

Then an incident occurred which placed Shabbatai Tzvi in the limelight. A decree of some sort had been brought against the Jews of Jerusalem and they needed money to alleviate it. Shabbatai Tzvi was chosen as the representative of Jerusalem to journey to Cairo and get funding from R. Rafael Yosef Chelebi (Scholem 1973:187). Shabbatai Tzvi’s followers regarded that event as the beginning of his revelation and they claimed he had performed many miracles at sea on the way to Cairo. However, he didn’t travel by sea but by land. On the way, he passed through Chevron and the people of that city stayed up all night to welcome him. Shabbatai Tzvi was successful in acquiring the ransom necessary to secure the Jews of Jerusalem.

4.10 Natan of Gaza endorses Shabbatai Tzvi

Shabbatai Tzvi kept his belief in himself as the Messiah a relatively guarded secret since 1648, and just his inner circle was aware of it (Goldish 2015:166). Things, however, changed dramatically after he encountered Natan of Gaza in 1665.

R. Natan Binyamin Levi, better known as Natan of Gaza, or *Natan haAzati* (1644-1680) was raised by an absentee father, a German Jew by the name of R. Elisha Chaim ben Yakov Ashkenazi, who spent most of his time overseas collecting funds for the Jews of Jerusalem. His father’s prestige may have been a contributing factor in later spring-boarding Natan into prominence, particularly in places like Morocco where he had visited as an emissary from Jerusalem and was held in unquestionably high esteem (Scholem 1987:261).

Natan of Gaza had a talent for writing which compensated for his poor oratory skills. He studied under R. Yakov Hagiz who, ironically, was later to become an opponent of Shabbatai Tzvi and who placed him under a ban. As a testament to Natan’s scholarship, the following account is found in Baruch of Arezzo’s chronicle *Zikaron Livnei Yisrael*:

“When the holiday of Shavu’ot arrived, Rabbi Nathan called to the scholars of Gaza to study Torah with him the entire night. And it occurred that in the middle of the night a great sleep fell on R. Nathan; and he stood on his feet and walked back and forth in the room, and recited the entire tractate Ketubot by heart.”⁸⁸

Natan of Gaza was suddenly thrust into a world of opulence and wealth when a marriage was arranged between him and the one-eyed daughter of the well-to-do Shmuel Lisbona who had just moved to Gaza. Natan of Gaza is considered to have been a great *kabbalist* and Maciejko (2017:xiii) refers to him as a “*Kabbalistic prodigy*.” He writes:

“Nathan managed to convince Sabbatai to accept the truth of his messianic destiny, and provided him with conceptual tools allowing for an explanation of his nonnormative conduct. Idiosyncratic acts and rituals (termed by Nathan *ma’asim zarim*, strange acts) were signs of Tsevi’s elevated messianic rank and the basis for future rites of his faithful.”

His followers called him the *butzina kaddisha* or *holy lamp* (Scholem 1973:857). No one is quite sure how Natan of Gaza and Shabbatai Tzvi became acquainted in April 1665 but a very close relationship was to develop. Scholem (1987:249) suggests that Shabbatai Tzvi had heard rumblings that a man in Gaza was able to disclose the spiritual roots of people’s souls and give them appropriate *tikkunim* or *rectifications* for their specific souls.

According to the testimony of R. Yakov Sasportas, the “*most vocal opponent*” (Goldish 2018:499) of the Sabbatian movement, Natan of Gaza took money from people who came to discover the roots of their souls. According to Goldish (2015:168), there is no reason to discount the following report by R. Yakov Sasportas:

“I myself saw some of these penances that he sent to certain persons here [Hamburg] and in Amsterdam...One of these was to Rabbi

⁸⁸ Freimann, *Inyane Shabbatai Tzvi* (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1912; reprinted Jerusalem, 1968), 47. Translation is by Goldish (2004:64).

Abraham Nahar, written thus on a small note: 'Abraham Nahar, because [lit. in the footsteps] of the messiah, 1,800 fasts. He is from the tribe of Judah.' ...The abovementioned man [Nahar] told me... "He says that anyone who does not believe in him and his messiah has no part in the God of Israel and comes from the mixed multitude [of non-Jews who left Egypt with the Jews]." ⁸⁹

The followers of Shabbatai Tzvi claimed that Natan of Gaza had discovered an ancient document hidden in the soil or a cave, which was known as the *Vision of Rabbi Abraham* (Goldish 2015:166). This was alleged to have been written by R. Avraham heChasid (a contemporary of R. Yehuda heChasid, a thirteenth-century leader of the mystical movement known as *Chassidei Ashkenaz*), which testified that Shabbatai Tzvi was the Messiah. However, according to Goldish, the document was written by Natan of Gaza himself and he even stressed the paper to make it appear old and worn. These accounts open up another area of research into the possibility of the intentional fraudulent actions of Natan, the ideologue of the Sabbatian movement. Scholem, on the other hand, is convinced of the sincere belief of Shabbatai Tzvi and Natan of Gaza in their messianic mission.

What follows is an excerpt from the *Vision of Rabbi Abraham* (Scholem 1987:224-25):

"And I, Abraham, after having been shut up for forty years...when behold the voice [from above declared].⁹⁰ "Behold a son will be born to Mordecai Sevi in the year 5386 [1626] and he will be called Sabbatai Sevi...and he will be the true messiah...And now write the vision and conceal it in an earthen vessel, that it may continue many days."⁹¹

Around *Shavuot*, Natan of Gaza proclaimed he was Elijah the Prophet who had risen to announce the arrival of the Messiah, and on May 31, 1665, Shabbatai Tzvi proclaimed he was the Messiah. Immediately a messianic frenzy took hold of Gaza

⁸⁹ Jacob Sasportas, *Zizat Novel Zvi*, ed. I. Tishby (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954), 6–7.

⁹⁰ Parenthesis is mine.

⁹¹ Ed. G. Scholem, *Be'Iqvoth Mashiah* (Jerusalem: 1943), 59- 61.

including the entire community and its rabbi, Yakov Najara. The rabbis of Jerusalem became very wary of the large following Shabbatai Tzvi was attracting and he was threatened with ex-communication. Natan encouraged the formation of a mass movement to promote Shabbatai Tzvi's messianism. The movement was to focus on repentance as a means of drawing the redemption nearer (Scholem 1987:251). Such strategy could hardly be opposed by any rabbis and soon people flocked to Natan to receive their *tikkunim* for their souls. Natan began to encourage excessive fasting, although paradoxically, he was soon to decree that the fast of the *Seventeenth of Tammuz*⁹² had been abolished. He took full advantage of his steady following and responded to the rabbinic opposition from Jerusalem by declaring that it had lost its importance and was no longer the Holy City as it had now been replaced by Gaza.

In June that year, Shabbatai Tzvi visited Jerusalem and after circling the city seven times on horseback, won the minds of some of its rabbis including R. Moshe Galante. Scholem (1987:250) points out that Galante's adherence to Shabbatai Tzvi was later suppressed. Nevertheless, Shabbatai Tzvi was soon banished from Jerusalem and he began to prepare for his journey back to Smyrna.

After passing through Aleppo where Shabbatai Tzvi was received with great aplomb, he returned to his birthplace, Smyrna. The movement was growing so fast that already in Aleppo, a charitable fund was established to assist those who were suffering as a result of the sudden halt in commercial activities (Scholem 1987:253). When he arrived in Smyrna, Graetz (1865:134) describes how, on *Rosh haShana* in 1665, with the sounding of the *Shofar* (ram's horn), Shabbatai Tzvi 'revealed' himself as the Messiah:

"and the multitude shouted to him, 'Long live our King, our Messiah!'"⁹³

⁹² This fast commemorates the breaching of the walls of the Second Temple by the Romans, and begins a three-week period of mourning culminating in the *Fast of the Ninth of Av* which traditionally commemorates the destruction of both Temples. The Jerusalem Talmud also connects the *Seventeenth of Tammuz* to the breaching of the walls of the First Temple by the Babylonians.

⁹³ To this day, some followers of the Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch refer to R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who passed away on 12 June 1994, when they chant: *Yechi Adoneinu Moreinu veRabbeinu Melach haMashiach leOlam vaEd*; Long live our Master, teacher and Rabbi, King Messiah, for all eternity.

4.11 Sabbatian innovations and emphasis on particularistic customs

Around this time, the name of the Sultan was removed from the *Prayer for the Government* which is traditionally recited on *Shabbat* mornings, and a prayer for Shabbatai Tzvi the Messiah was instituted in its place (Scholem 1987:255). At first, a veiled reference to Shabbatai Tzvi was used: “*Amirah*,” which is an abbreviation for *adoneinu*, *malkeinu*, *yarum hodo*, or *Lord, King, exulted majesty*. *Amir* also alluded to the *Emir* (which is Arabic for a military commander or prince). The term *Amirah* was used until the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹⁴

Psalm 21, which had taken on a unique Sabbatian significance since Shabbatai Tzvi had met Natan in Gaza, was instituted to be recited after each prayer service. This custom soon spread to other communities (Scholem 1987:257).

“*Lavish almsgiving*”, frequent ritual baths, and extensive fasting were emphasised as part of the new order. In some places, the ritual baths were so overcrowded it was “*almost impossible to enter there*” (Scholem 1987:261). Of interest is the encouragement by Sabbatian preachers for their followers to restore and return all ill-gotten gains - although there are no recorded cases of such activities (Scholem 1987:261). The followers truly believed that a new era had begun with the birth of Shabbatai Tzvi to the extent that they changed the calendar. Letters were dated and books were published, dated from “*the first year of the renewal of prophecy and the kingdom*” (Scholem 1987:261).

4.12 Questionable morality

Some Sabbatians were quick and unhesitant to move into what was to become their morally questionable mode, which they believed would speed up the full flowering of the mystical messianic era. The following event took place with one thousand and four hundred children under the age of twelve (Graetz 1895:135):

⁹⁴ These accounts of how the ‘Messiah’ was treated and regarded are significantly similar to other messianic personalities in the past and even recent times. For example, the followers of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994) who was and still is regarded as the ‘Messiah’ by thousands of his followers, continue to use similar expressions such as “*yechi adoneinu, moreinu ve’rabbeinu melech haMashiach...*” or “*long live our master, teacher and Rabbi, the King Messiah*”.

“The madness went so far that his adherents in Smyrna and elsewhere, as at Salonica, that Kabbalist hot-bed of old, married their children of twelve, ten, and even younger, to one another—seven hundred couples in all—that, according to Kabbalistic ideas, they might cause the souls not yet born to enter into life, and thereby remove the last obstacle to the commencement of the time of grace.”

With the help of Sarah’s charms, great gatherings and dances were arranged with both sexes intermingling perhaps too freely, something which was most uncommon within Jewish circles until then.

4.13 R. Chaim Benveniste and the blurring of boundaries

In an apparent act of revenge, the revered and elderly rabbi of Smyrna, R. Aharon de la Papa - who dared to speak out against the messianic fervour - was banished from Smyrna to set right the evil of Shabbatai Tzvi being excommunicated from that same city years earlier. He was replaced by R. Chaim Benveniste (1603-1673) who readily accepted the position of chief rabbi of Smyrna as he was a literary critic of the banished R. Aharon de la Papa. Graetz (1895:136) describes this move as:

“[m]ost unworthy...behavior.”

Benveniste was, originally, an opponent of the new messianic movement. However, after a short while, he too became a follower of Shabbatai Tzvi although he later withdrew his support, but only after Shabbatai Tzvi’s conversion to Islam.

It is important to note that R. Benveniste was a highly respected rabbinic authority and a great scholar and *talmudist*. He is also known as the *Kneset haGedolah*, after the title of his voluminous *Halachic* compendium. In this work, he analyses the large amount of rabbinic discussion of previous centuries. He also produced a classic *Haggadah* entitled *Pesach Me’uvim* published in 1692, which contains important *Halachic* rulings and is widely quoted in the standard *Halachic* sources. This publication came out in both a *Sefaradic* and *Ashkenazic* rite. The most recent edition was edited and elucidated by R. David Thumim (Lakewood 1997). This edition ironically includes previously unpublished manuscript glosses on *Pesach Me’uvim* by R. Yaakov Emden (Maimon 2020:1).

I would suggest that the fact that *Pesach Me'uvim* was published in both *Sefaradic* and *Ashkenazic* rites, indicates just how widely recognised R. Benveniste was, despite being tainted by his quite substantial brush with Sabbatianism. This is further emphasised by the glosses to this work by R. Yaakov Emden, the great Sabbatian opponent and identifier, and shows just how blurred the lines between mainstream and Sabbatian Judaism must have been in those times. In fact, one could argue that the lines are still murky to this day, considering how a contemporary online Orthodox source describes R. Benveniste:

“Hacham Haim Benveniste's status in the halakhic world remained untarnished by the period of his support of Shabbetai Tzvi, and he is considered one of the greatest adjudicators in Jewish history.”⁹⁵

This blurring of boundaries was to become a hallmark of that era. It was often not possible to determine a Sabbatian, and later a secret Sabbatian, from a mainstream Orthodox Jew. Many respected rabbis were crypto-Sabbatians. And - as I shall argue in a further study - because of its insidious nature, this prevalent state of affairs must have had some bearing on the development of future Judaism.

4:14 From Smyrna to the world

What was happening in Smyrna was soon to be repeated in neighbouring cities and then spread throughout the Jewish world. Most significantly, according to Graetz (1895-137):

“Not only the senseless multitude, but nearly all the Rabbis, and even men of culture and philosophical judgment, fell a prey to this credulity.”

Shabbatai Tzvi was not short of promoters. Between Natan of Gaza publishing circulars from Palestine, other ‘prophets’ such as Shabbatai Rafael and Matityahu Bloch, as well as his private secretary R. Shmuel Primo, Shabbatai Tzvi’s fame rapidly spread throughout the Jewish world.

⁹⁵ See *heChacham haYomi*: Online source: <https://www.hyomi.org.il/eng/default.asp>. Retrieved 21 September 2020.

4.15 R. Shmuel Primo (d. 1708)

R. Shmuel Primo was the rabbi of Adrianople and, initially, he opposed any overt displays of Sabbatianism. He only disclosed his deepest views in his “secret conclaves” (Scholem 1987:273). He was particularly responsible for:

“cleverly managing to give to the advent of the pseudo-Messiah an air of dignity.”⁹⁶

Employing this “*air of dignity*” Shabbatai Tzvi began to dismantle many pillars of traditional Judaism, in keeping with the notion of the “*Torah Chadasha*”, or *New Torah* that the mystics believe must replace the old one in messianic times. Graetz (1895:142), however, is doubtful as to whether Shabbatai Tzvi himself subscribed to this notion, but certainly, his followers did:

“The fundamental conception of the Zohar, the Bible of the Kabbalists, is that in the time of grace, in the world of order (Olam ha-Tikkun), the laws of Judaism, the regulations concerning lawful and forbidden things, would completely lose their significance. Now this time, the Sabbatians thought, had already begun; consequently, the minute ritualistic code of the Shulchan Aruch ought no longer to be held binding. Whether Sabbatai himself drew this conclusion, is doubtful. But some of his trusted adherents gave this theory prominence.”

This view of Graetz is surprising in light of the numerous well-documented “*strange acts*” performed by Shabbatai Tzvi and his openly flagrant attitude when it came to *Halachic* observances; even occasionally reciting the corrupted form of the blessing *Matir Asurim*⁹⁷ before such acts (Kahana 2016:149). According to Maciejko (2017: xiv), Shabbatai Tzvi:

⁹⁶ Online source: [PRIMO, SAMUEL - JewishEncyclopedia.com](https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14180-primo-samuel). Retrieved 24 May 2022.

⁹⁷ The word *asurim* can mean both *forbidden (issurim)* as well as *bound or imprisoned*. In this blessing’s normal formulation within the daily prayer liturgy, it forms part of the morning service and obviously is meant in the latter sense: - that God, on a daily basis, ‘releases’ (*matir*) those who were ‘bound’ (*assurim*), being incapacitated during sleep and are now grateful for being awake and alive. Shabbatai Tzvi, instead, used it in the sense of abrogation of the law: - as in “*permitting (mutar) the prohibited (issurim)*” (see section 4.15).

“abolished fasts and established new festivals, instituted new blessings and prayers, called upon women to read the Law, dismissed Rabbis and communal leaders, and appointed “kings,” among whom he divided the world.”

