

# Shabbatai Sevi in the Context of 17th Century Europe

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## I. Kabbalah and the Renaissance

Pre-modern Europe saw a resurgence of interest in ancient magic. Renaissance men such as Pico della Mirandola and Ficino sought to reconcile Christian theology with ‘ancient’ Egyptian wisdom thought to have been preserved in texts copied down by Hermes – the Greek equivalent to the Egyptian god of wisdom – Thoth. It was commonly believed that these Hermetic texts predated Moses and contained a more universal form of knowledge. In reality, they were neo-platonic texts, many of which dated to the time of ‘Julian the Apostate’ or ‘Julian the Philosopher’ (361-363 AD), as you prefer.

Central to the neo-Platonic worldview was a hierarchy of being in which “what was ‘up’ physically was also morally good.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the stars, whose paths were predictable, were considered to be superior to the moon, which wandered through the sky. Fredrikson notes that, “Below the moon, matter grew thick and recalcitrant. Flesh and blood – the constitutive elements of animas and thus of human bodies – were relegated to the earth, which stood at the universe’s center, where the heaviest matter had sunk.”<sup>2</sup> The source of all being was an impersonal Soul or Mind. Everything in existence was an emanation from this ‘unknowable’ abstraction. Emanation, as opposed to creation, gave rise to a pantheistic view of the Divine that

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews : A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). 54

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 55

offered a different motivation for moral conduct. The goal of human existence was to raise oneself above mundane existence and to unite with our indescribable Source. Although there is no such thing as a 'Gnostic Confession', if there were it would probably sound something like the following passage from the Gospel of Phillip: "Ignorance is slavery. Knowledge is Freedom. Seeking the Truth, we discover its seeds within us. If we unite with It, It will receive us in the Primordial Consciousness." <sup>3</sup>

The discovery of 'ancient' Egyptian wisdom in the Renaissance period gave rise to a renewed interest in magic. Ficino stated that he had once thought that statues could be made to speak through demons, following Thomas Aquinas, but now he realized, following Mercurius and Plotinus, that "all can be easily conciliated in the soul of the world for it generates and moves the forms of natural things through certain seminal reasons infused with its divinity. Which reasons he calls god for they are not separated from the Ideas in the supreme mind."<sup>4</sup> This is why the ancients created images of their gods, Ficino explained. When matter "is exposed to superior things... immediately it suffers a supernal influence through that most powerful agent, of marvelous force and life, which is everywhere present... as a mirror reflects a face, or Echo the sound of a voice."<sup>5</sup>

Ficino is echoing Plotinus, the most important of the Neo-Platonists. Plotinus explained that statues and shrines were a means of drawing down divine influences to earth.

"Those ancient sages, who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that,

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<sup>3</sup> "The Gospel of Phillip," The Gnostic Society Library, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Frances A. Yates, "Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition," (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964). 67

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 67 – The Picatrix, a Sabeian work of the 12<sup>th</sup> century states, "Magic consists in guiding or controlling the influx of spiritus into material."

though this Soul (of the world) is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated... every particular thing is the image within matter of Reason-Principle which itself images a pre-material Reason-Principle: thus every particular entity is linked to that Divine Being in whose likeness it is made...”<sup>6</sup>

Morality was imbued with magical significance within neo-Platonism and the Christian and Jewish gnostic sects influenced by Platonic thought. For example, the Manichaens, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian / Zoroastrian / gnostic sect, saw the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness.<sup>7</sup> Light was the highest and purest substance and evil was caused by light particles trapped by the darkness of this world. A person could release the light from its entrapment in darkness by living ascetic lives free from the domination of the sensual world.<sup>8</sup> Obedience was not based on notions of a just God, or a final judgment, but on the premise that man can actually change the cosmos through his actions.

To summarize, the renaissance marked a renewed interest in magic underpinned by a neo-Platonic understanding of the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon was not confined to Christian philosophers and theologians but was also behind the increasing popularity of kabbalah among learned Jewish circles in the same time period.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 65

<sup>7</sup> Although the Manicheans differs from Neo Platonism in their belief that everything that exists is a material substance, they incorporated Plato's hierarchy of being into their system.

<sup>8</sup> Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews : A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*. 54

<sup>9</sup> It is ironic that the ideas Augustine had opposed so vigorously centuries earlier, and seemingly defeated, were revived by Renaissance men under the mistaken identification of 'ancient Egyptian wisdom'.

