Sabbatianism:
The Ruin of Purity

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Synopsis
“Sabbatianism” is a movement named after Sabbatai Tzvi (1626–1676), a Jew of the Ottoman Empire. This movement, for all exposed to it, turned the world upside down. Scholars have called it a “transvaluation” within Jewish culture (Scholem 1973:685), meaning it spun accepted norms on their heads in ways that ultimately led to extreme expressions: A place where the violation of the sacred became a sacred duty. Sabbatianism repels as much as it attracts because it speaks to something deep within the human psyche: that fine line in consciousness between the sacred and profane, the moral and immoral, religious devotion and antinomianism, truth and imagination, meaning and nihilism. Sabbatianism developed independently of other messianic movements in Western monotheism, all of which tend to follow remarkably similar patterns: Populace movements that forge revolutionary ideas destructive of the religious status quo. For Sabbatians vitality became sacred (Alter 1987:25), so the movement is only different in kind from certain social, artistic, and aesthetic movements, even without Messiahs, that teach the world to see through new eyes, however much the world may squirm over this. All messianic movements attempt to bridge the gap between humanity and the Divine (Davies 1987:80) and while Sabbatianism has also attempted this, it still presents riddles that have yet to be deciphered. I will touch here on a few of its revolutionary features.

Key Words
Tikkun Olam; Lurianic Kabbalah; the Shemittot; Neo-Platonism; Gnosticism; the Messiah; Nathan of Gaza; Sabbatai Tzvi; Maimodines; Sefer Zerubbabel; a theurgy; the Sefirot.

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1. Introduction

In the seventeenth-century an astonishing mystical heresy arose—Sabbatianism—that centered on a messianic figure. Based in part on Lurianic Kabbalah, this movement whipped up the flames of expectation, only to burn itself out in the most ignoble way. Yet, the fervor could not completely burn out, but smoldered for centuries. Sabbatianism scandalized Judaism, and ambivalence toward it continues even today (Alter 1987:22).

I begin, as articles related to Kabbalah do, with the research of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), who pioneered the academic study of such weighty kabbalistic works as the Sefer ha-Bahir, the Sefer ha-Zohar, and Lurianic Kabbalah. Yet the most intriguing (and controversial) part of Scholem’s research has been to uncover the history of Sabbatianism. Much of what I write here is grounded in Scholem’s magnum opus, Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah (1973). Scholem found that much of this history had been deliberately repressed (Scholem 1941:300). Belief in Sabbatai Tzvi (1626–1676) had been so much more pervasive than standard histories of the movement had depicted. Sabbatianism had all the earmarks for creating a radically new religion, but it stopped just short of it, for reasons I will consider below.

Movements that create new religions trample on the sacred they inherit. Paul of Tarsus (c. 5–67 CE) toppled what it meant to be a Jew: “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Romans 2:28–29). Only a devout Jew, as Paul was, could make such across-the-board declarations and have them stick. In founding a new movement, Paul began by clearing away the brush that blocked its march for universal triumph in world religious consciousness: Jewish ethnicity and practices.

Similarly, only an Arab of the prominent Quraysh tribe, the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE), could take the sacred traditions of Abraham and the Ka’aba—beliefs that had been part of Arabic culture from antiquity—and re-center them on a new imperative: A return to the pristine religion of Abraham and the One God he worshipped and followed. Muhammad declared that the Al-Qur’an was Allah’s final revelation (Al-Qur’an 33:40), making all previous revelations (Judaism and Christianity) incomplete or at least corrupted versions of the pure faith of Islam (Al-Qur’an 4:47).

And only devout Jews could stretch the orthodox teachings they had inherited until they snapped. In 1665 Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680), using networks around the Jewish world, declared in treatises, letters, circulars, and even in personal visits, that the Messiah had appeared in Israel (Dan 1987:289). Astonishingly, within just a few months of Nathan’s announcement, Jews everywhere from every social class were suddenly caught up in a messianic fervor. Lurianic Kabbalah that by then animated Jewish life and strengthened traditional Judaism held only vague notions of any messianic dimensions and it certainly had nothing to do with an individual Messiah (Rabow 2002:94). Sabbatianism took a huge leap in the opposite direction: A Messiah was necessary to crush the “heel of evil” (Scholem 1973:300).
Since in Judaism “redemption” meant this present world (not in the heavens), as Maimodines (c. 1135–1204) had written (Kraemer 2008:356), with a King in the spirit of King David—a prophet like Moses in real space and time—many began to sell their land and possessions to move to the Holy Land to be among the first returnees (Scholem 1973:528–32). Now, to make salvation certain, Nathan encouraged everyone to repent and to support the Messiah with their prayer and devotion as he descended into the realms of darkness to free the remaining captive sparks of the Divine, trapped from the beginning of creation in the realm of the qelippoth or “degrees of death” (Scholem 1973:43). From May 1665 to September 1666 the enthusiasm had risen to a fevered pitch:

An emotional upheaval of immense force took place among the mass of people, and for an entire year, men lived a new life which for many years remained their first glimpse of a deeper spiritual reality (Scholem 1941:288).

The euphoria among the large Jewish population alarmed the Ottoman authorities—especially because Jews were neglecting their businesses (Scholem 1973:449)—and the Ottomans placed Sabbatai Tzvi under arrest. On September 16, 1666, after meeting with the Sultan’s Privy Council, Sabbatai accepted the Islamic turban, thus showing he was a convert to Islam.

What was the meaning of this? Since ancient times Jews had believed that to die for their faith—rather than to betray it—was the highest honor (Maciejko 2011:133–134). After the Messiah’s apostasy, the Jewish world was left with a deep trauma and dilemma: A person hailed as the Messiah through a legitimate prophecy (affirmed by rabbis in Jerusalem) had committed the most sacrilegious act possible. The Messiah’s apostasy was followed by outraged condemnations and excommunications (herem) by rabbinic councils in the larger cities everywhere (Scholem 1973:712). For most caught up in the mass movement the apostasy was too much and they quietly began to disassociate from it and to even deny they had ever believed in it.

Yet, in spite of Sabbatai’s conversion, Nathan of Gaza, who never wavered in his belief in Sabbatai’s messianic vocation, continued to expound on the reasons why the Messiah had to convert to Islam (Scholem 1941:314). The Messiah must assume the “cloak of evil” in order to destroy all evil from within (Scholem 1973:802). Sabbatai’s most loyal followers remained with him until his death in 1676 as an exile in Montenegro.

Even after Sabbatai’s death, his paradoxes continued to haunt many in the Jewish world. Some later formed into small, secretive communities to flesh out the more mystical meanings of Sabbatai’s legacy. Scholars identify at least ten different groups that developed more or less independently, some in Christian lands and some in Muslim lands (Dan 2007:92). These groups would continue in some form to our own day, with general perspectives from Sabbatianism either contaminating or enlightening (depending on one’s perspective) the entire Jewish world and even influencing the great secular liberalizing movements of Europe (Scholem 1941:320).

Sabbatianism’s context is important: It arose after the Reformation (1517–1648) and before the Enlightenment (1650–1800). In other words, it grew out of a “theocratic age” (Vico 1730:39–74). The seventeenth-century was still an age of magic—though more empirical ways of looking at life were emerging—with almost everyone at the time believing in the possibility of miracles. Sabbatai Tzvi appeared after Michel de
Montaigne (1533–1592), William Shakespeare (1564–1616), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1676), and René Descartes (1596–1650), all secular visionaries of human potential, but as a pious Jew he would not have been exposed to their writings; his contemporaries were John Locke (1632–1704) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), yet oddly Sabbatai’s legacy, though more indirect, pushed the world a little more toward rational objectivity.

Further, the Sabbatian movement was born of a religious culture remarkable for its homogeneity, given its dispersion far and wide geographically, from the Yemen to Great Britain, from Portugal to Western Russia. It was the first sustained assault from within on rabbinical authority to determine Jewish life and this planted the idea to “open the Ghetto” for fuller participation in European cultural life (Dan 1987:287–288). As the Reformation (1517) marked the start of the modern era for Western civilization (Russell 1945:481–483), Sabbatianism launched the modern era for the Jewish people (Dan 2007:92), though not everyone agrees with this (Alter 1987:28). I will consider a little of how this led to unforeseen consequences—both positive and negative—and how the dynamism of Sabbatianism, the movement that Sabbatai Tzvi and Nathan of Gaza orchestrated, unleashed powerful forces that have become part of secular life:

He (Sabbatai Tzvi) serves as a catalyst, negatively, for radical criticism of the existing order; positively, of dreams at long last come true, of barriers long-standing being broken down, of a new creation—all this accompanied by an impulse to propagate good news (Davies 1987:85).