Scholem (1987:257) describes how Shabbatai Tzvi distributed ‘kingdoms’ to his faithful followers who reflected and represented the ancient Israelite kings from David to Zerubabel. R. Shmuel Primo began by declaring that the fast of the *Tenth of Tevet*⁹⁸ was no longer a fast day but a day of rejoicing. He sent out the following communication to the Jewish world (Graetz 1895:143):

"The first-begotten Son of God, Sabbataï Zevi, Messiah and Redeemer of the people of Israel, to all the sons of Israel, Peace! Since ye have been deemed worthy to behold the great day and the fulfillment of God's word by the prophets, your lament and sorrow must be changed into joy, and your fasting into merriment, for ye shall weep no more. Rejoice with song and melody, and change the day formerly spent in sadness and sorrow, into a day of jubilee, because I have appeared."

4.16 Shabbatai Tzvi's apostasy to Islam

Natan of Gaza predicted that Shabbatai Tzvi would peacefully take the Turkish crown from the Sultan for himself, without weapons or war. Graetz (1895:145) describes how Shabbatai Tzvi prepared to meet the Sultan:

“Before he left Smyrna, he divided the world among his six-and-twenty faithful ones, and called them kings and princes. His brothers, Elijah and Joseph Zevi, received the lion's share; the former was named king of kings, the latter king of the kings of Judah. To his other faithful followers he disclosed, in Kabbalistic language, which soul of the

⁹⁸ This fast commemorates the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II.

former kings of Judah or Israel dwelt in each of their bodies, that is, had passed into them by transmigration.”

In December 1665, Shabbatai Tzvi departed by ship for Constantinople to seize the crown from the Ottoman Sultan. This sent alarm signals to the Turkish officials who were already concerned over the growing momentum of this new messianic movement. They dispatched boats to intercept Shabbatai Tzvi's ship and he was bound in chains and taken to the fortress of Gallipoli where he remained for some time. Maciejko (2017: xiv) explains how the Turkish authorities treated him:

“To the great surprise of his detractors, the Turks treated the prisoner with honor, allowing him to hold court and to send and receive envoys, among them Rabbinic and Kabbalistic luminaries...[D]uring his imprisonment, Sabbatai issued several pronouncements signed ‘I am the Lord your God Sabbatai Tsevi.’”

The Turkish authorities displayed remarkable restraint (Scholem 1987:257). Revolts took place regularly in Turkey and those responsible were immediately sentenced to death. Unfortunately, the official Turkish records of these events were lost in a fire so there are conflicting reports as to exactly what occurred. It is possible that the authorities did not want to turn Shabbatai Tzvi into a martyr, and - in his favour - he had not threatened them with a violent revolution. The fact that he was thrown into prison became something his followers considered even more proof that he was the Messiah. Graetz (1895:149) describes how much support he had from his followers:

“In almost all synagogues his initials, S and Z, were posted up with more or less adornment. Almost everywhere a prayer for him was inserted in the following form: ‘Bless our Lord and King, the holy and righteous Sabbataï Zevi, the Messiah of the God of Jacob.’”

Eventually, Shabbatai Tzvi was given an ultimatum by the Sultan to either convert to Islam or be killed, and on 16 September 1666, he was (officially) discredited as a false Messiah when he apostatised. According to Maciejko (2017: xiv):

“Following his conversion, Sabbatai Tsevi received instruction in the tenets of Islam, studied the Qur’an, began praying in a mosque, and developed contacts with Muslim mystics, including members of Dervish orders. He also continued to study the Zohar and other Kabbalistic writings, prayed at home in Hebrew, and observed, apparently with the silent consent of the authorities, most ritual commandments of Judaism...It seems that the Turks turned a blind eye to Sabbatai’s enduring adherence to Jewish customs and his excesses because they planned to deploy him as a missionary among the Jews.”

Many Jews then converted to Islam in solidarity with their ‘Messiah’ as a mystical form of ‘*descent for ascent*’. According to Scholem (1987:265), his wife also converted sometime later. After the conversion, Shabbatai Tzvi assumed the name Aziz Mehmed Effendi, and he was given the honorary title *Kapici Bashi* or *Keeper of the Palace Gates*. He also received a royal pension of 150 piasters a day (Scholem 1987:165).

He lived in both Adrianople and Constantinople until 1672, leading a double life as a Muslim while being allowed to perform some aspects of Judaism. The Turks expected him to act as a missionary to bring Jews to Islam, and he appears to have somewhat fulfilled this task. Thus, for example, we see that he referred to Islam as the “*Torah of Grace*” as opposed to Judaism which was the “*Torah of Truth*”. However, he also told the two hundred or so followers who had converted with him, to remain secret Jews and in that way fight the *Kelipah*, or *husks*, from within (Scholem 1987:267-8).

Shabbatai Tzvi was again arrested in August 1672, in Constantinople, and again faced the possibility of execution (Scholem 1987:268). Instead, he was exiled to Albania. He spent the last period of his life in prison in a fortress that his mystical followers dubbed *Migdal Oz* or the *Tower of Strength*. Graetz (1895:148) describes his arrival at the fort:

“On his arrival at the castle of the Dardanelles on April 19, the day of preparation for the Passover, he slew a Paschal lamb for himself and his followers, and ate it with the fat, which is forbidden by the laws of the Talmud. He is said, while doing so, to have used a blessing which implied that the Mosaic, Talmudic, and Rabbinical law was abrogated

– ‘Blessed be God, who hath restored again that which was forbidden.’”

He died in Albania on *Yom Kippur* in 1676. There remains a letter in his handwriting, written just before he passed away, where he asks for someone to send him a *Machzor* or *Prayer Book* for the high holy days. The letter is signed; “*Yehuda Shabbatai Mohammed Tzvi*.” After his death, there was a second wave of mass conversions to Islam, this time in Salonica, which became the centre for many of his secret followers. His last wife’s brother, Yakov Querido and her father Yosef Filosof (Scholem 1987:274) orchestrated this mass apostasy in 1683 (Goldish 1993:8). They went on to be instrumental in the formation of the Donmeh.⁹⁹

R. Yakov Sasportas writes¹⁰⁰ about just how widespread the Sabbatian movement became at that time and that he doubted there was a rabbi in Morocco or Algeria who was not a believer in Shabbatai Tzvi (Goldish 2018:503). Revisionist history has downplayed all of the above. Scholem (1987:159) is acutely aware of this phenomenon when he writes:

“Later the movement was presented in a different light in a strenuous attempt to minimize the part played by the upper strata of Jewish society and the spiritual leaders, and to ascribe the vehemence of the outbreak to the blind enthusiasm of the rabble and the poor, but this is not borne out by contemporary evidence.”

4.17 Excommunication and religious terrorism

The Sabbatians, or ‘*Shabsazviniks*’ as they were known in Yiddish, were not passive and quiet followers happy to keep to themselves. Instead, they developed a sophisticated programme of outreach activity through which they quite successfully managed to attract adherents. This strategy was so effective that between 1665 and 1666, many Jews returned to their faith and “*for an entire year, men lived a new life...of deeper spiritual reality*” (Scholem 1941:288). The method the Sabbatians used was to appear to be part of the mainstream and then to slowly introduce their theology to their

⁹⁹ The Donmeh were a group of secret Sabbatians who outwardly adopted the Islamic faith but inwardly practiced Judaism with particular emphasis on its mystical aspects.

¹⁰⁰ *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi* 318-20.

unsuspecting students. The students then felt part of an inner circle privileged to know the ‘secrets of redemption’ before they were ‘revealed’ to the rest of the world. Sabbatianism was so entrenched within the community that its adherents called themselves *Ma’aminim* or *believers*, even before they were known as Sabbatians.

With time, when the secret Sabbatians began to emerge after Shabbatai Tzvi had been discredited, some formed a more moderate branch of the Sabbatian movement and even tended towards strict *halachic* practices. This made it extremely difficult to identify Sabbatians from the mainstream community. Many Sabbatians were rabbis and some were even *halachic* authorities. The great irony is that the Sabbatian movement, at its peak, was so powerful that those who rejected Shabbatai Tzvi were scorned by his many ardent followers and made to feel like outsiders. They were referred to as *kofrim* or *non-believers*. According to Maciejko (2017:xiii):

“[I]n most Jewish communities skeptics and opponents of Tsevi were a tiny - and at times persecuted - minority.”

Graetz (1895:150) describes the animosity with which the opponents of Sabbatianism were met by the ‘*believers*’:

“The believers went so far as to threaten their opponents if they ventured to utter a word of censure against Sabbataï. At Venice, on the Sabbath, a quarrel broke out between the Sabbatians and their opponents, and one of the latter nearly lost his life. When Sabbataï was asked how the Kofrim (unbelievers) should be dealt with, he, or Samuel Primo, answered that they might be put to death without ado, even on the Sabbath; the executors of such punishment were sure to enjoy eternal bliss. A learned Talmudist at Buda, Jacob Ashkenazi¹⁰¹ of Wilna, whose son and grandson became zealous persecutors of the Sabbatians, was guided by the decision, and declared a member of the community worthy of death, because he would not say the blessing for Sabbataï Zevi.”

¹⁰¹ R. Yakov Ashkenazi was the father of R. Tzvi Hirsch ben Yakov Ashkenazi, also known as the Chacham Tzvi whose son, R. Yakov Emden was the great ‘Sabbatian hunter’.

Scholem (1987:260) speaks of “a mounting wave of messianic terrorism” that “threatened those who spoke derisively of Shabbetai Zevi and refused to take part in the general excitement.” The Sabbatian movement is known for these audacious acts of ‘religious terrorism’ perpetrated by the so-called *Ma’aminim*, against the *Kofrim*. These *Kofrim* were also known as the *Eirev Rav* or mixed multitude, insinuating that anyone who opposed Shabbatai Tzvi was not really of Jewish lineage (Goldish 2015:169). According to Citron (undated:38):

“There are accounts of anti-Sabbateans being beaten to death for failing to believe in the messiah in Izmir. Sasportas comments that fear of the mob was a primary factor in the popular willingness to follow Shabbatai.”¹⁰²

In Smyrna, during *Chanukah* on the Friday evening of December 11, 1665, they attempted to storm the home of R. Chaim Peña, an opponent of Shabbatai Tzvi, and the following morning they broke into his Portuguese synagogue with an axe. The *Kofrim* were expelled and Shabbatai Tzvi then proceeded to read from the printed copy of the Torah as opposed to the traditional scroll, while honouring his brothers and other ‘kings’ by calling them up for the reading and distributing ‘kingdoms’. They were all required to pronounce the Tetragrammaton during the blessing over the reading. R. Chaim Peña managed to escape through a window from the five-hundred-strong crowd of *Ma’aminim* (Scholem 1973:396).

In a speech which followed, Shabbatai Tzvi likened all the rabbis who refused to accept him as the Messiah to unclean animals. Thereafter he took out the Torah scrolls from the Ark and began to sing his favourite tune, a Castilian love song about the emperor’s daughter, Meliselda into which he infused *kabbalistic* imagery (Scholem 1973:399-400). Shabbatai Tzvi then announced the day of the final redemption as 15 Sivan 5426 (corresponding to June 18, 1666) and also told the assembled that he was to take the crown of the ‘Great Turk’. At the same time, he informed his female listeners that they would be freed from the ‘curse of Eve’

When R. Chaim Benveniste who was then still one of the dissenting rabbis present, objected and demanded proof of these dramatic revelations, Shabbatai Tzvi

¹⁰² Yakov Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, p. 9.

became enraged and placed him under the ban of ex-communication. R. Benveniste re-joined the Sabbatians the next day and was appointed the chief rabbi of Smyrna (see section 4.13). R. Aharon de la Papa, the previous rabbi, was forced into hiding for fear of his life.

The custom to kiss the hand of Shabbatai Tzvi was then instituted and many of his opponents did so out of fear of repercussions if they refused. When the rabbis who opposed this raised their objections, angry crowds threatened to attack them (Scholem 1987:255). R. Shlomo Algazi was one of these rabbis who was then forced to flee to Magnesia and his house was looted. According to Scholem (1973:505), one of the opponents of the Sabbatian movement was beaten up in Venice on *Shabbat*. A certain Moshe Nahmiahs asked Shabbatai Tzvi, when he visited him in Gallipoli, if it was permitted to shed the blood of those who speak contemptuously against him, and “*Sabbatai replied that this was permitted.*”

4.18 The elevation and redemption of women

An unusual and interesting spinoff from Sabbatian ideology was the elevation of women in society. Shabbatai Tzvi began to call women up to the Torah reading, an honour usually reserved exclusively for men (Maciejko (2017: xiv).

Women also began to study and teach the *Zohar*, often in private study circles. There is a collection of letters and responsa where opponents of the Sabbatian movement, like R. Moshe Hagiz and R. Yechezkel ben Yehuda HaLevi Landau (known as the *Nodah beYehuda*) objected to seeing the *Zohar* studied in Yiddish by men, women and children, who had no technical knowledge of mysticism (Rapoport-Albert 2001:239-249). Baumgarten (2007:16) writes:

“Shabbatean theology gave a major role to women. This transformation could be seen, especially, in the aliyah¹⁰³ of women in shul, the promotion of equality of sex and the participation of women to circles of study. We have testimonies of Jewish women from Shabbatean circles who studied the *Zohar* in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Altona...”

¹⁰³ Usually only men are called up to the Torah reading in Orthodox synagogues.

Goldish (2004:9) points out that when Shabbatai Tzvi was in the company of women, he would say things like the following:

“And you, downtrodden women! How unfortunate are you, that because of Eve your pain is so great when you give birth. What is more, you are subservient to your husbands, so you are unable to do a thing, small or great, without their approval...But thank God that I have come into the world to redeem you from all your sufferings, to free you, and to make you happy like your husbands—for I have come in order to annul the sin of Adam.”¹⁰⁴

According to Citron (undated:19), Sabbatian prayer books began to be extremely popular. In the first half of the year 1666, large numbers of prayer books were produced and reproduced:

“In all, seven editions were printed in Hebrew, and four in Spanish and Portuguese – for the benefit of the women and recent Marranos who would have difficulty saying the prayers in Hebrew.”

This supports the notion that women were being empowered and accommodated under the influence of Sabbatian ideology.

4.19 Synthesis

In this chapter, I have presented an outline of the rise of the Sabbatian movement in terms of its history, personalities and emerging behavioural patterns. In the following chapter, I discuss the scholarly debate over which theological, doctrinal and sociological causes and influences were most dominant in birthing the Sabbatian phenomenon.

¹⁰⁴ Shabbatai Zvi, quoted by the Dutch minister Thomas Coenen in his *Ydele verwachtinge*, 55. Translation by Matt Goldish (2004:9).

CHAPTER 5:

ROOT CAUSES OF THE SABBATIAN MOVEMENT

5.1 Introduction

It may seem strange that there should even be a debate around the causes of the largest messianic movement in Jewish history since the Second Temple times (Scholem 1973:xxi) but scholars have not reached a consensus as to the main influence that gave rise to the Sabbatian movement. Gershom Scholem's classical view dating from the 1940s - that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was the major cause of Sabbatianism - has been sharply challenged by later scholars, some of whom are his very own students. We will now methodically analyse some scholarly views including those of Scholem, Idel, Citron, Liebes, Goldish, Ruderman and Sharot on the fundamental causes of Sabbatianism.

5.2 Gershom Scholem's view of Lurianic Kabbalah as a direct cause of the Sabbatian movement

While Scholem acknowledges the significance of the Khmelnytsky massacres which occurred between 1648 and 1657 and which left between one hundred thousand and five hundred thousand¹⁰⁵ Polish Jews dead (Dubnow 1916:1:156-157), he takes the view that the causes are more nuanced. Scholem (1973:1) makes the point that Sabbatianism cannot be compared to previous messianic outbreaks in Jewish history, because:

“[a]ll other messianic movements...were limited to a certain area...[but
n]ever before had there been a movement that swept the whole House
of Israel.”

Therefore, since “*the whole House of Israel*” was drawn into the vortex of Sabbatianism, the reasons for its emergence had to be more fundamental and theologically underlying.

¹⁰⁵ According Eldridge (2010:5) about twenty percent of the Jewish population (90,000 out of 450,000) may have perished during the massacres.