## II. Kabbalah

Kabbalah is a form of Jewish mysticism that emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Spain and Southern France. It is built on a massive compendium of mystical writings called the Zohar – a book that stands next to the Bible and the Talmud as a “source of faith and tradition.”<sup>10</sup> The primary goal of Kabbalah is mystical communion with God.<sup>11</sup> Two of its central features are: 1) the introduction into the godhead of a series of ten divine powers that became known as ‘sefirot’, 2) the introduction of the feminine into the godhead. These two aspects will be discussed in further detail below:

- 1) Sefirot: According to the kabbalist’s worldview, the world is a series of emanations that originate from *En Sof* – ‘the Infinite’. These emanations are called 'sefirot', each of which represents a certain attribute of God. Scholem writes that, “as the stream of the divine emanation proceeds, it becomes progressively less spiritual and refined, more material and coarse; thus all the worlds come into being by the descent of the divine power from the hidden Root of Roots [*En Sof*].”<sup>12</sup> The material world is “the garments only 'that clothe the hidden light of *En-Sof*.’”<sup>13</sup>
- 2) Male / Female Aspects: Tishby notes that, “The attribution of male / female aspects within the godhead and the use of sexual language are common themes in the Zohar –

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<sup>10</sup> “The belief in the book Zohar as a traditional work standing beside the Bible and the Talmud as the three pillars of Jewish faith and ancient tradition has become an article of faith in modern orthodox Judasim.” (Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah : A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Scholem notes that, “Kabbalah is not unified by doctrine but its various manifestations share common characteristics: the search for a deeper and secret meaning to texts, the attribution of magic power to ceremonial practices, an understanding of the cosmic order as a series of emanations that cascade from pure, spiritual being to material existence.”

<sup>12</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai SEvi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*, Revised and augmented translation ed., The Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation (London,: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973). 28

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 28

often drawing on the language of the Song of Songs.”<sup>14</sup> The two divine female aspects to the godhead are *Binah* (“understanding”) and *Malkhut* (“kingdom”). *Binah* is the source of divine emanations, while *Malkhut* is the source of the creative force that gave rise to the earth. Both are divine wombs that unite with their male counterparts within the *spherot*, *Hokhmah* and *Tiferet* respectively. The union of *Binah* and *Hokhmah* is represented as the love of mother and father in which there is never separation whereas the union of *Malkhut* and *Tiferet* is represent as the union of lovers who feel the strains of separation and the strong desire to reunite. The first union gave rise to the hidden world while the second gave rise to the revealed world.<sup>15</sup>

As with any system that seeks to make sense of the world, it is necessary to explain ‘what went wrong’? Isaac Luria, the Safed kabbalist, answered this question by positing a complex process that involves two stages of creation: 1) the 'withdrawing (*simsum*) of En Sof' and, 2) the 'breaking of the vessels'. The first stage in creation was the process of *simsum* in which 'the Infinite' is said to have withdrawn from within himself, thereby creating a void. The tug and pull between the emanation of En Sof and retraction of En Sof is what brought the cosmos into existence. Scholem writes,

"The rhythm of the living God, like that of organic forms including man, can be described as a double process of inhaling and exhaling. Jewish mystics viewed God primarily as "living" that is, as a kind of perfect organism whose unity is neither motionless nor static. The vitality of God reveals itself in the organic analogy. In fact,

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat Ha-Zohar*. in loc.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. – The explanation of male and female principles has been adapted from Tishby.

God is the supernal root and origin of all the organic patterns that are manifest in the lower world. The double rhythm of regression and egression is at the root of everything that exists."<sup>16</sup>

Emanation from the 'root of roots' resulted in the Primordial Man – an androgynous mystical symbol that encompasses the whole cosmos. Scholem further describes the process of emanation:

“As the light of En Sof coursed through the body of the cosmic man [Primordial Man], it cascaded through vessels that might be pictured, in the words of Moses Cordeovero, as vessels of colored glass that gave various hues to the clear light of En Sof. There was an aspect to this light that was described as 'stern judgment' that proved to be too 'hard' for the vessels to contain. When the light emanated from these vessels, it caused them to break. The broken fragments of the vessels fell into the void created by the retraction of En Sof. These broken fragments became the domain of unharmonious forces.”<sup>17</sup>

In summary, the process of coming into being is described as the emanation of light from En Sof. The light is caught in a series of cascading 'vessels' that correspond to members of the body of the Cosmic Man. But the vessels could not withstand the light and shattered. Fragments of the vessels fell into the void where they formed a lower, chaotic realm (*qelipah*). When En Sof withdrew (*simsun*), remnants of the Divine Light (*reshimu*) remained trapped in the lower realm – the 'dark side' or *qelipah*.

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<sup>16</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai ŠEvi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*. 31

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 34

The 'dark side' was further strengthened when Adam fell. It was believed that all the souls of mankind were contained in Adam. Thus, when Adam sinned, these 'soul sparks' fell into the lower realm where they empowered the 'dark side'. The goal of redemption is to rescue these divine sparks 'trapped' in the 'dark side' since the breaking of the 'vessels' along with "the holy souls that have been slaves of Belial since Adam sinned."<sup>18</sup> This task belongs to each generation and to each individual. Souls may be trapped in different realms, and in different levels of each realm. The souls of those that have abandoned the 'task of redemption', (ie. the Gentiles) belong to the realm of the *quelipah* whereas the souls of Israel belong to the realm of holiness. It was therefore important to understand the 'root of the soul' in order to know the proper steps for its restoration. Moses Zacuto wrote, "It behooves every man to inquire diligently and to know the root of his soul, so as to be able to perfect it and to restore its origin, which is the essence of its being. The more a man perfects himself, the closer he comes to his self."<sup>19</sup>

### **III. Lurianic Kabbalah**

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain gave rise to new a new form of kabbalah that emerged from Safed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this small city in the upper Galilee, Moses Cordovo and Isaac Luria adapted traditional kabbalah and infused it with messianic fervor. Traditional kabbalah had focused on questions of origins but 'Lurianic kabbalah' looked forward to redemption.

Luria taught that the breaking of the vessels that resulted from the initial emanation of 'divine light' had been necessary in order for 'the dross to be removed from the godhead'. Now, it was a

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<sup>18</sup> Powers of evil are described as the fingers of God's left hand – no final separation between God and Satan. (Dan, *Kabbalah : A Very Short Introduction*.)

<sup>19</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai SEvi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*. 42

matter of restoring original harmony to the godhead. The restoration (*tiquun*) of the world from the effects of the 'fall' was given to man, who was uniquely suited for this task because his body was made after the pattern of the Primordial man. The first man to be given this task was Adam, who, "by an act of the will, could choose to commune with God and thus separate good from evil in the lowest realms of the world. The cosmic exile would have come to an end, with Adam acting as the redeemer who restored the world to its unity."<sup>20</sup> But Adam failed and rather than fixing the cosmic world, he sank deeper into the 'dark side'. Adam had originally been given a 'body of light' but his failure resulted in the loss of his spiritual body and its replacement with a body of 'gross matter' – like our own. Adams task was given to his descendants, and ultimately to Israel. But Israel also failed, and was exiled.

In Luria's system, the exile of Israel took on cosmic significance. It became a symbol of the separation of the feminine aspect of god, the Shekinah, from her husband Tifereth – the sixth emanation in the godhead. At the final redemption, "the Shekinah will be restored to perpetual union with her husband."<sup>21</sup> The obedience and piety of the Jewish people was no longer simply a matter of obedience to tradition but a means of reunifying the godhead and thereby restoring the cosmos. Scholem writes, "The exile of the "lower" terrestrial Congregation of Israel in the world of history is thus merely a reflection of the exile of the supernal Israel, that is, the Shekinah."<sup>22</sup> The Kabbalist no longer looked upon the Exile as punishment for sin, or a test of faith, but as a mission. Scholem notes that, "the purpose of this mission was to raise the scattered, holy sparks and to liberate the divine light and the holy souls from the realm of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 38

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. in loc.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 42



*qelippah*, represented on the terrestrial and historical plan by tyranny and oppression."<sup>23</sup>

According to this view, the law became something mystical, in which every religious commandment contained “a world of inner significances.”<sup>24</sup> It is therefore understandable why the new kabbalah that issued from Safed was accompanied by a great variety of new ceremonial rituals intended to free divine sparks from the clutches of the *qelipah* (the dark side). Obedience to the commandments took on a very strong theurgical aspect so that, “the deed above is aroused by the deed below. If a man performs a deed below correctly, a power is aroused correctly in the world above.”<sup>25</sup> Just as obedience to the commandments was infused with cosmic significance, so also was the breaking of the commandment. Thus Tishby writes, “When sins multiply in the world the supernal divine sources stop their flow of influence and the ‘dark side’ of the *qualipot* (*sitra ahra*) gains power in the lower world.”<sup>26</sup>

The greatest warrior in the cosmic realm is the Messiah. He was conceived as a particularly great soul that originated, rather counter-intuitively, in the deepest regions of the ‘dark side’. The suffering Servant of Isaiah becomes the messiah who struggles, “amid great suffering and anguish, to free himself from their [*the qelipoth*’s] embrace and to “redeem” them. But the *qelipoth* hold him fast, seeking to possess him and prevent him from fulfilling his messianic task.”<sup>27</sup> It was believed that, “In every generation He creates one perfectly righteous man,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 45

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 50

<sup>25</sup> Tishby, *Mishnat Ha-Zohar*. 1160 - In relation to theurgy, Liebes writes, “In the Zohar, the death of Rabbi Akiba and his friends raises the *mayin nukbin*, the liquid that enables the mating of the male and female elements in the divine.” (ibid. 25) Liebes also notes, “The Zohar found a hint in the following verse Genesis 6:18 - But with thee I will erect my covenant”; according to the Zohar, the covenant refers to the male sexual organ, and the verse expresses the idea that the love of the righteous for the Shekinah arouses God's jealousy, and He is thus moved to mate with her.” (Liebes, 59)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*. 302

worthy - like Moses - on whom Shekinah rests, provided that also his generation merits it.”<sup>28</sup>

The key is that the generation must merit the coming of the messiah. Faith becomes a central aspect of the messianic redemptions as. Joseph Dan writes, “Each Jew should give the messiah spiritual force in the form of faith in him, and the messiah will then focus the powers of the whole people to achieve the final victory over the forces of evil.”<sup>29</sup>

Scholem argues that the mystical / messianic aspirations of Lurianic kabbalah gained broad acceptance among Jewish communities from Yemen to Amsterdam and set the stage for the widespread reception of Shabbatai Sevi as the Messiah.