Scholem (1973:1-2) argues that if, as some posit, the Khmelnytsky massacres were the main cause of Sabbatianism, the movement would have been localized to Poland. However, the movement did not even start in Poland but rather in Palestine - and additionally, there were notably few Polish leaders of the Sabbatian movement. It spread to wherever Jews were living which included Yemen, Morocco, Persia, Kurdistan, Holland as well as Poland. Scholem (1972:2) suggests that the Jews of Morocco would probably not even have been aware of the massacres. Historically, with previous messianic claimants, the movements died out relatively soon after the claimant was shown to be false. In the case of Shabbatai Tzvi, however, the movement did not dissipate but persisted for generations, and even prospered. For these reasons, its root causes had to lie far deeper.

Nor can one claim that economic conditions were the main cause because Sabbatianism was equally embraced by the impoverished communities of Poland as well as the wealthier communities of Constantinople, Amsterdam and Hamburg. The movement knew no social boundaries because there were millionaire patrons like Amsterdam-based Abraham Pereira who offered all his wealth to Shabbatai Tzvi, as well as R. Rafael Yosef Chelebi (see sections 4.6 and 4.9) and there were also beggars from the poorest regions, who joined together in Sabbatian fellowship. Furthermore, the Jews of Persia, Yemen and Morocco were also experiencing some manner of persecution, yet they did not resonate with Sabbatianism any more than the Jews who lived in relative freedom (Scholem 1973:3).

It is most likely that Sabbatianism drew perhaps most of its support from the upper class:

“[T]he majority of the ruling class¹⁰⁶ was in the camp of the believers [in Shabbatai Tzvi],¹⁰⁷ and the prominent and active part played by many of them is attested by all reliable documents...The essential correctness of this picture is not impugned in the least by the ‘revised version’ of events that was put forward afterward by a kind of self-imposed censorship” (Scholem 1973:5).

¹⁰⁶ Scholem points out that the ruling class, includes “*rich merchants, lay leaders, and rabbis.*”

¹⁰⁷ Parenthesis mine.

In other words, even when later generations tried to deny that the majority of the upper class and its leadership, including prominent rabbis, had supported Shabbatai Tzvi, the fact remains that at one time they did indeed believe that he was the Messiah. For all these reasons, the intriguing root causes of the Sabbatian movement must have been deeper than those produced by historic and socio-economic conditions.

Scholem understands the Sabbatian movement as originating in something far more theologically universal than any one particular historical or sociological event. That universal influence was *Kabbalah* - specifically *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Mystics and mystical teachings became so popular that the quiet town of Safed which started with just twelve hundred inhabitants, became a bustling centre of *Kabbalah* with eighteen thousand Jews, by the end of the sixteenth century (Giller 2001:14).

Safed drew many *Marranos* because, besides its reputation as a *Kabbalah* centre, it was situated on major trade routes and this created economic opportunities. The main trade was the wool industry which is also why so many of the exiles from Spain were attracted to that city (Faierstein 2007:2). The fact that these *Marranos* and *Conversos* were already exposed to the intense mysticism of Spain also explains why *Kabbalah* began to flourish in the new Safed.

Between the mystical centres of the old *Zoharic Kabbalah* of Spain and the new *Lurianic Kabbalah* of Safed:

“[t]here is only one main line” (Scholem 1941:287).

In contrast to medieval *Kabbalah* based on the *Zohar*, which remained the domain of a select few, *Lurianic Kabbalah* was soon to spread from Safed throughout the Diaspora. The Ari passed away in 1572, just fifty-four years before Shabbatai Tzvi was born. *Lurianic Kabbalah* had created a *de facto* movement so “*highly charged with messianic tension*” that it found its outlet and “*discharge*” just decades later in the Sabbatian movement (Scholem 1973:8). There is far more emphasis on messianism in *Lurianic Kabbalah* than in any other *kabbalistic* system, to the extent that:

“Luria’s disciples saw him as the Messiah, son of Joseph, who was to prepare the way for later revelation of the Messiah, son of David” (Scholem 1987:76).

As a result of the *Lurianic* theory of *Tikkun* (spiritual rectification):

“[T]he whole meaning of Judaism [was seen]¹⁰⁸ as an acute messianic tension. Such tension finally broke in the Shabbatean movement” (Scholem 1987:75).

This, in effect, created another “*main line*” between *Lurianic Kabbalah* and Sabbatianism.

The writings of the Ari were first printed in 1630, just four years after Shabbatai Tzvi was born. Scholem (1973:24) reminds us that the masses considered *Lurianic Kabbalah* to be the “*final and ultimate revelation of kabbalistic truth*”, and that it was the authoritative distillation of the thirteenth-century *Zohar* in a manner appropriate to the seventeenth-century. According to Scholem, without this powerful and popular *Lurianic* mystical foundation, the Sabbatian movement would never have been able to take root, develop and - importantly - continue to perpetuate itself after the demise of its leader. At the time of the genesis of the Sabbatian movement, mysticism had become synonymous with messianism:

“...kabbalistic esotericism and messianic eschatology were intertwined and acted in combination” (Scholem 1973:22).

What the Ari did that was so appealing to that generation (Scholem 1973:26) was to perfect the concepts of exile and redemption and elevate them to cosmic and divine levels thus removing them from a narrow historical and political interpretation. Scholem (1973:52) puts it succinctly:

“Lurianic kabbalism hinges on the idea of redemption.”

Kabbalah in general reflects the mood of the generation (Scholem 1941:287) and after the expulsion from Spain in 1497, the Jews were living “*between the poles of exile and redemption*” (Scholem 1941:288) as they awaited the expected Messiah. Exile took on a mystical theory which was matched by a corresponding theory of mystical redemption. Exile and redemption now co-existed within the fabric of creation. These two poles were present even within the Godhead, and redemption was no longer just a tenet of faith with a vague promise of a future utopian. Because the

¹⁰⁸ Parenthesis is mine.

interconnectedness of exile and redemption was so primary to the cosmos and God, it was a short step to translate that, with immediate effect, into historical reality on the ground which meant only one thing - messianism. Many of these *Lurianic* ideas were being perpetuated and popularised amongst the masses by preachers and moralists, and they would have emphasized the more dramatic, spectacular and immediate aspects and potential effects of this ideology.

Scholem (1973:44) maintains that trying to find a basis for these concepts within the earlier *Zohar*, would be in vain as they are a uniquely *Lurianic* reworking of broader *Zoharic* ideas. It is interesting to note the historian Heinrich Graetz (1895:138) - while acknowledging the pivotal role mysticism in general played in the influences on Sabbatianism - comes to a slightly different conclusion, in that he includes the *Zohar* as an influence:

“At that time not a single man of weight and importance recognized that the primary source of all these phenomena lay in the Kabbala and the *Zohar*.”

It is, however, most likely that Scholem had a keener appreciation of the theological subtleties and nuances of the corpus of *Kabbalistic* literature than Graetz who, I believe, may have been writing in more general historical terms about *Kabbalistic* influences as a whole. Scholem (1973:45) continues expounding on the *Lurianic* doctrine:

“There is something startlingly novel about this kabbalistic explanation which regarded exile not merely as a test of our faith or a punishment for our sins, but first and foremost as a mission. The purpose of this mission was to raise the scattered, holy sparks...”

These “*holy sparks*” are explained by the Ari’s student, R. Chaim Vital, as follows:

“[Egypt, or exile, represented the Kelipot, or unclean husks which the holy sparks had to elevate. M]any sparks got entangled there and Israel too was enslaved there. Even the Shekhina [God’s Presence]¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Parentheses are mine.

was exiled with it in order to raise the sparks that were there...For that reason Israel had been condemned to bondage among the seventy nations, so that it might extract the holy sparks that had fallen among them.”¹¹⁰

The notion, then, of *Tikkun* (*rectification* or *restoration*) made every Jew a:

“protagonist in the great process of restitution, in a manner never heard of before” (Scholem 1941:284).

Lest one thinks that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was the sole proclivity of the specialised mystic, Scholem (1941:285) reminds us that it affected the general theology of non-mystics as well:

“The Lurianic Kabbalah was the last religious movement in Judaism the influence of which became preponderant among all sections of the Jewish people and in every country of the diaspora, without exception”.

Scholem (1941:286), however, cannot refrain from expressing his view that *Lurianic Kabbalah*, although so widely accepted, might not be able to claim a pure foundational basis within Judaism itself and that its roots might have wandered elsewhere:

“[It is] surprising that the doctrine which achieved this result was deeply related to Gnosticism, but such are the dialectics of history.”

Graetz (1895:122) also believes that Shabbatai Tzvi was influenced by *Lurianic Kabbalah* and does not hide his dislike of mystical literature when he writes:

“This Lurian mysticism dazzled the bewildered brain of the Smyrna youth, and produced such confusion and giddiness, that he thought he could easily usher in this spiritual redemption...That book of falsehoods, the Zohar, declared that in the year of the world 5408 (1648) the era of redemption would dawn, and precisely in that year

¹¹⁰ Chaim Vital, *Sefer haLikuttim* (Jerusalem 1913), fol. 89a. Translation is from Scholem (1973:45).

Sabbatai revealed himself to his train of youthful companions as the Messianic redeemer.”

Graetz (1895:119) explains that Shabbatai Tzvi would enthrall his circle with his singing “*in Spanish the Kabbalistic verses composed by Lurya or himself.*”

Based on the *Lurianic* notion that during the exile, the unity of God’s name had been divided and was thus incomplete and even ineffective, Shabbatai Tzvi claimed to restore the Name to its perfect state. He did so by uttering the Tetragrammaton, which united God’s Name and joined the lower worlds to the upper realms and thus the messianic redemption of God and the universe had begun through him.

5.2.1 Synthesis

Although Scholem presents his arguments so eloquently, there is much debate as to whether *Lurianic Kabbalah* was indeed a major influencing factor in the rise of the Sabbatian movement. Moshe Idel, parts ways with Scholem’s ‘thunderous’ view of messianism as “*tension*,” “*apocalyptic*” and cosmic “*catastrophe*,” and draws our attention to the earlier *Zoharic Kabbalah* and its focus on a ‘quieter’ personal form of redemption.

5.3 Moshe Idel on the notion of personal redemption

Idel (2011:35) rejects Scholem’s “*attraction to catastrophic manifestations*” because it disallows other forms of non-catastrophic redemption to take place. Idel maintains that the role of ‘*catastrophe*’ in thirteenth-century *Kabbalah*, for example, was very minor indeed and focus more on ‘*construction*’:

“In fact, the perfection of the individual is redemptive, on both the personal level and the more cosmic one” (Idel 2011:36).

In this sense, the perfection of the individual (without the need to invoke national or universal ‘*catastrophe*’) is already messianic.

Idel further suggests that instead of ‘*catastrophe*’ and drama, an important component of Shabbatai Tzvi’s theology was simply related to astrology and cosmic cycles:

“In many cases, calculation related to the coming of the messiah had astrological bases. An impact of this approach to messianism can be seen in the case of the most famous messiah, Sabbatai Tevi. In this view of redemption, destruction of the existing order is essential for the beginning of a new age. Central to the kabbalistic notion of order that is related to astrology is the understanding that the cosmic processes are inevitable and part of a constant universal rhythm that does not depend on human activity” (Idel 2011:31-32).

Idel explains that these astrological and cosmic ideas were first formulated by early *kabbalists* including Nachmanides (1194-1270) and R. Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi (thirteenth century), more than two centuries before *Lurianic Kabbalah* began to emerge:

“The late thirteenth-century Kabbalah from the circle of Joseph Ashkenazi must have contributed to Tzevi’s self-awareness as Messiah more than anything in Lurianic Kabbalah could possibly have done” (Idel 1995:193).

Idel believes, contra Scholem, that Sabbatianism was influenced by this earlier *kabbalistic* notion of quiet personal redemption as well as the thirteenth-century astrological *Kabbalah*, more than the more recent sixteenth-century ‘catastrophic’ *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

5.3.1 Synthesis

Idel calms down Scholem’s messianic drama and introduces the notion of personal redemption as well as astrology and cosmic cycles that may rather have influenced Sabbatianism. Joseph Citron, however, adopts a more traditional approach.

5.4 Joseph Citron’s view of a more traditional belief in a Messiah

According to Joseph Citron, the success of the Sabbatian movement was the result of a far more conservative and deep-seated traditional Jewish belief in redemption that had long since been a part of Jewish yearning and tradition. It was not, therefore, directly related to the influence of *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Citron points out that:

“Scholem never claims that large groups of ordinary people were experts or even studied Kabbalah, rather that Lurianic ideas were mediated to groups of people by the popular preachers...” (Citron n.d.:26).

Citron (n.d.:30) explains that what *Lurianic Kabbalah* did, was it enabled Shabbatai Tzvi's 'prophet', Natan of Gaza to:

“gain prestige amongst the educated elites on a theoretical level and charismatic appeal on a popular one.”

Thus, *Lurianic Kabbalah* lent the nascent Sabbatian movement an air of authenticity on various levels, but its effects were not wider than that. The masses were not studying *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

Citron, however, adduces - to my mind - a questionable argument where he mitigates the degree of messianic mysticism to be found within the very corpus of *Lurianic Kabbalah* that Scholem seemed to emphasise:

“[another]¹¹¹ element which undermines the idea that Lurianism was crucial to Shabbatai's popularity during these years is that even within the specifically Lurianic texts, there is little evidence that they are particularly messianic” (Citron n.d.:25).

Scholem (1973:52), as will be recalled, maintained that *Lurianic Kabbalah* “*hinges on the idea of redemption*.” In light of the many examples that Scholem brings, including the primary role of *Lurianic Tikkun* leading to redemption, this challenge by Citron seems difficult to accept. Additionally, as we noted earlier, both the Ari and his 'primary' student R. Chaim Vital - the two main conduits of *Lurianic Kabbalah* - were regarded separately as being the Messiah. This alone would have charged the air with intense messianic tension.

Yet Citron (n.d.:32-33) presents another challenge to Scholem that I would tend to concur with, and that is the effects of the Khmelnytsky massacres and persecution in general on the Jewish population, leaving them in a state of despair and thus

¹¹¹ Parenthesis is mine.

susceptible to promises of redemption. Citron (n.d.:32), in concert with views expressed by Barnai (1995:175), shows that the pogroms were not restricted to Poland nor were they specifically related to Eastern Europe. The persecutions also affected Western Europe and elsewhere. The thirty years war in Germany and central Europe between 1618 and 1648 created as many Jewish refugees as the Khmelnytsky massacres. And the Polish and Lithuanian wars and rebellions continued for nineteen years between 1648 and 1667 during which time Jews were subjected to continual persecution and expulsions. Moshe Rosman (1982:6) shows how there were 6 published chronicles and other writings about the Khmelnytsky massacres that were printed in Poland, Amsterdam, Venice and Salonika. Also, a printing press was established in Istanbul by Polish refugees. These indicate that knowledge of the massacres would have been widespread. Barnai (1995:183) also reminds us that in 1664 Shabbatai Tzvi married Sarah, a Jewish refugee from those very pogroms, so he certainly would have been acutely familiar with those events and sentiments. As to Scholem's notion that the Moroccan Jews might not have even been aware of the European massacres, Citron (n.d.:34) asserts:

“[I]t is likely that the Moroccan Jews would empathise with the plight of their Polish brethren and see their suffering as part of the grander narrative of the Jewish people.”

Another valid observation that Citron (n.d.:5-6) makes is that messianism was always part of Judaism. He writes that:

“[T]he anticipation of the messiah was an essential component of the religious faith of the Jewish communities... the popular willingness within European communities to follow him [Shabbatai Tzvi]¹¹² was not primarily a reaction to desperate circumstances or even a reflection of an emergent mysticism but was due to their continued loyalty to normative Judaism.”

¹¹² Parenthesis is mine.

This approach might also explain why much of the rabbinic world initially went along with Sabbatian ideology as it seemed to represent an extension of the Judaism they were familiar with. Citron (n.d.:21) continues:

“Even the anti-Sabbateans concluded that supporting Shabbatai was foolish but not an act of rebellion.”

The chief rabbi of Prague, R. Aron Spira, although he did not support the movement, wrote the following to R. Yakov Sasportas in December 1665:

“Let us not disturb them, for great is the power of penitence which can turn even willful sins into merits.”¹¹³

Citron (n.d.:37) makes his point that:

“had Shabbatai not been clearly presented as the normative messiah of Israel he could not have achieved a mass following.”

Furthermore, Citron (n.p:40) shows how ‘normative’ the messianic events must have initially been presented because:

“[u]pon Shabbatai’s apostasy...the overwhelming majority returned to orthodoxy.”