#### **IV. Shabbatei Sevi**

Shabbatai Sevi is an enigmatic figure. In his younger years, he was known as an ascetic. He would fast from one Sabbath to the next, cloistering himself in his room during the week. Occasionally he would spend a few days “in the mountains and caves of the Judean desert where, as he told Laniado in Aleppo, he would hear voices from the graves.”<sup>30</sup> Shabbatai Sevi was given to long spells of depression interrupted by spells of illumination in which his personal magnetism was such that even Turkish officials seem to have been enamored by him. In his elated state, Shabbatai was known for his ‘strange actions’ that betrayed an antinomian tendency, the most noteworthy of which was Shabbatai’s pronunciation of the Divine name ‘yvh’ and the change of the fast on the ninth of Av (the traditional date for the destruction of the 1st and 2nd temples) into a feast. Shabbatai’s strange and perhaps morally questionable behavior was taken as evidence of the Messiah’s struggle to overcome the dark side. Thus one of Shabbatai Sevi’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. in loc.

<sup>29</sup> Dan, *Kabbalah : A Very Short Introduction*. in loc

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*.

followers, Nathan of Gaza, sought to explain Shabbatai's sufferings in a letter to an unknown recipient, "There [in the Raya Mehemna] it is said, "Thou art wounded because of the guilt of the people and I suffer great pain as it is said 'and they made his grave with the wicked', and they do not recognize me and I am accounted in their eyes like the stinking carcass of a dog."<sup>31</sup>

Shabbatai Sevi would have remained a fringe figure if it were not for the arrival of Nathan of Gaza. It was Nathan of Gaza that supplied Sevi with the conviction of his calling and the content of his theology. Nathan of Gaza was well respected in his own right as a seer who had the ability to look into the souls of men and tell them the proper actions they needed to accomplish to atone for their sins and free their souls from the clutches of the dark side. In a revealing letter brought by envoys and addressed to Nathan of Gaza, we gain some insight into Nathan of Gaza's status. In the letter, Nathan of Gaza is addressed as "the man of God, who beholds visions of the Almighty as in a bright glass, and the light is with him, he that bringeth good tidings and announceth peace, praising God for vouchsafing unto us a voice and speech and giving us a true prophet whose inspiration is true and we confess and believe that his word is faithful and his promise steadfast... Wherefore we of the congregation of Casale have bestirred ourselves to dispatch on behalf of the whole community two envoys...."<sup>32</sup> We understand from this letter that Nathan of Gaza was given the status of a prophet.

The importance of prophecy to the movement is highlighted by the fact that the date of the beginning of the Shabbatai movement is sometimes counted from "the first year of the renewal

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 745

<sup>32</sup> The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered (Num 24:16 ESV); How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness (Isa 52:7a ESV); Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*.

of prophecy and the kingdom.”<sup>33</sup> Ecstatic prophecy accompanied the rising popularity of Shabbatai Sevi. De la Croix recounts an example of ecstatic prophecy that preceded the arrival of Sabbatai Sevi in Constantinople: “They brought a young man from Burssa, called Moses Suriel, a great cabbalist... the young man was seized by a prophetic furor at the sound of musical instruments. He fell to the ground foaming at his mouth, and a voice issued from him with such rapidity that the scribes could hardly follow... He began every day at the same hour, which attracted many spectators and turned many people to Sabbatai Sevi, for all his utterances ended with the words: “Repent ye, for our salvation is at hand, and ye shall behold Sabbatai Sevi, the Messiah, the son of David and our righteous Redeemer, crowned on earth even as we have seen him crowned in heaven...”<sup>34</sup> Another witness provides similar testimony: “I beheld a young scholar...who uttered biblical verses while in a complete swoon and almost without heartbeat. Then he said: Sabbatai Sevi is our King and savior, the Teacher of Righteousness, crowned with the supreme crown. And thou shalt reign over the whole earth and over the host of heaven... and he would repeat verses, ...prostrating himself and alternately crying and laughing... When he recovers he remembers nothing...”<sup>35</sup> R. Isaac Lamprontin said that, “in Ferrar three people died as a result of this fast [an uninterrupted fast of six days and six night] at the time of the pseudo-messiah Sabbatai Sevi...”<sup>36</sup>

Word about Shabbatai Sevi did not spread via apostles that were sent out, but rather emissaries almost always came to Shabbatai Sevi. Surprisingly, reports among Christians also served to spread the news. Serrarius, for example, took a keen interest in the news of a Jewish Messiah and believed that it may have been a sign of the end and the return of Jesus. Indeed, the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 465