Even the antinomianism of Shabbatai Tzvi’s “*strange acts*” may have been initially tolerated as, at least in theory, there was *talmudic* precedent in R. Yosef’s statement that:

אמר רב יוסף...מצות בטלות לעתיד לבא

“The mitzvot [commandments] will be abolished in the time to come.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Yakov Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, 120-21 in Scholem (1973:562).

¹¹⁴ b. *Nidah* 61b.

Then there are further references, in *midrashic* literature which speak of the abrogation of certain dietary laws, the annulment of various sacrifices,¹¹⁵ and the annulment of certain festivals (Citron n.d.:41). R. Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340), as another example, suggests that the prohibition of meat and milk will no longer be applicable in the messianic age (Shapiro 2004:139). Citron (n.d.:42) shows how the mystics elaborated upon this idea of future abrogation of the law. He cites Tishby who brings *Kabbalistic* statements claiming that in the future, *Kabbalists* particularly, would be freed from the commandments.¹¹⁶ A telling comment by David Ruderman (1993:178) supports this very notion:

“I would submit...that Judaism through the kabbalah offers a most compelling example of a religious tradition that consciously and willingly subverts itself.”

Taking all these relatively traditional and normative views into account, there must have been great difficulty in defining the status of certain laws during what was perceived to be the dawning of the messianic era. As long as Shabbatai Tzvi had not yet been disproved as being the Messiah, and as long as he was still endorsed by so many in positions of authority, we can understand that there would have been a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the exact nature of Jewish law in general and his “*strange acts*” in particular.

In light of this ambiguity, the odds would have been against speaking out and denying the long-awaited Messiah. Understandably, the masses may have been fairly comfortable hedging their bets, in the meantime, on the prevailing messianic claimant. They had rabbis and textual precedents on their side. Citron (n.d.:42) therefore concludes that Shabbatai Tzvi:

“...seemed to faithfully comply with the image of the messiah which had been envisioned within Jewish communities for hundreds of years.”

¹¹⁵ *Vayikra Rabah* 9:7.

¹¹⁶ Isaiah Tishby, 1991, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, New York, p. iii.1150 n.277.

David Ruderman (1993:172) in identifying the origins of the Jewish mystical tradition, puts it more bluntly:

“[T]he rabbis' fertile religious imagination was not as lacking as Scholem describes it. Myth...was an integral part of rabbinic Judaism; it was not necessary to "import" it from gnostic or Neoplatonic sources since it was long implanted at the religion's very core.”

In other words, even the ambiguity and “*strange acts*” would have been relatively palatable as long as it was presented within a traditional messianic framework.

5.4.1 Synthesis

In my view, Citron makes a valid contribution by pointing to the rich history of belief in a Messiah that has long been part of Jewish general religious culture. I do, however, question his negating the important role messianic redemption played within *Lurianic Kabbalah*.

On his point that large groups were not studying *Lurianic* teachings in the early days of the Sabbatian movement, and that all *Lurianism* did was lend an element of “*prestige*” to the “*educated elites*”, Citron downplays to some degree the *Lurianic* influence on the movement because the masses were simply not studying *Lurianic Kabbalah*. I interpret this differently, as it meshes with my argument of the vertical transmission of Torah ideology through the leaders without the need for mass participation. The leaders studied *Lurianic Kabbalah*. The masses, though, did not need to study it to be profoundly affected by it through their rabbis (see section 5.9).

5.5 Yehuda Liebes on the Sabbatian concept of redemption

Yehudah Liebes (1993:vii) describes Sabbatianism as:

“the most important Jewish messianic movement (unless we include Christianity under this rubric) as well as the most mystical.”

Liebes, a student of Scholem,¹¹⁷ also poses some challenges to his teacher by reminding us that it is not a simple matter to define Sabbatian thought as though it fell under a single categorisation:

“Sabbatianism encompasses several currents of thought; each one is different, and each one follows its own development” (Liebes 1993:99).

Most scholars seem to follow the view of Scholem that Sabbatianism was, “*despite its mystical character,*” mainly concerned with “*historical and political redemption*” (Liebes 1993:vii). This is the dominant view, as, after all, Shabbatai Tzvi was considered to be the Messiah, and as such, his role must have been to fulfil typical messianic expectations in the simplest of senses. This would have included national redemption. However, there is a growing body of thought, as represented by Liebes and Idel, that Shabbatai Tzvi was more concerned with *personal, mystical* and *spiritual* redemption, not *national* redemption. This would place him in a different category of Messiah.

Liebes maintains that Scholem and the other scholars had first been influenced by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* which was dominant during the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment movement) and which sought to minimize the national, mystical and non-rational foundations of Judaism. However, with the later spread of Zionism, it became more acceptable to embrace those areas of thought that had embarrassed the *Wissenschaft* who wanted to set Judaism on a more ‘scientific’ and ‘historic’ footing. Thus, post-*Wissenschaft* thinking sought to raise those neglected areas of myth and mysticism to a respectable level worthy of academic endeavour. Scholem did this with his masterful and ground-breaking research into *Kabbalah* becoming the first professor of Jewish mysticism.

Liebes writes: “*I am a disciple of Scholem, but I have attempted to break further ground,*” and unlike Scholem who spoke of a historical and political redemption, Liebes is determined to show that:

¹¹⁷ Scholem was his doctoral advisor.

“Sabbatianism was chiefly concerned with spiritual redemption: the redemption of religion, the redemption of God, and personal, mystical redemption” (Liebes 1993:viii).

Liebes (1993:100) points out that Shabbatai Tzvi never mentioned the notion of redemption of the Jewish people as a whole. In fact, his:

“utmost concern was not the fate of the people but rather a spiritual realm the people could not reach, and he was profoundly alienated from the masses of his followers.”

In a letter Shabbatai Tzvi wrote soon after his apostasy, he shows little concern for his people as a nation:

“My brothers, know...that the True One, which only I have known for many generations and for which I have toiled, wanted me to enter Islam with all my heart” (Liebes 1993:100).

This disregard for his birth people can be seen reflected in the attitude of what Liebes (1993:101) calls the “*Sabbatian sect*” - the Donmeh - who even after their conversion to Islam, never expressed the desire to return to their birth religion of Judaism. On this view, Shabbatai Tzvi was not interested in redeeming his people but rather in redeeming the individual, the religion and even God Himself. In this sense, “redemption” also meant redemption *from* the Jewish religion.

Liebes (1993:100) supports the idea of “*redemption of God*” by showing that Shabbatai Tzvi referred to himself as the *Messiah of the God of Jacob*, and he meant that quite literally. He was audacious enough to claim he could even redeem God from the *Kelipot*, or *husks of evil*. Natan of Gaza expresses this idea of his master redeeming God when he said:

“And our king, his majesty, took pains about this faith until he seated the King on his throne” (Liebes 1993:100).

According to Liebes, the Jewish people and their religion meant very little to Shabbatai Tzvi for whom Judaism was but an:

“empty shell and [in place of which]¹¹⁸ new frameworks must be sought” (Liebes 1993:100).

Thus, according to Liebes, Sabbatianism was not a movement about political redemption but rather about religious redemption in every sense of the phrase. It was about the:

“renewal of religion, of faith, and of the true God. In the eyes of Sabbatians, exile is the exile of religion, and its place of exile is the fossilized tradition, which has long since forgotten its roots and its aims” (Liebes 1993:106).

This way, Liebes completely reconstructs the Sabbatian messianic notion of political and historical redemption of the Jewish people as Scholem saw it, to a dramatic spiritual redemption *from* religion and it extended to the very redemption *of* God Himself.

On the matter of *Lurianic* influences on Shabbatai Tzvi himself, Liebes (1993:109) suggests that the *Lurianic* doctrine of God was far too technical and impersonal for him. This was because *Lurianic Kabbala* had become, in Liebes’ view:

“an advanced, multifaceted machine [that]¹¹⁹ had replaced the personal God.”

Shabbatai Tzvi’s study partner, Moshe Pinheiro, attested that his colleague had abandoned *Lurianic* devotional prayer and adopted a less restrictive method to pray:

“as someone who prays to His King” (Liebes 1993:110).

Liebes also maintains that Shabbatai Tzvi chose to rather interact with the more personal *Zoharic Kabbalah*:

“rather than to the mechanistic Lurianic one” (Liebes 1993:110).

¹¹⁸ Parenthesis is mine.

¹¹⁹ Parenthesis is mine.

5.5.1 Synthesis

Liebes' interpretation of redemption in all its various Sabbatian constructs from the perspective both of the masses and the leader, Shabbatai Tzvi himself, is enlightening and revealing. However, on the notion of *Lurianic* influences, in my view, while Liebes' examples clearly show some aversion on the part of Shabbatai Tzvi to *Lurianic Kabbalah*, they do not deal with the broader issues of *Lurianic* influences on the Sabbatian movement as a whole. The masses were more influenced by the ideologue of the movement, Natan of Gaza, who was a "*master Lurianic kabbalist*" (Chajes 2020:8). In fact, one could argue that the very idea of Shabbatai Tzvi *abandoning* some *Lurianic* practices, shows obvious evidence of its influence in the first instance.

5.6 Matt Goldish and the centrality of the belief in prophecy

Matt Goldish also parts with Scholem's view of the centrality of *Lurianic Kabbalah* as a major influence on Sabbatianism, because:

"[T]he vast majority of believers in Shabbatai adopted the faith without even being exposed to Sabbatian theology" (Goldish 2004:6).

Goldish explains that this was because the writings of Natan of Gaza took some time to circulate and by then the movement was already well established. However, the people would have immediately known about the "*first spectacular news of Nathan's prophecy*," as this spread quickly and did not require any form of scholarship. Goldish (2004:7), therefore, adopts the fascinating position whereby:

"Social movements spread according to the same dynamics as contagious diseases, and one of the keys in even the largest movements is the overwhelming influence of a few individuals."

Goldish maintains that a small but influential group of rabbis saw what had happened in Gaza on *Shavu'ot*, where much 'prophetic' activity had taken place and they became convinced that Shabbatai Tzvi was the Messiah. These rabbis had the ear of the people. Goldish (2004:7) maintains that:

“[T]he spectacle of prophecy rather than any mystical theology was clearly the main catalyst in the first and most critical success of the movement...A far more powerful unifying factor was the willingness of seventeenth-century Jews to believe in acceptably validated messianic prophecies, especially those of a kabbalist like Nathan of Gaza”.

One such prophecy was a daylong event which Natan of Gaza records in a letter referring to Shabbatai Tzvi:

“I recognized that he was [the] true [messiah] by the signs which Isaac Luria [the Ari]¹²⁰ had taught, for he [Luria] has revealed profound mysteries in the Torah and not one thing faileth of all that he has taught. And also the angel that revealed himself to me in a waking vision was a truthful one, and he revealed to me awesome mysteries.”¹²¹

At one point, Natan of Gaza actually believed he was a reincarnation of the Ari (Goldish 2004:63). Goldish makes the point that this vision took place in Gaza under Ottoman rule. It occurred at a time when there was a strong Sufi influence in the empire. Much of Natan of Gaza’s teaching resembles Abulafia’s prophetic *Kabbalah*, and:

“almost all the elements in Nathan’s practice, following Abulafia, Albotini, and Vital, were found in Sufi traditions...Nathan was influenced by this Sufi method, whether through the Abulafian literature that reflects Muslim influence, through sixteenth century kabbalists, or through direct local contact with Sufis” (Goldish 2004:62).

Goldish (2004:105) describes an “*outbreak*” of prophetic experiences which then took hold of the masses. According to an account from Baruch of Arezzo:

¹²⁰ Parenthesis is mine.

¹²¹ Scholem, G., 1966, *Qobes al Yad*, VI, New Series, 419-56. See also Scholem (1973:204-205).

“After this, prophecy came upon many men, women and children in Izmir, Constantinople, Aleppo, and elsewhere...In the city of Izmir over 150 prophets prophesied.”¹²²

Baruch of Arezzo goes on to describe how, apparently, a deep sleep would descend upon them and they would lie on the ground as if they were dead. They would remain like that for about half an hour and then begin breathing normally, when they would declare, “*Shabbatai Zvi is the Messiah of the God of Jacob.*” Then they would revert and have no recollection of what had just occurred.

Goldish (2004:109) offers an interesting observation about what he calls the “*genre*” of the popular prophecies:

“[T]hey were almost all spirit possessions, following a standard pattern. The visionary would convulse and faint away, a short while later a voice would issue from his or her throat pronouncing the messiahship of Shabbatai, then the person would faint again and wake up remembering nothing. This places the “popular” Sabbatean prophets into a rich nexus of contemporary phenomena.”

Goldish (2004:110) explains the nature of this popular prophecy:

“We are thus not dealing with a spontaneous outbreak of visionary possessions, but a mass mimesis whose source was itself mimetic - Nathan mimed the possession of R. Joseph Karo.”¹²³

To be clear, Goldish (2004:xi) is referring to “*prophecy*” in its “*widest meaning*” akin to what we may also refer to as “*enthusiasm*.” Goldish (2004:147) refers to this style of prophecy as “*self-induced*”, and that:

¹²² Freimann, *Inyanei Shabbatai Tzvi*, 49. Translation by Goldish.

¹²³ R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575) was the author of the Code of Jewish Law known as the *Shulchan Aruch*. He was also a member of the group of Safed mystics and a contemporary of the Ari although he was not part of the circle of the Ari (Scholem 1987:421-422).

“Nathan learned the technique of invoking a Maggid from R. Joseph Karo, who appears to have learned it from R. Joseph Taytatzak’s¹²⁴ circle, which had a long secret tradition of such concepts from Spain, ultimately connected with Sufi methods” (Goldish 2004:117).

These techniques were then mimicked or “*absorbed mimetically*” by Natan of Gaza’s followers. This would not have been a difficult process because as Goldish (2004:117) explains drawing on an analogy from current times:

“As we know from contemporary copycat crimes, mimesis does not demand any more contact between the original actors and those imitating them than a rumor, a story, a news article.”

There were also parallels drawn between the Quakers and these prophesying Jews, and one Polish publication of 1666 called Shabbatai Tzvi a “Quaker Jew” (Goldish 2004:111). The Dutch minister in Izmir, Thomas Coenen, trying to fathom the nature of the source of the popular spiritual outpouring, writes:

“Perhaps one should say it was surface appearances mixed with a lot of fraud. It would be easier to imagine that there was something artificial in it all, like the Quakers of England.”¹²⁵

Similarly commenting on the mimicry nature of popular prophecy was R. Yakov Sasportas¹²⁶ who was ever keen to analyse and observe the strange patterns of the Sabbatians:

“Why should I accept all that has been reported? Because of the words of ridiculous prophecies, or epileptic fits, or a frightening evil spirit?... Is it already possible that the most empty of men will lie down in his bed, and in the morning will find himself a prophet by the decree

¹²⁴ The earlier messianic claimant, Shlomo Molcho, it will be recalled, studied in the *yeshiva* of R. Yosef Taitazak (see section 2.3.9.3). This shows another common mystical influence on messianic thought, a thread running throughout this study.

¹²⁵ Coenen, Ydele verwachtinge der Joden, 59.

¹²⁶ Yakov Sasportas, *Tzitzat Novel Tzvi*, 96.

of God? It is worth as much as the prophecy of a frog or a donkey!”
(Goldish 2004:140).

Another important point that Goldish makes is the proclivity of women to prophesy. He explains just how central the notion of prophecy was to not only Natan of Gaza but particularly to his successor, Avraham Miguel Cardozo:

“The frequency and variety of visions in Cardoso’s circle have no parallel. While Cardoso himself did receive revelations in visions and dreams, it appears the bulk of prophetic phenomena in his home was granted to women—his wives, daughters, and other female relatives”
(Goldish 2004:99-100).

This phenomenon of women beginning to prophecy was not just occurring within Sabbatian circles, because Goldish (2004:111) draws our attention to the similarity between Sabbatians and Quakers in this regard, probably due to the shifting gender structures which were taking place in the world at the time. To further this notion, one report records that the English merchants with which Shabbatai Tzvi’s father was acquainted, were Quakers. There were also Quaker missionaries “*carrying piles of pamphlets*” in Izmir, Istanbul, and Jerusalem just before the Sabbatian outbreak. Some of these, apparently from Ireland, also visited the synagogue in Livorno (Goldish 2004:111).