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 437

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 491

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 492

excitement generated by Shabbatai Sevi even elicited a reaction from Spinoza who stated, "I am inclined to believe that with the opportunity afforded, since human affairs are notoriously changeable, they may again recover their kingdom, and God elect them to Himself anew."<sup>37</sup>

The glad tidings of Shabbatai Sevi were accompanied by a powerful call to repentance. Leyb b. Ozer recalled, "There was a repentance, the like of which has never been since the world was created and unto this day... in Turkey, and from there it spread to all the dispersions of Israel... and it is impossible to describe it and it will not be believed, though it be told."<sup>38</sup> Ozer went on to describe the ascetic practices adopted by great numbers of people. Strict fasts were observed; penitents engaged in flagellations and adopted other ascetic practices such as rolling in the snow for 15 minutes. Merchants neglected their business and sold all of their property at half price in order to prepare for the journey to the Holy Land. Wealthy youths married orphan girls believing that "the son of David will not come before the souls in the *guf* [celestial storehouse of souls] are disposed of."<sup>39</sup> Further evidence for the tremendous religious fervor that took root in those days is found in a legal responsum given by R. Jacob b. Boton that states that if a witness to a marriage contract lived before the year 426, his word should be held admissible in a court of law, "For at that time everyone repented of his evil ways and returned with his whole heart, confessing their sins and undergoing flagellation for every trespass and practicing innumerable fast and mortification... and this repentance took place...wherever Jews dwelt..."<sup>40</sup>

The messianic furor that swept over the Jewish world created severe social problems, even outside out of the Jewish community. Poverty increased as people quit working so that both Constantinople and Aleppo were forced to created special funds to deal with the poor. There

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 544

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. in loc.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 473

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 473

were some who opposed the movement but they were in the minority. Sasportas mentions that in “every community there had been some rabbis who supported the movement and others who kept quiet “for fear of the rabble.”<sup>41</sup> Scholem notes, however, that in many places the movement “did not begin from the bottom, among the lower classes, for we find a goodly number of rabbis and lay leaders heading the revival.”<sup>42</sup>

Shabbatai Sevi was arrested by the Turkish authorities upon his arrival at Constantinople. It is not known to what degree this was the result of Jewish authorities who feared the repercussions of a failed revolt. Remarkably, Shabbatai was not killed and even seemed to have gained some favor with the Turkish authorities. Shabbatai also remained popular with the people, evidence for which is the enormous bribe of 100,000 reales<sup>43</sup> that was raised by Shabbatai’s followers to secure his removal to more comfortable quarters. Shabbatai was released from prison, perhaps as a way of securing Jewish support for the Turkish expedition to Crete.

Shabbatai would eventually get into trouble with the Turkish authorities and was forced to convert to Islam. His conversion was met with disbelief and shock. Although Shabbatai Sevi retained a significant following, others became disillusioned. Scholem suggests that the apostasy of Shabbatai Sevi may have paved the way for the ‘haskalah’ – or Jewish secular enlightenment that emerged in the early modern period.

## **V. Why did the Sabbatai movement spread?**

A number of reasons may be cited for the popularity of Shabbatai Sevi. The following have been summarized from Scholem’s treatment of the question:

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 476

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 478

<sup>43</sup> 4 reales = one gold ducat = one florin = .11 troy ounces = 143 USD

1. It originated in the Holy Land. At this time, the Jewish community of Palestine was extremely poor. Those that lived there were drawn to the ascetic lifestyle and were usually supported by foreign aid. In Lurianic Kaballah – this poverty was a purer form of spirituality.
2. It was accompanied by prophecy. The date of the beginning of the Shabbatai movement is sometimes counted from “in the first year of the renewal of prophecy and the kingdom”<sup>44</sup>
3. Traditionalist could accept the movement without analyzing the details. The details contained “the seeds of the crisis that were hidden in the very nature of the messianic awakening.”<sup>45</sup> The call for repentance was perceived as a good. “Rabbis had to debate within their consciences not only the question of their own ‘faith’ or unbelief, but whether they were justified in obstructing a great penitential awakening.”<sup>46</sup> For example R. Samuel Aboab of Venice, did not issue an opinion on Shabbatai Sevi.
4. Lurianic kabbalah had already paved the way for the messianic brand of mysticism expounded by Shabbatai Sevi and Nathan of Gaza.

This last point is worth considering further for it provided the theological underpinning for the claims of Shabbatai Sevi.

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<sup>44</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*. 465

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 467

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 467

## VI. Kabbalah, Gnosticism, and Hebrew Monotheism

In his book on the religion of Israel, Yehezkel Kauffman argues that one of the defining features of paganism is the belief that gods are a part of a transcendent order. Kaufmann writes, "The outcome of the pagan view that the gods originate in the world stuff is to remove any fixed bounds between them and the world of men and other creatures. For there is a common womb out of which both the gods and all the phenomena of nature have sprung. This confusion of realms manifests itself both in mythology and the cult. Thus, we find no clear-cut distinction between worship of nature and worship of the gods of nature."<sup>47</sup> One of Kauffman's central claims is that the distinguishing idea of Jewish monotheism is the concept of a God who is distinct from the natural world – an idea that is at odds with the pan-en-theistic system of kabbalah.