By pointing to what has been described as a self-induced if not fraudulent mimesis, Goldish has touched upon a theologically less romantic influence on the Sabbatian movement than Scholem and his theory of a grander *Lurianic Kabbalistic* influence and an “*epochal crisis*”. Instead, he offers a pragmatic interpretation where Jews simply followed their important rabbis, with perhaps even some influence from Christian and Muslim theology that was prevalent at that time. Yet Goldish (2004:169) argues that it was specifically this mundane constituent that makes for a very compelling explanation for the rise of Sabbatianism:

“[T]his was the period when the prosaic became the profound, the pedestrian became signal. In the very days of Shabbatai, alchemists were becoming chemists, lowly mathematics was proving to be the cornerstone of a new cosmology, astrology was turning into

astronomy, and blood-letting quacks were learning to be effective physicians. Sabbateans and their prophecies were an organic part of this scene.”

Goldish furthers his argument that not only is mysticism excluded as a main cause of Sabbatianism, but in fact, Sabbatianism served as a cause for the *spread* of mysticism. He shows that after the apostasy of Shabbatai Tzvi, prophetic activity amongst the Sabbatian followers appears to have become even more widespread than ever before. Also, whilst the earlier ‘prophets’ tended to be *Sefaradi*, now there was a shift to the predominantly *Ashkenazi* ethnicity of the post-apostasy Sabbatian prophets. Additionally:

“[T]here is more evidence to show that interest in Kabbalah in the generation after Shabbatai’s apostasy dramatically increased. Along with Kabbalah studies came a surge of non-Sabbatean prophecy that was also rife in kabbalistic circles for a long time afterward...A disproportionate number of those who carried on the faith in secret were rabbis and scholars” (Goldish 2004:162-3).

This is an idea that I wish to elaborate upon in a further study where forms of ecstasy and prophecy were becoming dominant within the next major movement to appear on the Jewish horizon, Chassidism. Goldish (2004:166) writes:

“[T]he speed and fervor with which Hasidism spread are distinctly reminiscent of Sabbateanism, and the common element of prophecy may have been equally important in both.”

This increase in interest in mysticism and mystical prophecy provided fertile soil for the new growth and flowering of the nascent Chassidic movement which followed soon after the Sabbatian movement.

5.6.1 Synthesis

Goldish raises some important issues which have broadened the scope of general scholarship with his focus on the “*role of seventeenth-century ideas on the rise of*

Sabbateanism,” and also his evaluation of “*its larger historical context*” (Goldish (2004:x-xi).

Goldish explains that the movement simply spread without the need to resort to particularistic causes. He often seems to tend toward sociological reasons for the development of religious ideas, perhaps mirroring Sharot who writes:

“religious beliefs, practices, and movements originate and develop under certain social conditions, and a plausible link can be made between social condition and religious phenomena” (Sharot 1982:3).

Sharot is even more explicit when he declares that:

“social forces were among the major determinants of religious phenomena” (Sharot 1982:6).

Sharot similarly opposed Scholem’s approach claiming it was somewhat narrow and limited:

“Scholem’s history of the cabbalah is very much a history of the ideas of a small intelligentsia... the influences of forcers from outside Judaism are rarely discussed in Scholem’s work, and when they are discussed, they are accorded little significance” (Sharot 1982:5).

This may be the case but I would still argue, however, that since *Lurianic Kabbalah* is admittedly identified as the kernel of what originally influenced that “*small circle of important rabbis [who]¹²⁷ became convinced by what they had personally seen and heard in Gaza*” (Goldish 2004:7) - it should indeed be categorised as a *cause* because essentially *Lurianism* lay at the roots of this frenzied activity, with Natan even considering himself “*Luria’s reincarnation*” (Goldish 2004:63). Then, with the “*overwhelming influence of a few individuals*” (Goldish 2004:7) the movement spread exponentially as social forces played out their prosaic roles. This also resonates with my contention that the vertical transmission of traditional ‘Torah’ authority requires just a small core of ‘authoritative’ rabbis, for ideas to spread amongst the masses. The small but critical group of rabbis endorsing Natan of Gaza, were endorsing *Lurianic*

¹²⁷ Parenthesis is mine.

ideas - and then the frenzied social mechanism and the seventeenth-century “*social forces*’ passed the baton on to the masses even if they did know what they were spreading (I develop this argument further in 5.8).

5.7 David Ruderman and the Sabbatian movement as a catalyst for the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah

David Ruderman (1993:177) writes that Ze’ev Gries (1990) has studied the *Hanhagot*, or *popular practices* and moral guides within the prevailing Jewish religious literature of the seventeenth century. These were often abbreviated and shortened from previous more complex works. What Gries found (and this corroborates the abovementioned view expressed by Goldish) was that these smaller publications, containing ideas inspired by *Lurianic Kabbalah*, were only disseminated *after* the Sabbatian movement had begun to spread, and were distributed mainly amongst the Sabbatians themselves. This research seems to indicate that:

“Lurianic kabbalah, contra Scholem, did not spread Sabbatianism but, instead, Sabbatianism spread popular forms of Lurianic doctrine among a wider laity” (Ruderman 1993:177).

5.8 Stephen Sharot and messianism as more dominant among the Sephardim and the Marranos

In his sociological study of Sabbatianism, Stephen Sharot is of the view that millenarianism was more dominant among *Sefaradim* and *Marranos* than among the *Ashkenazim*:

“The influence of the Lurianic cabbalah was a contributing factor to the messianic outburst, but it cannot be regarded as a sufficient or even major cause. The centers of Sabbatian enthusiasm in 1666 show a closer correspondence with another factor: the geographical distribution of the Iberian exiles and, in particular, the distribution of the former marranos...” (Sharot 1982:101-2).

He goes on to explain that many of these *Marranos* had been baptized and had had a Catholic upbringing. When they later decided to ‘return’ to Judaism they were shocked

by the ritual and attention to the letter of the law that traditional Judaism required of them. They thought they were returning to the biblical Judaism they had anticipated from their reading of the Bible. They risked their lives for something completely different from what they now saw in Judaism:

“They had rejected the authority of the church and the priesthood, and they were now expected to accept the discipline of the Jewish community and its rabbis, to which many educated marranos felt intellectually superior” (Sharot 1982:107).

It was therefore particularly in the societies of former *Marranos*, because of their previous “*conflicts, tensions, and problems of identity*,” that they experienced a higher level of messianism (Sharot 1982:109). Especially after Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy, they persisted in holding on to an idea that resonated with them: Shabbatai Tzvi’s apostasy (like the *Marranos*’ previous conversion to Christianity) was forced upon them; it was just a mask, it was not real.

This *Marrano* ideology was succinctly seized upon and developed further by another ideologue of the Sabbatian movement, R. Abraham Cardozo, who was also a former *Marrano*:

“It is possible that Abraham [Cardozo] and other former marranos were attracted to a faith that reminded them, consciously or unconsciously, of the faith of their childhood...Abraham Cardozo believed that the Christians were correct in presenting a suffering messiah, but that they were mistaken in their belief that the messiah must die” (Sharot 1982:121).

Thus, according to Sharot, Sabbatianism generally followed the geographical paths of the *Marranos*, and for the reasons outlined above, they can therefore be regarded as an important influencing factor in the movement.

5.9 Arguments in favour of the (unpopular) view of Scholem

Having looked at seven different approaches to the root causes of the Sabbatian movement, namely: Scholem’s claim of origins in *Lurianic Kabbalah*; Idel’s view of

personal redemption and astrological factors; Citron's traditional approach; Liebes' description of various forms of non-political redemption; Goldish's uncovering of popular prophecy; Ruderman's notion of Sabbatianism acting as a catalyst for the spreading of *Lurianic Kabbalah*; and Sharot's sociological connections to *Marrano* activity and ideology - I will now return briefly to the classical, if not unpopular, view of Scholem.

Firstly, in the simplest of terms, there does seem to be a *prima facie* connection between the mysticism of *Lurianic Kabbalah* and *Sabbatian Kabbalah*. This can be seen in the adoption by the Sabbatians of basic *Lurianic* concepts such as *Tikkun*, reincarnation, and general messianic expectations. According to Adrianus Van Selms:

“a relationship between two different documents may be postulated providing that there is agreement as regards time and place or on logical grounds” (Van Selms 1970-).¹²⁸

It can be shown that the three criteria of *time*, *place* and *logical grounds* “agree” in relative and broad *historical*, *cultural* and *theological* terms concerning *Lurianism* and Sabbatianism. Fifty-four years separated the Ari from Shabbatai Tzvi. Safed and Gaza are separated by 189 km, and their ideologies have much in common.

Secondly, there are many earlier rabbinic sources and accounts which corroborate Scholem's thesis. Even before the popularisation of *Lurianic Kabbalah* in 1630 when sixty *Lurianic* works were printed (Scholem 1973: 68), the printing presses of Cracow and Lublin were already producing large amounts of general *kabbalistic* material and had been doing so since the sixteenth century (Scholem 1973:77). This shows a real demand for mystical teachings, so much so, that even as early as 1570, the acclaimed R. Moses Isserles, known as the *Ramah*, criticised the “*ignorant crowd*” for dabbling so enthusiastically in *kabbalistic* matters:

“Many of the unlettered crowd jump at kabbalistic studies, for they are a lust to the eyes, especially the teachings of the later masters who expounded their doctrines clearly and in detail... Not only scholars try

¹²⁸ This was conveyed to me in a written communication from Professor J. F. (Hans) Janse van Rensburg: “*Adrianus Van Selms stated in my presence in the early seventies (1970-) that a relationship between two different documents may be postulated providing that there is agreement as regards time and place or on logical grounds.*” Received on 27 May, 2022.

to study it, but even ordinary householders, who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand and who walk in darkness unable to explain [even] a portion of the Pentateuch or a chapter of the same with Rashi's commentary, rush to the study of kabbalah."¹²⁹

A short while later R. Samuel Edeles (1555-1631), known as the *Maharsha*, expressed a similar sentiment:

"[I]t behoves us to protest against those who discourse on it in public."¹³⁰

If general *Kabbalah* was in such demand by the "*ignorant crowd*", then after 1630 when *Lurianic Kabbalah* became readily available, it is most likely that it similarly enjoyed widespread and popular attention.

In 1660, six years before the Sabbatian outburst, R. Yakov ben Moshe Temerles, a *kabbalist* who had been actively teaching in Volhynia for many decades, wrote the following about the spread of *Lurianic Kabbalah*:

"[The kabbalistic mysteries] have spread to all sides...Verily, all, great and small, are knowledgeable in the mysteries of the Lord. This is my comfort in my affliction: to behold the great desire and longing of our contemporaries for this hidden wisdom, and all - people and priests, small and great - desire to be admitted to the mystery of the Lord and live by it. Surely this signifies that our salvation is soon to come."¹³¹

If that was true of the general population, it was certainly true of Natan of Gaza, the great architect and ideologue of the Sabbatian movement. R. Isaiah Bassani¹³² (1673-1739) was one of the teachers of the highly respected mystic R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746) - who, incidentally, was also suspected of being a secret

¹²⁹ Isserles, *Torat haOlah*, III, ch. 4. Translation is by Scholem (1973:78).

¹³⁰ Edeles, Novellae to B. *Chagigah* 13a.

¹³¹ This extract is from R. Yakov Temerles' unpublished approbation for a *Kabbalistic* prayer book, which his student, R. Chaim Buchner intended to publish. However, the approbation was eventually printed by Buchner in his introduction to his *Or Chadash* (Amsterdam, 1672-75) (Scholem 1973:86).

¹³² Also known as Bassan.

Sabbatian (Danieli 2005:109) - and Bassani stated that he had studied the various Sabbatian theological works and described them as being:

“full of Lurianic Kabbalah, particularly in the Sefer haBeriah and in the Zemir Aritzim [both works are by Natan of Gaza]¹³³.”¹³⁴

Additionally, in a letter written by Natan of Gaza, we read:

“I studied the Torah in purity until I was twenty years old, and I carried out the great Tikkun [spiritual rectification]¹³⁵ which Isaac Luria prescribes for everyone who has committed great faults. Although, praise be to God, I have not advertently committed any sins, nevertheless I carried it out in case my soul be sullied from an earlier stage of transmigration. When I attained the age of twenty I began to study the book Zohar and some Lurianic writings.”¹³⁶

These early sources re-enforce Scholem’s insistence on the measure of *Lurianic* influence. While Goldish (2018:497) acknowledges the *Lurianic* nature of Natan of Gaza’s writings, he insists that not many even read them until the movement was proliferated, thus ruling out its function as a direct influence. However, my argument is that theological ideas in Judaism need just to ferment in the minds of a few in important positions of rabbinic leadership, for entire generations to be swayed even if they remain unaware of the provenance of those ideas.

For example: Were one to prove, empirically, that Chassidism emerged out of Sabbatianism, it would not even dent the mainstream worldview, which is that the two movements are totally antithetical - because the masses follow *leaders* and do not concern themselves with the *origins of ideas*. Similarly, were one to prove that *Kabbalah* came from Gnosticism, as per Scholem, it would have no bearing whatsoever on the mystics who only follow their *kabbalistic* teachers and have no interest in tracing the origins of Jewish mysticism.

¹³³ Parenthesis is mine.

¹³⁴ Ginzburg, *Osef iggerot*, letter 47, 103–105. Translation is by Danieli (2005:109).

¹³⁵ Parenthesis is mine.

¹³⁶ Columbia University Library MS X893-Z8, 1:20, fol. 16v-17r.

By the same token, even if we assume that Sabbatians may have been unaware of the *Lurianic* origins of their leaders' ideologies, and even if we assume that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was not yet a popular literature; it made no difference one way or the other to the people's desire to follow their leaders - and by extension to follow a form of *Lurianism* even while they may not have been aware of it. In other words, because 'Torah'¹³⁷ transmission is vertical, the people followed their respected rabbis. And by following their rabbis, they were inevitably following *Lurianic Kabbalah*. My hypothesis is further bolstered by the ubiquitous nature of messianism always being inspired by some form of mysticism as evidenced by the historical review earlier on in this study.

In this sense, I argue against the flow of much modern scholarship, that *Lurianic Kabbalah* with its messianic tensions, should be seen as a root cause of the Sabbatian movement, because, again, 'Torah' transmission is vertical, not horizontal. It is carried out in the 'rabbinic court' as opposed to the 'court of public opinion.' In a religiously orientated community, rabbinic authority trumps all social and democratic forces and influences. This notion is supported by study and observation of historical and contemporary rabbinic authority within Judaism, and even has an official designation, "*Da'at Torah*,"¹³⁸ although I use it here in its widest context. Thus, in my view, once the authority of the rabbinic circle of Natan of Gaza had been established, the fate of Sabbatianism was sealed, long before societal pressures and other influences could begin to flow their course.

As a rabbi, my investigation is not a secular historical study nor a sociological study but a theological study of links and determinants between historical Jewish messianic movements. My point of departure, based on pragmatic and observable evidence and behaviours, is that religious ideas which inevitably sublimate into religious movements, essentially originate from religious leadership. In Judaism, rabbinic leadership is by its very nature authoritative and is even perceived to be 'Godly'.

The notions of *Emunat Chachamim* ("faith" in the sages), or more recently *Daat Torah*, describe this very phenomenon where the rabbis' ideas and proclamations are

¹³⁷ The word Torah is used here in its broader sense, not referring to the Pentateuch, but rather conveying the general ethos of rabbinic Judaism and its constituent worldview.

¹³⁸ This expression is relatively new and perhaps anachronistic but the idea it represents still holds true in general (Blau 2015:8-28).

regarded as being expressions of the Torah, and by extension, of God Himself.¹³⁹ There is much truth in the *talmudic* notion that a *tzadik* (righteous individual) decrees and the Holy One blessed be He fulfils [the *tzadik*'s decree]:

אֲנִי מוֹשִׁל בָּאָדָם, מִי מוֹשִׁל בִּי — צַדִּיק, שְׂאֲנִי גֹזֵר גְּזֵרָה וּמְבַטְלָהּ

“[God is said to declare:] I rule over man, [but] who rules over Me? - The righteous person [as represented by the rabbi]. I issue a decree and the righteous person [is powerful enough to] nullify it.”¹⁴⁰

This *talmudic* statement underscores the experiential reality of the known power of the influence of the rabbi. Even God is said to be moved by the influence of the ‘*righteous person*.’ This idea is likely based on empirical observations of how the religious masses are persuaded and prejudiced by the theological pronouncements of supreme rabbinic leadership. This way, the transmission of Torah ideology cannot always be fully explained historically or sociologically because it is primarily driven vertically, from the top down. In the early stages, there is very little room for a horizontal or democratic process or even a natural evolution of ideas to occur.

The rabbinic process is comparable to a chain of command, as it were. One does not, therefore, require mass participation or a predominance of printed literature to perpetuate a religious ideology. All one needs are one or two sufficiently authoritative rabbinic leaders, even if they are active only within small circles, to sow the theological seeds and the ideology will root and spread in fertile ground. I would argue that the kernels of any new theological ideologies are to be found in the teachings of sometimes just one authoritative rabbinic individual. Only once this form of leadership is established and recognised, can history, sociology and even theology play out their important and inevitable roles. While the numbers of followers of a rabbi are sometimes open to dispute and exaggeration, the point is that the ideology gets established, verified and authorised in this initial stage, after which different ‘carriers’

¹³⁹ I use the masculine form “Himself” without intending to malign women. In fact, Jewish mystical tradition speaks of both masculine and feminine aspects (*Sefirot*) dispersed equally within the Godhead. It also speaks of the union between the masculine aspect of God known as *Kudshah Brich Hu*, which bonds with the feminine aspect which is known as *Shechintei* or *Shechinah*. The rationalists, however, take umbrage at this apparent disunity claiming it violates the pure monotheist character of God.

¹⁴⁰ b. *Moed Katan* 16b. Translation is mine.

and forces serve to spread the teachings to a wider audience. It is not just any rabbi, and like a perfect storm, the right leader combined with multiple factors have to be in place, but the process is initialised by the leader figure.

This guiding principle runs as a common thread throughout this study, and it determines what I tend to emphasise or move to the periphery. I take pains to name individual rabbis, not just to be conscientious but to emphasise that the idea is spearheaded specifically by rabbinic leadership with usually some quite considerable degree of standing within the community. The rabbi is not just a person of interest but rather the grand disseminator of ideology to the masses. Sometimes these rabbinically driven ideologies together with their consequences happen to coincide with those scholars who speak the language of history and other times with those who give voice to sociology, psychology and even normative or classic Jewish tradition.

Examples of veneration of rabbinic leaders by huge numbers of followers abound throughout Jewish history and continue to this day. Yehuda Liebes shows that this veneration was very much alive and flourished within Sabbatian circles at around 1666. R. Heshil Tzoref¹⁴¹ (1633-1700), for example, became an important Sabbatian leader once it was believed that:

“a spirit of prophecy rested upon him...It was then that he began to adopt the practices of a spiritual leader, much like the way the Chassidic masters were to act a hundred years later...[His] followers thronged to him, not just from his city [of Vilna] but from all corners of Poland, and he expounded for them upon the mysteries of the Torah and upon matters concerning Shabbatai Tzvi and the [messianic] redemption. He even took care of their personal needs and [appeared to] save them from evil decrees as well as finding a *tikkun* [spiritual remedy] for their souls...His influence and the admiration he commanded, was not limited to the period in which he lived but was still evident hundreds of years after his passing, due, particularly to his literary activity [which endured]” (Liebes 2017: 1-3).¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ R. Heshil Tzoref becomes an important figure in my future study of the period between Sabbatianism and Chassidism.

¹⁴² Translation is mine.

Based on the demonstrable notion of intense rabbinic veneration, I would reason, therefore, for a reopening of the currently unfashionable hypothesis of *Lurianic* influence on the Sabbatian movement as championed by Scholem, but with this modification of rabbinic veneration as a major component in the argument.

My supposition can be applied broadly to counter some of the challenges to Scholem. Moshe Idel challenges Scholem on the assumption that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was all that widespread because of the inherent difficulty in understanding its contents. He encourages scholars to seek out wider-ranging explanations for the rise of Sabbatianism (Idel, Fall 1993:79-104). However, my analysis of Idel's challenge that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was too complicated and therefore could not have been as widespread as Scholem suggests, is also based on contemporary observation of modern Jewish mystical approaches. Today, popular mystical Chassidic groups such as Chabad and Breslov, which are largely based on *Lurianic Kabbalah*, are easily conveying and teaching these concepts of spiritual exile and redemption to the lay population. *Kabbalistic* and theurgic ideas and practices are commonly even adopted *ab initio* by non-religious elements of Jewish society.¹⁴³ Not everyone might understand the intricate depths of the *Kabbalah* of the Ari, but many seem comfortably conscious of the basic structures and promises of modern mysticism, theurgy and messianism. By taking these observations and interpolating them back into the Jewish community of the seventeenth century - who would have been even more susceptible to these ideas - one can understand how *Lurianic Kabbalah* can indeed be considered a major conceptual influence on the general population.

Although the classical view of Scholem regarding the "supremacy" of *Lurianic* influence on the Sabbatian movement has been challenged by many scholars, another possibility to contemplate in his support, is that with the advent of *Lurianic Kabbalah*, however widely one wishes to view its dissemination, the foot was in the door to corrode the hitherto traditional authority of the community structures. I would suggest that the previous well-defined *halachic* and ecclesiastic authority of community rabbis would have been compromised by the growing popularity of *Lurianic Kabbalah* and its

¹⁴³ Although beyond the scope of this discussion, these would include the adoption by the laity of mystical beliefs that a *mezuza* on the doorposts is for protection, that *tehillim* (psalms), *challah* (*Shabbat* bread) bakes and *segulot* (amulets) can heal the sick and so forth. The rationalist (Maimonidean) counterarguments to these matters are very often unknown to both the secular and even the popular religious camps.

constituent mysticism, which placed authority more on *kabbalists* and less on non-mystical *halachists*. As leadership lines became blurred, space would be created for other allied mystical ideas - most notably Sabbatian ideas - to be introduced as well. The world was seen to have pivoted spiritually since the time of the Ari - and particularly from 1630 when *Lurianic* teachings were publicised. It was believed that there was a shift in the cosmic balance, and from that moment on, there was to be a renewed emphasis on redemptive elements within Judaism. *Lurianic Kabbalah* posed a challenge to *Halacha*.

Taking all this into account, I would argue in favour of Scholem that *Lurianic Kabbalah* was a major influence on Sabbatianism, but for a different reason. It didn't matter so much whether the *masses* were, or were not, studying *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Even were one to ignore or dispute Scholem's numerous examples of the relative popularity of *Lurianic Kabbalah* during the seventeenth century and the iconic status it enjoyed (and continues to enjoy) as the new *Kabbalah* superseding *Zoharic Kabbalah* - there is still a scholarly consensus that at least the main leadership was influenced by *Lurianic Kabbalah*. The point was that a *critical mass* had been formed early on by the right core of authoritative rabbis who supported Natan of Gaza, and by extension, Shabbatai Tzvi. The *critical mass* was not necessarily by *numbers*¹⁴⁴ but by something profoundly more influential: *rabbinic authority*. And by the power and prestige vested in that critical mass of authority, *Lurianic* ideas and messianic tensions were both directly and subliminally transferred, vertically, to the masses. Thus, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the people were drawn into that *Lurianic* sphere of influence as well.

By interpreting or modifying Scholem like this - which I maintain is both realistic and based on standard models of transmission of rabbinic authority - one can retain the classical position of Scholem, and *Lurianic Kabbalah* can once again be regarded as a major influence on the Sabbatian movement.

This re-construal of Scholem also resonates with the common thread of *mystical messianism* (with mysticism always being the cause of messianism) running throughout the entire narrative of this study. This is supported by Zeitlin:

¹⁴⁴ Although the numbers of rabbis who supported Shabbatai Tzvi, as we have seen, were not insignificant.

“They arrived at this [messianic]¹⁴⁵ belief...through their engrossment in the studies of mysticism and Kabbala” (Zeitlin 1979:100).

At the same time, the contributions from modern scholarship, with their honing of historical, theological and sociological detail, can remain standing side by side as important parallel causes or influences on the Sabbatian movement without having to negate Scholem.

5.10 The *Kabbalistic* work *Gali Razaya* as an influence on Sabbatianism

Leaving aside the debate on *Lurianic Kabbalah*, we must mention other mystical works that may also have contributed to theological influences that gave rise to Sabbatian eschatology. One such work was *Gali Razaya* or *Revealed Mysteries*, attributed (with uncertainty) to the Moroccan-born R. Avraham haLevi Beruchim who became an important member of the circle of Safed *Kabbalists*. It was he who introduced many ascetic and devotional practices which became the hallmark of the mystical Safed circle. The work contains no overt connections to *Lurianic* nor *Cordoverian Kabbalah*, so it stands out as an independent entity. Importantly, *Gali Razaya* became popular and was widely disseminated in written form as well as in oral teaching in the era just before the appearance of the Sabbatian movement (Scholem 1973:61).

The work deals with the ‘reason’ why so many biblical personalities had relationships with “*strange women*” who would normally have been considered out of bounds. These include the relationships such as Judah and Tamar, Josef and Potiphar’s wife, Joshua and Rahab, and Boaz and Ruth. Contextually, it must be borne in mind while reading the following excerpt, that the later Sabbatians were intentionally promiscuous, as part of their theology was to sin intentionally, to repent and thereby, they claimed, elevate the sin from its evil domicile. According to *Gali Razaya*:

“Whenever God wants to raise a king or hero to wreak vengeance on the heathen, it is necessary that there be some kind of relationship or rapport between the gentile nations and the Jewish king, so that Scripture should be fulfilled [Isa. 49:17]: ‘Thy destroyers and they that make thee waste shall go forth from thee’..., for whoever is born in

¹⁴⁵ Parenthesis is mine.

order to humble the foes of Israel must have some measure of communion with the 'left side'."¹⁴⁶

The 'left side' is a reference to the 'feminine' side (as it symbolically 'receives' emanation from the 'male,' or 'right' side) of the *Kabbalistic* model of the cosmic Tree of Life. The 'left side' is also the source of *Kelipah* (husks of evil):

"All offspring of the 'pure side' have a part in the 'impure side,' through the females..."¹⁴⁷

Then we read an articulation of this mystical idea that leaves room for much (mis)interpretation:

"Know for sure that the 'other side' has been permitted to contract marriages between some of its women and the heroes and saints of Israel. The souls of these women are descended from pious gentiles, and the pious gentiles thereby acquire a share in the world to come because [in this way] they mingle with Israel. Therefore, whenever the 'other side' sends its impure forces to oppress Israel by destroying its religion, it is necessary that an Israelite king or hero, who has some contact with the 'impure side' through the daughter of a strange god [a gentile woman], step out against them."¹⁴⁸

Scholem (1973:62) sums this up as follows:

"More than a hundred years before the Sabbatian movement we find a philosophy of history based on a mystical psychology exhibiting striking similarities to some of the doctrines of later Sabbatians..."

The theology expressed in *Gali Razaya* is related to the doctrine known as "*holy deceit*" which is paralleled in *Lurianic Kabbalah*, and which the Sabbatians were very familiar with. R. Chaim Vital wrote that:

¹⁴⁶*Gali Razaya*, 1812, fol. 23a.

¹⁴⁷*Gali Razaya*, 1812, fol. 6d.

¹⁴⁸*Gali Razaya*, 1812, fol.29. Translation is by Scholem (1973:62).

“[W]hen a soul is exceedingly great [holy], it is impossible to save it from qelippah¹⁴⁹ except by ruse and cunning...In my case too, the evil powers did not mind the matter [of my soul coming into this world] because they thought that I was already lost, but God snatched me from them...They thought it would be to their advantage [to use me for their purposes], but I became their enemy.”¹⁵⁰

Thus, sometimes the birth of a ‘great soul’ has to come about as a result of deceit or even a sinful union and a *Tikkun* or *rectification* is thereby allowed to occur. This notion of ‘*holy deceit*’ was later to be seized upon by the Sabbatians and even used in the first instance, to bring about a state of redemption. This general *kabbalistic* notion of ‘*holy deceit*’ is perhaps another contributing factor that served as an influence on the Sabbatian movement. It ties in with my hypothesis that intense mysticism (of any genre) usually precedes some eschatological event.

5.11 Synthesis

In this chapter, we analysed various possible causes of, and influences on, the Sabbatian movement. Attention was drawn to the scholarly debate surrounding these matters. I expressed my support for the classical view of Scholem that *Lurianism* was a primary influencing factor because of its mystical ideology and implied messianic tensions. *Lurianic Kabbalah* was shown to have become the foundational theology of Natan of Gaza and the rabbis who endorsed him. Despite the validity of much of post-Scholem scholarship, I take the theological view that because of the vertical process of applying the authority of the rabbis, all that was needed was a critical mass of authoritative rabbinic leadership that essentially endorsed Natan of Gaza’s *Lurianic* leanings, and the Sabbatian movement was birthed. This way *Lurianic Kabbalah*, both directly (in terms of the leadership) and indirectly (in terms of the masses), must be seen as an important contributing influence.

Because many of the core messianic and mystical ideas we have discussed so far, continue to persist and to permeate facets of contemporary Jewish eschatology, it is important to show a counterweight to these extreme but popular forms of

¹⁴⁹Kelipah or husks of evil.

¹⁵⁰Chaim Vital, *Sha’ar haGilgulim*, fol. 65a. Translation is by Scholem (1973:64).

messianism. We now examine a very different approach to a more 'rational'¹⁵¹ Messiah as perceived by Maimonides, who had a fundamentally different perspective on the notion of a Messiah and a messianic age.

¹⁵¹ The term 'rational' is used here in its broader sense within the context of religion and theology. It is intended to describe a 'theological rationalism' which opposes the acute supernaturalism, omnisignificance, theosophy and theurgy of *Kabbalah* and mysticism (see section 1.1).

CHAPTER 6:

MAIMONIDES' NATURAL MESSIAH VS THE TOSAFISTS' SUPERNATURAL MESSIAH

6.1 Introduction

Being a theological study, it is important to show that mystical messianism is not a universal and uncontested Jewish tenet. Maimonides (1135¹⁵²-1204), the father of Jewish rationalism, presents a firm anti-mystical approach to the messianic idea. Maimonides speaks about a natural and gradual evolution of humanity to a non-supernatural messianic era. According to Maimonides, as history unfolds, humankind slowly develops in the direction of a more perfect state of awareness, to the extent that:

“later Jewish history represents a higher stage of spiritual development than Biblical history” (Rosner 1982:19).

To highlight the differences between the mystical and rationalist approaches to the idea of a Messiah, we must examine two diverse schools of Jewish thought which emerged simultaneously during the period of the *Tosafists* – namely, the schools of the *Tosafists* and Maimonides.

6.2 The mystical Tosafists

The *ba'alei haTosafot*, or *Tosafists*, are the school of rabbis who contributed to the intricate analytical commentaries on the *Talmud*. On a typical *talmudic* folio, Rashi's commentary is presented on one side, the main Aramaic *talmudic* text is in the centre, and *Tosafot* is on the opposite side.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Some accounts have his birth at 1138. Online source: [Maimonides \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#). Retrieved 30 June 2022.

¹⁵³ Rashi and *Tosafot* are both in Hebrew. Rashi's commentary is the work of one man Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak (1040-1105), while *Tosafot* (or more accurately the *Ba'alei haTosafot*, or *Tosafist* Masters) is the work of whole schools created by Rashi's sons-in-law and grandchildren.

The *Tosafist* period - spawned by Rashi (1040-1105) - lasted about two hundred years, encompassing the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and ended with R. Meir of Rothenburg (d. 1293). The term *Tosafists* generally refers to those rabbis of the early period of the *Rishonim* (1038-1500) who lived specifically in *Ashkenaz* (northern France and Germany).

Although Maimonides lived during that same period (1135-1204), he is not technically regarded as a *Tosafist* because he lived in Egypt and not in *Ashkenaz*. Also, because the *Tosafists*, besides being astute jurists, were predominantly mystics (Kanarfogel 2001:147-169),¹⁵⁴ Maimonides the rationalist could not be grouped with the *Tosafists*.

Kanarfogel explains, that we only know part of the *Tosafists*' story from their published and printed legal works - yet their unpublished manuscripts reveal so much more about who they actually were. These unpublished manuscripts, some only recently discovered, reveal a very different and mystical side of their authors, and shatter the perception of *Tosafists* as only analytical *talmudic* commentators and jurists.