Gershom Scholem, one of the first to undertake the massive task of systematically analyzing kabbalah, would probably have disagreed with Kaufmann.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Kaufmann, Scholem argued that Gnosticism could be found at the "heart of Jewish monotheism."<sup>49</sup> In this context, Gnosticism is defined by Scholem as, "the ascent of the soul from the alien earth back to its home in the fullness (pleroma) of God's glory."<sup>50</sup> Biale notes that, before Scholem, historians of Judaism such as Graetz had typically treated Gnosticism as a foreign idea that had attempted to infiltrate Judaism and was defeated. Jewish mystical books that looked Gnostic were placed by Graetz in

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<sup>47</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel, Volume I* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977). 35

<sup>48</sup> Both where scholars in Jerusalem in the years leading up to 1948 and afterward and both taught at the Hebrew University.

<sup>49</sup> David Biale, *Gershom Scholem : Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). 51

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 53



the early Medieval period - distant from the "glorious age of the Talmud."<sup>51</sup> Scholem resisted this tendency, arguing that Jewish Gnosticism did not borrow from Christian Gnostics, as was typically assumed, but instead, "Jews provided the Christians with material for Gnosticism."<sup>52</sup> Erwin Goodenough also argued that, "normative legal Judaism in late antiquity is a distortion perpetrated by medieval rabbis and modern scholars: Judaism in the Greco-Roman period was actually much more pluralistic."<sup>53</sup> This picture has been confirmed by the discovery of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century synagogue mosaic floors and tombs that incorporate Greco-Roman religious symbols. Liebes argues that many of the developments found in the Zohar can be traced back to earlier Hebrew texts and to the Talmud. For example, the *Sefir Bahir* describes God's attributes as "quasi mechanical entities" in which each entity acts "in its own destined way and bringing either good or evil."<sup>54</sup> Of particular note is the separation of the attributes of justice and mercy – and their association with the left and right hands of God.

“And what is Satan? It teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, has an attribute named evil to the North [to the left] of the Holy One, blessed be He... And what is this attribute? It is the shape of the hand, with many extensions, and all are named evil, evil.... And all of man's evil inclination comes from there. And why was it given to the left? Because he may not rule anywhere except in the North...”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 53 -

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. in loc.

<sup>53</sup> Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. in loc. - Sefir Bahir first emerges in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but probably dates back to an earlier period.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 59

The separation of the attributes of God into different entities may be traced to certain passages in the Talmud where God is portrayed as being at war with himself.<sup>56</sup>

"Therein lie His mighty deeds, that He subdues His inclination, that He extends long suffering to the wicked. Yoma 69b

R. Johanan says in the name of R. Jose...hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers. What does he pray?-R. Zutra b. Tobbi said in the name of Rab: "May it be My will that My mercy may subdue My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice." Berakhot 7a

This led to a mechanistic view of God and a theurgical view of prayer. This may be seen from the following passage:

"R. Eliezer said, Why are the prayers of the righteous likened to a pitchfork? To teach thee that just as the pitchfork turns the corn from place to place in the barn, so the prayers of the righteous turn the mind of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of cruelty to that of compassion."<sup>57</sup>

Another kabbalistic concept that is first elaborated in the rabbinic texts is the identification of the presence of God (Shekinah) with the community of Israel. As long as the community of Israel is in exile, there is an aspect of God that is likewise separated from the godhead and in need of restoration.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 53

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 53

The redemption of Israel will come together with the redemption of God's right hand which is bound as long as Israel is enslaved. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 17:5

A. Judah b. Idi said in the name of R. Johanan: The Shekhina made ten journeys, as it stated: from the ark cover to the cherub, and from one cherub to another, and from the cherub to the threshold, and from the threshold to the court, and from the court to the altar, and from the altar to the roof, and from the roof to the wall, and from the wall to the town, and from the town to the mountain, and from the mountain to the wilderness, and from the wilderness it ascended to its own abode, as it says (Hosea 5:15) "I will go and return to my place"...Correspondingly the Sanhedrin wandered to ten places of banishment...<sup>58</sup> (Ros Hashana 31a)

These texts cited above suggest that some of the ideas in the Zohar are already hinted at in the Talmud. Thus Scholem argues that the Merkebah legends in the Talmud were in fact Gnostic and that "Jewish mystics interpreted the vision of the throne in Ezekiel as the *pleroma* of the Gnostic myth and were therefore able to translate the dualistic Gnostic terminology into biblical images that could be harmonized with monotheism."<sup>59</sup> However, according to Scholem, after the close of the Talmudic period, Jewish mysticism did not resurface until the 12th century, when neo-platonic philosophy gave new life to Jewish Gnosticism.

Biale explains the process of synthesis:

"Rather than the world being the result of emanations from One Absolute Abstract as in neo-Platonism, the emanations became sefirot in the system of Kabbalah. Neoplatonism viewed the emanations as taking place outside of 'the One' where as Kabbalah

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Biale, *Gershom Scholem : Kabbalah and Counter-History*. 53

understood it as something that occurred 'within God'. Creation ex Nihilo was made to become Creation out of God himself.”<sup>60</sup>

The dualism of the Gnostics in which the ‘creator god’ was evil and the ‘hidden god’ was good was internalized in the monotheistic version. The souls of mankind were now trapped in the lower realms that were created by the withdrawal of the Divine Light. The struggle for man’s souls took on cosmic proportions. The Messiah was no longer conceived of as *primarily* a national figure, but one who must battle for the redemption of the cosmos and restoration of harmony within the godhead.

These ideas reflect the world of what Flusser terms ‘high paganism’ which flourished in the Late Greco-Roman period. In this period, “the concept of a family of anthropomorphic gods had become an obstacle to further religious development.”<sup>61</sup> Thus ‘high paganism’ sought to translate polytheistic myth into the language of philosophy. However, the underlying cosmology remained unchanged.

Flusser describes two types of monotheistic tendencies in late antiquity:

- 1) Single gods became manifestations, aspects or forces of the supreme god.
- 2) One god was elevated to the position of *kosmokrator* and all other gods were equated with him.<sup>62</sup>

Both process led to similar results which is perhaps best illustrated in a famous passage from the Saturnalia written by Macrobius in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. In this passage, Macrobius lists

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> David Flusser, "The Great Goddess of Samaria," *Israel Exploration Journal* 25, no. 1 (1975). 14

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

pairs of gods and goddesses. He further identifies the goddesses with the earth and the gods with the sun. The sun and the earth are, in turn, viewed as two aspects of the 'one god'.<sup>63</sup>

Another important source of Gnostic myth are the fragments of the gnostic text 'Apophysis Megale' purported to be written by Simon Magus. Parts of the text are quoted by Hippolytus (170-235) in his massive compendium, 'Against All Heresies'.<sup>64</sup> Hippolytus recounts that "Simon Magus saw in himself the manifestation of the *great power* and in his wife Helen that of the cosmic thought; she was also identified with Selene, the moon goddess."<sup>65</sup> (emphasis added) The description of Hippolytus is in broad agreement with the reference to Simon Magus in the Gospel of Luke in which Simon is referred to by the Samaritans as '*somebody great*' (Acts 8:9) and is also identified with the "power of God that is *called Great*." (Act 8:10b ESV) Flusser notes that the word 'great' (Gk. *dynamis*) is the Hebrew word *gevurah* which is probably etymologically linked to the word '*gever*' which means 'male'. From what we can glean from Hippolytus, Simon taught that the 'great power' has its partner in the 'female thought' (*epinoia*) which are related to heaven and earth respectively.<sup>66</sup> Simon further separates the male and female powers into six: Mind and Intelligence (Heaven and Earth); Voice and Name (Sun and Moon); Ratiocination and Reflection (Air and Water). Intermingled with all of these, and holding them together is a 7<sup>th</sup> power that is described as "the indefinite, the (self-) existing power." In what can only be described as the densest verbage ever conceived, the origin of the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>64</sup> Hippolytus, Refuting All Heresies, VI ch. 2-15

<sup>65</sup> Hippolytus, "Refuting All Heresies, Book 6, Chapters 2 - 15," in *Early Church Fathers*, ed. Schaff. Simons wife was named after Helen of Troy who

<sup>66</sup> Flusser, "The Great Goddess of Samaria." 19 – Hippolytos records, "And that one of these appears from above, and this is the great power, the mind of the whole ruling upon all male and the other is from below the great thought (*epinoia megale*) female procreating the all. From whence ranged in pairs opposite each other they undergo conjugal union and manifest an intermediate interval namely an incomprehensible air which has neither beginning nor end." (Hippolytus, "Refuting All Heresies, Book 6, Chapters 2 - 15.")

cosmos began when this ‘indefinite power’ brought “forward himself by means of himself, manifested unto himself his own peculiar intelligence.”<sup>67</sup> Gnostics have always struggled to describe what caused movement within ‘the unmovable’ and this is a good case in point. Hippolytus further recounts how an emanation gave rise to a ‘hermaphrodite’ being which seems to have brought the six powers into existence. Several aspects of this myth share similarities with the system of kabbalah: 1) The self-reflection of an abstract entity that marks the beginning of ‘being’, 2) the series of emanations, each given the name of an attribute, 3) and the androgynous intermediary between the ‘Indefinite Power’ and the six paired male and female powers.