According to Kanarfogel's research on these unpublished manuscripts, the *Tosafists* emerge as profound mystics - influenced by the mystical school of the *Chasidei Ashkenaz*, or *German Pietists* (Kanarfogel 2010-). Kanarfogel shows how the *Tosafists* had a "tendency to interpret aggadah¹⁵⁵ literally." This means that they took the oftentimes fanciful *midrashim* more literally than allegorically. This mystical "tendency" led to *Tosafists* like the thirteenth-century R. Moshe Taku describing the messianic era as follows:

"[W]e will then become familiar with and experience Ruach haKodesh [the Spirit of Holiness], the fire falling [from Heaven] on the sacrifices, and the closeness of the Holy Presence in the pillar of fire and the cloud, just as it had been during the Exodus from Egypt. After a time, with the intensification of our redemption and enlightenment, [we will

¹⁵⁴ Ephraim Kanarfogel is a specialist in the period of the *Tosafists* and particularly in their unpublished (mystical) manuscripts.

¹⁵⁵ *Aggada* refers to the expansive narratives and non-legal exegetical texts of the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.

see] the resurrection of the dead, and the descent of the [Third]¹⁵⁶
Temple.”¹⁵⁷

R. Moshe Taku continues by claiming that during a certain stage of the messianic era:

“...the righteous people...will be given special angel-like forms...and
have no need for food or drink...a state of existence that will continue
into Olam haBah [the World to Come].”¹⁵⁸

It must be pointed out that the notion of the Third Temple miraculously descending
from Heaven in messianic times is of *kabbalistic* origin.

Here are two more examples of the miraculous appearance of the Third
Temple:

According to the ninth-century *Midrash Tanchuma*, God informs the Jewish people
that:

“[I]n the future I will build it, and I will not destroy it.”¹⁵⁹

Similarly, according to another ninth-century *midrashic* source, the *Pesikta Rabati*:

“[T]he first Temple which was built by flesh and blood was destroyed
by enemies, whereas the future Temple which will be built by the Holy
One....will never be destroyed.”¹⁶⁰

Accordingly, the Third Temple will not be built by human hands, as were the previous
two Temples, but rather by God himself. Although there are other texts which suggest
it will be built naturally by human hands, the mystical *Tosafists* only reference these
earlier types of selected mystical sources which speak about the miraculous

¹⁵⁶ Translation and parentheses are Kanarfogel's.

¹⁵⁷ *Ketav Tamim*, ed. R. Kirchheim in *Otzar Nechmad*, ed. I. Blumenfeld, 1860, 89.

¹⁵⁸ *Ketav Tamim*, *ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵⁹ *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Parshat Noach*, section 13. It is difficult to precisely date the *Midrash Tanchuma*, as cultural references within the text as well as other early medieval writings suggest it may have been edited around the ninth-century CE, although it does contain sections that are most likely centuries older.

¹⁶⁰ *Pesikta Rabati* Ch 29. This *midrashic* work was composed in the Holy Land around the year 845 CE.

construction of the Third Temple and appear to ignore the other sources dealing with a human and natural building process.

“As far as I can tell, there are no medieval Ashkenazic Rabbinic authorities who suggest the third Temple will be built by human hands, despite the fact that there are a number of sources which record and support this view” (Kanarfogel 2001:162).

Another example of the mystical *Tosafists* cherry-picking and manipulating their supportive texts can be seen in a *Tosefot* commentary¹⁶¹ which brings a source - that the Third Temple will be built from fire and will fall from Heaven - from the biblical verse *מִקִּדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי בּוֹנֶנּוּ יָדָיִךְ*, “*God’s Temple will be established by Your hand*.”¹⁶² This source appears to be a manipulation because according to the *Talmud*,¹⁶³ this verse refers to the building of the Second Temple which was built by *righteous people* who were considered tantamount to *God’s hand*. It does not refer to the Third Temple.

A further example can be seen in what appears to be some confusion in Rashi’s commentary. In his *talmudic* commentary,¹⁶⁴ Rashi quotes the abovementioned biblical verse, “*God’s Temple will be established by Your hand*”, and agrees that it refers to the first two Temples:

אבל מקדש העתיד שאנו מצפין בנוי ומשוכלל הוא יגלה ויבא משמים

“But the future Temple which we await...will come from heaven.”¹⁶⁵

On the other hand, Rashi’s biblical commentary¹⁶⁶ contradicts this by suggesting that the Third Temple will be built by human hands (Levy 1931:89). Clearly, different sources are available, but the *Tosafists*, by selecting only mystical references to *God* building the Third Temple - are firm in their resolve to perpetuate the notion of the miraculous nature of the messianic era.

¹⁶¹ b. *Shavuot* 15b.

¹⁶² Exodus 15:17.

¹⁶³ b. *Ketuvot* 5a.

¹⁶⁴ b. *Rosh haShana* 30a, b. *Sukkah* 41a.

¹⁶⁵ Rashi on b. *Sukka* 41a.

¹⁶⁶ Ezekiel 43:11 (in some editions).

The *Tosafists* also promoted the mystical notion of there being two messiahs, namely, *Mashiach ben Yosef*, followed by the ‘main’ Messiah, *Mashiach ben David*:

“These Tosafot texts assume, as a foregone conclusion, that the arrival of...[*Mashiach ben Yosef*] is part of the redemptive process, despite the minimal reference to this messiah in the Talmud itself” (Kanarfogel 2001:162).

Again, we see mystical *Tosafist* amplification in their selection of and emphasis on only certain earlier texts.

6.3 Maimonides and his rationalist conception of the messianic era

It is at this juncture, that we now turn to an analysis of a theological Maimonidean counterweight to the notion of a supernatural Messiah, to show that messianic movements were the proclivity of the mystics and not the rationalists.

Maimonides was born in 1135 which makes it most likely that he would have heard about the events surrounding the Baghdadi messianic claimant, David Alro'i (see section 2.3.7). We know that Maimonides entered into correspondence with Baghdadi Jews. We also know that Shmuel ben Ali, the Gaon of Baghdad and the teacher of David Alro'i, publicly accused Rambam of discarding a most fundamental precept within Judaism, namely the notion of the *revival of the dead*. The Gaon was the most outspoken critic of Maimonides during his lifetime. This prompted Maimonides, in 1191, to write his *Ma'amar Techiyat haMeitim* (Essay on the Revival of the Dead), to defend himself against this open charge of heresy (Rosner 1982:15-16). Maimonides was certainly motivated to react against the widespread fervour of messianism and to write his *Iggeret Teiman*, (Letter to Yemen), in 1173, where he refers to a Yemenite messianic claimant who had also created theological angst in the south.

Maimonides was also criticized for his view of a more natural, as opposed to the popularly anticipated dramatic and supernatural perception of the messianic era, which must have stemmed from tumultuous events of messianic claimants such as these. Maimonides did not take this attack sitting down. In the *Essay*, Maimonides writes scathingly about his adversary the Gaon of Baghdad:

נשלח אלינו זה המאמר אשר חיברו זה הגאון ובלשוננו, וראינו כל הדרשות וההגדות אשר קבצן. וידוע אצל כל אדם: שאין המבקש מן החכמים ספור הדרשות והמעשים ההם הנפלאים בלשונם, כמו שידרשום הנשים בבית האבל קצתן לקצתן, אבל המבקש מהם: לבאר עניניהם עד שיאות למשכל, או יקרבו אליו

“The compilation by this Gaon [Ali of Baghdad] in his own words, was sent to us, and we saw all the homilies and legends which he had composed. All [intelligent] people know that what is required from wise [teachers] is not homilies and tales [presented] in wondrous idioms – like those told by women in their plain language in mourner’s houses. Rather, what is required from [wise teachers] is intelligent elucidation [of concepts], or at least something close to that.”¹⁶⁷

Maimonides the rationalist was positioning himself squarely against the mystical 'homilies and curious tales' which were prevalent in Baghdad at that time. Maimonides adopted a completely different view of the Messiah and the messianic era:

“[A]ll analyses concur that the non-miraculous, naturalistic character of the messianic age is fundamental to Maimonides’ presentation. During the messianic era, the workings of the world will continue to be guided solely by natural law...” (Kanarfogel 2001:149).

Maimonides bases himself¹⁶⁸ on the opinion expressed in the *Talmud* by the *Amora* known as Shmuel of Nehardea (165-257 CE):

אין בין העולם הזה לימות המשיח אלא שעבוד מלכיות בלבד

“There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah other than the [elimination of] oppression by other nations.”¹⁶⁹

The Sefaria commentary to that *talmudic* text adds:

¹⁶⁷ Maimonides, *Ma’amar Techiyat haMeitim*, Rabinowitz, Tel Aviv, 1950, ch. 3, 359. Translation is mine.

¹⁶⁸ *Mishna Torah, Hilchot Teshuva* 9:2.

¹⁶⁹ b. *Shabbat* 63a.

“However, in other respects, the world will remain as it is, as it is written: “Because the poor will not cease from within the land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Society will not change, and wars will continue to be waged.”¹⁷⁰

In other words, according to Shmuel, during the messianic era, there will be no wonders and miracles. Everything will be as it is now, except that Jews will no longer be subjugated by the nations. Based on this view of Shmuel, Maimonides writes:

אל יעלה על הלב שבימות המשיח יבטל דבר ממנהגו של עולם או יהיה שם חידוש
במעשה בראשית אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג

“Do not think that during the messianic era, the world will no longer function naturally, or that there will be any change in the fundamentals of creation. Rather, the world will run according to its natural order, as our sages have said...[and, the abovementioned quote from Shmuel follows].”¹⁷¹

It must, however, be pointed out that Maimonides only quotes Shmuel, although there are other dissenting views expressed in the *Talmud*¹⁷² which do indicate a more miraculous end of days. Maimonides’ rationalist views were never to gain popular acceptance among the masses, and two and a half centuries later, Maimonides is severely criticised for his messianic views by R. Don Yitzchak Abravanel (1437-1508). In his *Yeshuot Meshicho*,¹⁷³ Abravanel challenges Maimonides’ citing of Shmuel as his source, because although Shmuel’s view is mentioned six times in the *Talmud*, on four of those occasions the *Talmud* rejects or minimises his position. Furthermore,

¹⁷⁰ Sefaria, b. *Shabbat* 63a:12. There are some who interpret Shmuel to only be referring to the *initial* process of the redemption, allowing for a more mystical process to follow, but Maimonides does not take that view.

¹⁷¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim*, 12:1-2.

¹⁷² See b. *Berachot* 34b. “And Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: All the prophets only prophesied *with regard to the change in world order in the end of days* with regard to the days of the Messiah. However, with regard to the World-to-Come, *which exists on a higher level, it is stated*: “No eye has seen it, God, aside from You.” And the *Gemara* notes that this statement disagrees with the opinion of Shmuel, as Shmuel said: The only *difference between this world and the days of the Messiah* is with regard to servitude to foreign kingdoms alone” (Sefaria).

¹⁷³ *Yeshuot Meshicho*, Bnei Brak 1993, 157-159.

Abravanel also criticises Maimonides for not mentioning Shmuel by name but instead simply refers to the '*opinion of the Sages*' as if this was the main *talmudic* position. Nevertheless, Maimonides maintains:

אל יעלה על דעתך שהמלך המשיח צריך לעשות אותות ומופתים ומחדש דברים
בעולם או מחיה מתים וכו'

“Do not think that the king messiah has to perform miracles and wonders, or change any order in the world, or [even] revive the dead, etc.”¹⁷⁴

Maimonides adds that the Messiah himself will build the Third Temple – a view which flies in the face of the mystical notion that the Temple will be built by God and descend from Heaven. Maimonides maintains that the verse in Isaiah which refers to the wolf lying down with the lamb is not to be taken literally but rather allegorically as alluding to a state of universal peace. Maimonides makes absolutely no reference to the concept of *Mashiach ben Yosef* – this again is in stark contrast to the view of the *Tosafists*. Sharot (1982:46) makes the point that:

“The medieval rationalist view of the messianic age was similar to the future hopes of the Jewish people of an earlier age. During the biblical period the Israelites had concrete social and political hopes, rooted in history, rather than expectations of a cosmic drama.”

The *Tosafists* based themselves largely on mystical sources which according to *Halacha*, or *practical law*, are not generally regarded as solid enough to determine practical outcomes. It is a well-established principle (although one often overlooked and debated) that practical *Halacha* is not to be determined from *Midrash* or *Kabbalah* (Goldish 1994:160).

¹⁷⁴ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Malachim* 11:3. These are Maimonides' views in *Mishneh Torah*. However, in his *Iggeret Teiman*, he does indicate that some miracles may occur to validate the Messiah's authenticity. This may have been his view at the time of his writing the *Iggeret Teiman*, or he may have tried to comfort the Yemenite community in the aftermath of false messianic claims. The *Iggeret Teiman* was written in 1173/4, the *Mishneh Torah* was written between 1170 and 1180, and the *Ma'amar Techiyat haMeitim* was written in 1191.

On the other hand, Maimonides' idea of a non-mystical Messiah was sharply criticised by rabbis like Abravanel and it is difficult to pick holes in the technical accuracy of his criticism that Maimonides based himself on a minority opinion in the Babylonian Talmud. It is apparent, therefore, that both the mystical and rationalist schools seem to have chosen their support texts very selectively. Nevertheless, what we ultimately do have are two fundamentally different defining approaches to the essential nature of the messianic age in general and the Messiah in particular.

6.4 Maimonides and his Thirteen Principles of Faith

Before we leave Maimonides and his view on the Messiah, I want to draw attention to the twelfth declaration of faith - from Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith - which is inaccurately recorded in almost every *siddur* (prayer book):

"I believe with faith that is complete in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, with all that I await him [certain] that he will come."¹⁷⁵

The Thirteen Principles of Faith¹⁷⁶ originated in Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishna*¹⁷⁷, in the Introduction to his *Perek Chelek*,¹⁷⁸ which was written between 1155 and 1168, when Maimonides was very young. Maimonides' *Perek Chelek* was originally composed in Judeo-Arabic, or Arabic in Hebrew characters, and towards the end of a discussion in his Introduction, he enumerated Thirteen Principles which Jews are required to believe in.¹⁷⁹ To date, there are about six different Hebrew

¹⁷⁵ Siddur for Weekdays, The Schottenstein Edition, 2002, Mesora Publishing, New York, 245.

¹⁷⁶ A summary of the Thirteen Principles follows: 1) Belief in the existence of the Creator, who is the Primary Cause of all existence. 2) Belief in the oneness of God. 3) Belief in God's incorporeality. 4) Belief in God's eternity. 5) Worship to be directed only to God. 6) God communicates with man through prophecy. 7) Moses is the master prophet. 8) The Torah is of divine origin. 9) The Torah is immutable. 10) Belief in God's omniscience and providence. 11) Belief in reward and punishment. 12) Belief in the Messiah. 13) Belief in the resurrection of the dead. (Online source: [The Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith - Essentials \(chabad.org\)](http://www.chabad.org). Retrieved 26 April 2022.)

¹⁷⁷ B. *Sanhedrin*, Chapter 10. In some editions Chapter 11.

¹⁷⁸ It is called *Perek Chelek* after the opening words of the *Mishna* which reads *Kol Yisrael yeish lahem chelek la Olam haBah*, or *All Israel have a share (chelek) in the world to come*.

¹⁷⁹ There is some discussion as to whether Maimonides intended all his Thirteen Principles to be of equal importance. These hinge upon which of the Principles were intended for the masses as 'necessary beliefs' and which were for the intellectual elites as 'true beliefs'.

translations¹⁸⁰ of the original Arabic text. This, naturally, creates problems in terms of wording, definitions and translations of key concepts which are crucial to defining exactly what we are supposed to believe in.

The ubiquitous opening formula of all thirteen principles in the popular versions, *Ani Ma'amin be'emunah shleima* ("I believe with perfect faith in..."), is noticeably absent from the original Arabic text. According to *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, it is "reminiscent of early Christian creeds" and "has no basis in the Arabic original". It was only in a later Hebrew translation of the Arabic (by Shlomo ben Yosef ibn Yakov) that expressions like *le ha'amin* (to believe) were first interpolated or inserted into the text.

A popular summary of the thirteen principles by an unknown author began to surface later in what become known as the *Yigdal* hymn which is found in the prayer book. There are variant versions of *Ani Ma'amin* in *Sefardi* and *Ashkenazi Nuschaot* (prayer rites). In the popular *Ashkenazi* version of *Ani Ma'amim* as printed in the *siddur*, the text of Principal no. 12 reads:

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה בביאת המשיח ואף על פי שיתמהמה עם כל זה אחכה לו
בכל יום שיבא:

"I believe with perfect faith in the coming of Mashiach, and although he may tarry, nevertheless, I wait every day for him to come."

However, the *Sefardi* version simply states:

ושיבוא מלך המשיח

"I believe...that the King Messiah will come."

No mention is made of awaiting the Messiah on a *daily basis*!¹⁸¹ In Maimonides' original writing in *Perek Chelek*, there is also no mention of awaiting "every day for him to come". Maimonides' original text simply reads in rather general terms: "If he delays, wait for him" (Habbakuk 2:3), but there is no mention of anything close to waiting

¹⁸⁰ R. Shlomo ben Yosef ibn Yakov of Saragossa; R. Shmuel Ibn Tibbon (1150-1230); R. Yehuda alHarizi (1165-1225); Abarvanel in his *Rosh Amanah* (1437-1508); R. Yosef Kapach (1917-2000); and R. Yitzchak Shilat (b. 1946).

¹⁸¹ I did notice, though, that in one particular *Sefaradic* edition, the words *bimheirah be'yameinu*, or *speedily in our days* was somehow inserted after the sentence above.

constantly “*each day that passes.*” Somehow the anonymous author of *Ani Ma’amin* slipped in the phrase, “*I wait every day for him to come,*” - and ever since then, it has become part of the popular narrative with no basis whatsoever from its source text in *Perek Chelek* nor its mother text in *Habbakuk*.

Marc Shapiro (1993:187-242) shows how Torah scholars throughout the ages do not always agree with the ‘definitive’ Thirteen Principles of Maimonides. One of his observations is that the Twelfth Principal has had opposition from a much earlier view recorded in the *Talmud* itself. R. Hillel the *Amora* (not to be confused with the famous Hillel the *Tanna*) maintains:

אין להם משיח לישראל שכבר אכלוהו בימי חזקיה

“There is no Messiah coming for the Jewish People, as they already ate from him [i.e., as all the prophecies relating to the Messiah were already fulfilled] during the days of Hezekiah.”¹⁸²

Because of the obvious subversive nature of this text, many commentators reworked R. Hillel’s statement. According to Rashi, R. Hillel only denies a personal Messiah, but still believes there will be a messianic era:

אלא הקב"ה ימלוד בעצמו ויגאלם לבדו

“God Himself...will redeem them [Israel]”.

According to Abravanel “*the Messiah would not come by virtue of Israel’s meriting him*” (Kellner 1982:135-39). However, R. Hillel’s view still stands, as recorded in the *Talmud*, and must have been taken on face value as the next line in the *Talmud* quotes R. Yosef saying: “*May the Master forgive Rabbi Hillel [for making such a remark].*” Shapiro (2004:136), however, argues that R. Hillel was a “minor scholar” and for this reason his view is not a “viable option” for representing traditional Jewish thought. On the other hand, Halivni (1991:94-6) claims that:

“Issues of doctrine, in contrast [to halacha], cannot be definitively settled merely through the consensus suggested by a vote of the

¹⁸² b. *Sanhedrin* 99a.

majority nor by the judgement rendered by the passage of history...Quantitative superiority can play no role in the qualitative realm of speculation.”

According to some, Maimonides made a distinction between certain of his Principles which were deemed *crucial* or *primary*, as opposed to others which were granted as *concessions to the masses*. The problem is that we are not quite certain which are which. Maimonides writes that there are two categories of ‘faith’ - *true faith* and *necessary faith*. A *true faith* allows one to attempt to understand something as factually and intellectually as possible, while a *necessary faith* is a mistaken belief that either fulfils a social purpose, encourages obedience to the Torah or it simply alleviates one’s fears. The latter category is often found to be effective for those, who Maimonides referred to rather ingloriously as, the *ignorant masses* (Guide for the Perplexed 3:28). Shapiro explains this Maimonidean idea in simple terms:

“It is ‘necessary’ for the masses to believe God is angry if they disobey Him in order for them to keep their behavior in line. In addition, it is ‘necessary’ for the masses to believe that God responds instantly to the prayer of someone wronged or deceived. For them to believe otherwise, would damage their faith in prayer...Maimonides was aware that it is not entirely ‘true’...[however,]¹⁸³ through them, people are kept from straying from the proper path” (Shapiro 1993:19-20).

Maimonides believed in a natural Messiah and a natural progression toward a normative messianic age. He also included believing in the Messiah as one of his Principles, the unanimous acceptance of which, has been the subject of debate and interpretation. Indeed, despite its popularity, Maimonides' Thirteen Principles as a dogma has met with great opposition from the rabbinic world:

¹⁸³ Parenthesis is mine.

“[E]ven a cursory examination of Jewish literature shows that Maimonides' principles were never regarded as the last word in Jewish theology” (Shapiro 1993:I).¹⁸⁴

In a similar vein, Eric Lawee writes:

“Maimonides had laid special stress on belief in the coming of the Messiah but not all of his successors shared this view of messianic belief's doctrinal centrality” (Lawee 1996:256).

6.5 Synthesis

With the less-known Maimonidean option of a rationalist messianic belief within Judaism, we have closed a theological circle. It is important to have shown that mysticism and messianism which have been the focus of most of this study, is not the only expression of Judaic thought. While it may have been, and still is perceived to be the *de facto* mien of popular Judaism, there is a theological counterweight. There are two streams within classical (and by extension Orthodox¹⁸⁵) Judaism: Mysticism and Rationalism.

It is vital to have demonstrated that a ‘rationalist option’ exists for Jewish messianism specifically in our times when the impression is still created that our age, which is experiencing a resurgence of messianism, is a unique messianic moment, the likes of which have never been experienced before. I bring a contemporary commentary which is significant to this last point. In an article entitled ‘*Sometimes*

¹⁸⁴ If I understand Shapiro correctly, on the one hand he considers R. Hillel to be a very minor rabbinic player, so his radical statement of Israel having no Messiah has no real bearing on Jewish theology and is not a huge obstacle to Maimonides' Twelfth Principle. On the other hand, the dogma and general reception of the Thirteen Principles is, in any case, rather fluid and not considered completely or unanimously binding.

¹⁸⁵ In the Enlightenment setting of the early nineteenth century, the German-Jews were split between reformers and traditionalists, each attributing the origins of the term ‘orthodox’ to the other. They both agreed, strangely, that the term ‘orthodox’ was inappropriate to describe the traditional Jews. In fact, the reformers referred to their traditional brethren as ‘*der sogenannten Orthodoxen*’ (the so-called Orthodox). In 1854, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, a spokesperson for the (more modern) traditionalists said that “*it is not ‘orthodox’ Jews who first introduced the term ‘orthodoxy’ into Judaism,*” instead “*it was the modern ‘progressive’ Jews who first applied the epithet to their ‘old style’ backward brethren to distinguish them in a derogatory sense.*” R. Hirsch was more in favour of the label ‘*gesetztreu*’ (true to the law) for the traditionalists (see Blutinger 2007:310).

Mashiach is not the Solution’, published, surprisingly, in the ultra-Orthodox *Mishpacha Magazine*, R. Aaron Lopiansky, the *Rosh HaYeshiva* of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington informs us that during the Corona pandemic, he received a call from a former student of his, teaching at a religious girls school, saying:

“[T]he girls want to know if they should get their tambourines ready to celebrate and welcome Mashiach.”

Lopiansky responds:

“We need to teach our children history. And that history needs to include much more than dry names and dates and stories of gedolim¹⁸⁶...My first concern is our deep ignorance of Jewish history - or any history for that matter. It is simply mind-boggling to hear people state that “Never has anything like this happened before. This [Corona]¹⁸⁷ virus must be heralding the coming of Mashiach!” ...The second source of distress is the current Mashiach fervor. Klal Yisrael has had many ‘Mashiach is here’ moments. Read the excellent ‘Mashichei Hasheker U’misnagdeihem’ (all 700 pages)¹⁸⁸ of R. Binyomin Hamburger, and you will get a feel for how numerous and how destructive these movements were...”¹⁸⁹

I mention this as a reminder that our discourse, although rooted in centuries of theological history, has just as much relevance today in 2022 as ever. Through the investigation of historic messianism one better understands contemporary and no doubt future messianism as well, all the while being mindful of a theologically equal

¹⁸⁶ *Gedolim* are the highly venerated rabbis who generally assume their status and authority on the controversial basis of *Da’at Torah* (see Yuter 1993:140-157 and Blau 2015:8-28). I used the earlier basic formulations of this concept to support my defence of Scholem, when I argued that a critical mass of rabbinic authority can override all other factors in determining a practical (*Halachic*) and theological (*Hashkafic*) outcome; and that this has direct bearing on the style and content of Torah (used here in its broader context) transmission.

¹⁸⁷ Parenthesis is mine.

¹⁸⁸ My copy of the 1989 *Machon Moreshet Ashkenaz* edition has 347 pages.

¹⁸⁹ Online source: [Sometimes Mashiach Is Not the Solution – Mishpacha Magazine](#). Retrieved 04 April 2022.

but opposite - though marginalised - Maimonidean rationalist approach and option to messianism.

Finally, having noted the existence of Rationalist Judaism and established the fundamental, yet often overlooked differences in *weltanschauung* between the two approaches of mysticism and rationalism, we are now in a position to summarise, synthesise and conclude this study.

CHAPTER 7:

SYNTHESIS

7.1 Motivation and relevance

I was motivated to do this study, not just to understand the history of Jewish messianism and Sabbatianism but to understand where these ideas came from and how they developed and transformed. Every theology has a history and that history must have a direct bearing on the nature of the theology itself.

I was also motivated by the common thread running throughout the historical timeline of messianism - that the fount from which messianism sprouts is always some form of earlier mysticism. This remains relevant to this day where messianism is again a dominant and urgent theology in the Jewish world which seems to have largely forgotten the facts, let alone lessons of its messianic history.

7.2 Research problem

Recent scholarship has provided an array of conflicting possible causes of the Sabbatian movement which are in sharp contention with the classical view of Gershom Scholem and his *Lurianic* premise. With so much disharmony surrounding such a weighty and influential movement, I felt it important to attempt some closure to this debate by revisiting the matter; and because I am convinced of the role mysticism plays in messianism, I needed to go back to Scholem and his *Lurianic* premise but with some modification to include as much of contemporary scholarship as possible.

7.3 Aims and objectives

In this study I set out to achieve four aims:

- To examine (as per Chapter 2) the influences, behavioural patterns and consequences of Jewish messianism, messianic claimants and their movements, from 500 BCE up to the seventeenth century; paying particular attention to Shabbatai Tzvi and the establishment of the Sabbatian movement.

- To examine (as per Chapters 3, 4 and 5) the causes, influences and rise of Sabbatian ideologies and practices, including a scholarly debate over this contentious issue and attempt a more harmonious approach.
- To show (as per Chapter 6) that, although the Jewish world has largely adopted a mystical worldview, there is a corresponding theologically rationalist approach as championed by Maimonides.
- To show (in a further study) that a residual underground Sabbatian influence remained after the movement had been outlawed and that it was embedded enough to provide some potential for further perpetuation.

7.4 Methodology

The research methodology in this literature study has been descriptive, evaluative, explanative and textual. *Historical backgrounds*, as well as theological and ideological systems have been *presented* but they have also been *evaluated* and *interpreted* to relate to the continuum of Jewish history and thought, including a contemporary perspective.

The study has been *explanative* and *textual* in terms of including theological considerations to show their influences on empirical history. Earlier mystical texts were *evaluated* to suggest possible influences on *Sabbatian Kabbalah* and both traditional and academic sources have been consulted to reflect a wider and more critical worldview.

7.5 Research results

Chapter 1 introduced the overall style, structure and methodology of this study. It described the motivation, research problem, hypothesis, and highlighted the difference between Jewish mysticism and rationalism, and prepares the reader for an excursion into one of the least-known yet perhaps most powerful movements in Jewish history.

Chapter 2 dealt with early Jewish messianism from 500 BCE, and messianic claimants from 132 CE up until just before the period of seventeenth-century Shabbatai Tzvi. It also dealt with the rise of messianic study circles after the expulsion from Spain, heralding a new form of mystical messianism. Overall, four conclusions were drawn from this chapter: 1) Some form of mysticism usually preceded and served

as a catalyst for the nascent messianic movements; 2) Predictable and repetitive patterns emerged from the ubiquitous nature of the various mystical movements and their leaders; 3) A lingering of the ideology persisted even after the leaders had died; and 4) A religious fallout and theological crisis of faith endured in their aftermath.

Chapter 3 dealt with *Lurianic Kabbalah* and showed how difficult it is to speak of this mysticism as a homogenous unit of thought due to the multiplicity of students of R. Yitzchak Luria who all claimed to represent his pure teachings. This was not unique to *Lurianism* as disparate factions similarly emerged with the advent of Sabbatianism. The dissemination of mystical theology always seems to lend itself to such divergence, which, coupled with messianic urgency creates complicated theological climates. It was shown how *Lurianic Kabbalah* in all its shades, contributed to the pivotal idea of restorative *Tikkun* which gave the mystical followers the belief that they held the power to effect redemption.

Chapter 4 focused on the biography of Shabbatai Tzvi, the influence of his ‘prophet’ and ideologue Natan of Gaza, and the development of the mystical Sabbatian movement with its distinctive emerging behavioural patterns and ideas. The chapter showed how once established, the Sabbatian movement attracted followers from across the Jewish spectrum; and particularly after the movement was forced underground, lines became blurred and it was difficult to distinguish between a mainstream religious Jew and a secret Sabbatian. Coupled with the notion of religious terrorism and the persecution of non-believers in Shabbatai Tzvi, this period became fertile ground for mutated influences to be disguised as traditional theology.

Chapter 5 looked at the causes of the Sabbatian movement. Scholarship in the post-Scholem era moved away from Scholem’s classical view of *Lurianic* mysticism as a primary influence on the movement. Six opposing views were analysed and I argued (see section 5.9) that by introducing the idea of vertical transfer of rabbinic authority, *Lurianic Kabbalah* can still be seen *the* major influence, while simultaneously allowing for most of the additional findings from the dissenting scholarly camps to retain their relevance. This sustains my hypothesis that intense mysticism is the incubator of radical messianism.

Chapter 6 demonstrated a Maimonidean rationalist counterweight to this study, most of which was situated within the confines of mystical theology. It showed that mysticism, although the popularist choice, is not the only option within Jewish theology even with regard to the ‘mystical’ notion of messianism.

7.6 Hypothesis

In keeping with my hypothesis, the common theme throughout this study bears testimony to the historical observation that *mysticism generally precedes messianism*. The more intense the mysticism the more intense the messianism. This appears more pronounced from the second millennium and becomes even more overt as the *Kabbalistic* movements develop. Hence my qualified defence of Scholem that Sabbatianism was essentially the product of a fermented *Lurianic* mystical doctrine.

7.7 Proposal for further study

Based on my hypothesis that mysticism begets messianism, I propose that this principle be extended further to the next major movement to appear on the scene of Jewish history, the Chassidic movement. *Lurianic Kabbalah* with its messianic redemption¹⁹⁰ also featured as an important component of this new movement. In keeping with the idea that there is always a relatively direct link between each major successive mystical movement in Judaism, in a future study I shall project this hypothesis to show a possible influence of Sabbatianism on Chassidism. Esotericism always spills over into the public domain (Scholem 1979:69) making the paper trail of these influences relatively easy to trace.

The Chassidic movement was birthed just decades later in an environment saturated with secret Sabbatians and I shall investigate the influence this clandestine group had on the new movement. The numbers of secret or crypto-Sabbatians after 1677, however, will never fully be known. According to Holzer (2019:n.p.):

“[a]t first, the nation was almost completely united in its faith [in Shabbatai Tzvi]¹⁹¹...After the conversion, around half had left the faith,

¹⁹⁰ Contra Citron (see section 5.4).

¹⁹¹ Parenthesis is mine.

and after the death of Sabbatai Zevi in 1677 it seems that barely one tenth remained resolved.”

I will focus on this important but neglected group of hidden Sabbatians as many of them were powerful and influential rabbinic personalities who bridged the short period between the Sabbatian and Chassidic movements. Did the early Chassidic *Nistarim*, or *hidden mystics* have any connection with the hidden Sabbatians? It will be worthwhile determining to what extent the Chassidic movement was also subject to the patterns, tensions, influences, behaviours and theologies explored in this study.

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