One final example of Gnostic myth that bears some similarities to the system of kabbalah is the *Eugnostos* – a gnostic text found at Nag Hammadi. According to Parrot, it predates Valentinism (mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century) or Middle Platonism (2<sup>nd</sup> century).<sup>68</sup> This text begins with the ‘primal mind’ named “the One Who Is” that reflects on himself and gives rise to "Self Father" or "Self-Begetter". This being, in turn, gives rise to an androgynous being named “Immortal Man” or “Begotten”. The “Immortal Man” gives rise to “The First Begotten” (also named “Adam of Light”) and his consort “All Wise Sofia”. Through spiritual sexual interaction, this couple brings into being yet another androgynous being, “Savior, Begetter of all things” and his consort “Sophia, All-Begettress” (the names of the all the consorts have the name ‘Sophia’ in them). This last couple gives rise to six other beings together with their consorts – twelve all together. These 12 generate 72 powers, who generate 360 powers.<sup>69</sup> The emanations in the super-celestial realm correspond to the structure of the material world. In this system, deities were thought of as

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<sup>67</sup> "Refuting All Heresies, Book 6, Chapters 2 - 15."

<sup>68</sup> Douglas M. Parrot, "Gnosticism and Egyptian Religion," *Novum Testamentum* 29, no. 1 (1987).

<sup>69</sup> The number 72 is important in gnostic systems.

different aspects of the primal mind. The names of the emanations described in *Eugnostos* are evidently derived from Biblical tradition but the system of emanations is clearly Neo-platonic. Once again, we see parallels with kabbalah in the series of emanations that cascade down to the material world through the mediation of an androgynous being called ‘Immortal Man’. Parrot further argues that the entire structure of emanations described in *Eugnostos* follows Egyptian cosmology that emerged in the New Kingdom period.<sup>70</sup>

Several generalizations may be made, based on our admittedly sketchy survey of the *Saturnalia*, the *Eugnostos*, the *Apophysis Megale* (or the version of it transmitted by Hippolytus), and Lurianic kabbalah:

- 1) Biblical narrative or Biblical names and beings (ie. angels) are reinterpreted to accommodate a neo-Platonic system of emanations that originates from an impersonal ‘soul’ or ‘mind’.
- 2) The emanations may be ‘androgynous’ or ‘male and female’.
- 3) The emanations correspond with attributes or powers. The female attribute is often wisdom.
- 4) The emanations correspond to the underlying structure of the material world.
- 5) All beings may be infused with divinity.
- 6) Ritual is mechanistic.
- 7) Morality takes on cosmic dimensions and a theurgical aspect.

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<sup>70</sup> Parrot draws several comparisons between the Primal Mind and Amon: Eugnostos: “He is untraceable”; Egypt: “I am one who strides not”; Eugnostos: He embraces the totalities of the totalities, and nothing embraces him”; Egypt: There is none who grasps me, or shall grasp me. Furthermore, it may be noted that the Primal mind gave rise to eight beings that emanated the world – all related to begetting (males) and thought (females). Amon gave rise to four: Nun - primal waters; Heh - endless space; Keku – darkness; Tenemu - the disappearing or the lost. (ibid. in loc)

## VII. Conclusion

Neo-Platonism sought to translate pagan myth into the language of philosophy. Its influence on Jewish and Christian groups can be gauged by the gnostic texts that begin to appear in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and flourish from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD to the reign of Constantine. These ideas saw a resurgence in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe with the ‘discovery’ of neo-Platonic / gnostic texts that were believed to have been ancient Egyptian wisdom texts. The resurgence of gnostic thought in Europe was paralleled by the emergence of kabbalah among Jewish communities. Isaac Luria infused kabbalah with messianic fervor and thereby established the theological framework for the reception of Shabbatai Sevi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

As noted previously, Scholem argued that the apostasy of Shabbatai Sevi paved the way for the ‘haskalah’ – or Jewish enlightenment that emerged in the early modern period that was essentially secular. While this may have been the immediate effect of the apostasy of Shabbati Sevi, it is also possible, when one looks at the broader picture of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, that gnostic / neo-Platonic philosophy was one of the major driving forces behind ‘the Enlightenment’. One of its early apostles, Giordano Bruno, was burned at the stake for his unorthodox ideas but his vision of a world united under a universal philosophy of reason did not disappear.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Arthur D. Imerti summarizes the philosophy of Giordano Bruno as follows: 1) the universe is an emanation of the Deity within it. 2) Divinity is latent in nature, "working and growing differently in different subjects through diverse physical forms in certain arrangements... succeeds in making them participants... in her being in her life and intellect." 3) Bruno alludes to the ladder of Nature by which Divinity descends even to the lowest things," just as all rational beings "by means of a life, resplendent in natural things," rise "to the life which presides over them." 3) Multiform nature in which all opposites coincide is, according to him, the infinite emanation of a Deity who is absolute reason, she is the teacher of all rational beings." Giordano Bruno and Arthur D. Imerti, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). From the Introduction



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