2. Sabbatai Tzvi

Sabbatai Tzvi, a native of Smyrna (Izmir, Turkey) and a Sephardic rabbi, is an unlikely Messiah. A drifter among the synagogues of the Eastern Mediterranean since early adulthood, Sabbatai left no memorable sayings of wisdom and no scholarly achievements.5)

Though a devoted kabbalist, ascetic, and Talmudist, Sabbatai was at times erratic, hyper, even profane toward the sacred of Judaism, while at other times he was so withdrawn that he locked himself in his room for weeks and weeks. Synagogues sometimes tolerated him, but at other times they expelled him. The Jerusalem rabbis, considered the de facto central authorities of Judaism of the day, once had him whipped. Sabbatai’s “strange actions” (ma’asim zarim) had an aura of a sacramental violation: he pronounced aloud the Tetragrammaton—the Divine name considered too sacred to say (Scholem 1978:247),6) celebrated a marriage between himself and the Torah (ibid.), ate lard (a sacrilege of dietary Kashrut) on certain holy days (Dan 1987:303), and even changed the days in which festivals, feasts, and fasts were held, once celebrating Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—events celebrated over nine months—in one week (Scholem 1978:248). Sabbatai had also proclaimed himself a Messiah from time to time, but only a few took him seriously (Rabow 2002:94–95).

Scholem has shown that Sabbatai Tzvi was manic-depressive, suffering from severe mood swings every three months or so, from euphoria (his illuminated state) to deep depression (Scholem 1941:290). Nathan of Gaza gave these swings metaphysical and redemptive meanings: When in a depressed state Sabbatai descended deep into the qelippoth to release sparks from captivity or to redeem lost souls there (Sabbatai only committed “strange actions” in his hyper state). When in an euphoric state, Sabbatai was ecstatically
returning the sparks or souls to the Divine (Scholem 1973:302–308).

From about 1648, at around the age of twenty-two, as Sabbatai’s manic-depressive condition began to appear, he suffered paralyses of such intensity that he could not read or write. He had looked for cures all his adult life. In 1665, while in Egypt as an emissary of the Jerusalem community (which earlier had punished him), and now nearly forty years old, Sabbatai had heard of Nathan of Gaza, the gifted young healer, and in April went to Gaza to be treated by him (Scholem 1941:291). To Sabbatai’s astonishment, Nathan announced that he (Sabbatai) was the redeemer of Israel. At first Sabbatai laughed this off, but over time Nathan convinced him this was true (Scholem 1978:435).

On May 31, 1665, Sabbatianism formally began, with Sabbatai proclaiming himself the Messiah in Gaza and Hebron, before going to Jerusalem with forty men (twelve from a rabbinical school he chose to represent the twelve tribes of Israel). They wore green (the color a previous Messiah of twelfth-century Baghdad). Sabbatai had gained special permission from the Ottoman government to ride a horse around Jerusalem seven times (Jews were forbidden to ride horses in Jerusalem). After, he went to the ancient Temple Mount where the mosque, Haram esh-Sharif (Dome of the Rock), stood—also a place where Jews were forbidden to go. Sabbatai intended to perform a sacrifice showing that the Temple would be rebuilt. Later, Sabbatai ate heleb (forbidden fat—heleb can also mean “a dog”) the fat around a kosher animal’s kidneys, chanting a profane blessing: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, who permitted that which is forbidden” (Scholem 1973:242).

After hearing of the sacrilege with heleb, the Jerusalem rabbis excommunicated Sabbatai and forbade him from ever entering Jerusalem again (Scholem 1973:246). Sabbatai’s message of eating heleb was clear: In the Torah, heleb is the only one of the thirty-two prohibitions that dealt with food (Leviticus 7:25; 18:1–26); all the others were prohibitions against fornication, adultery, and incest (Scholem 1973:242). The messianic age, then, would overturn all sexual taboos. Sabbatai’s intention was in part to elevate the status of women—Sabbatai also wanted women to read the Torah during Sabbath services (Scholem 1973:403).

The Jerusalem rabbis excommunicated Sabbatai not because he had claimed to be a Messiah but for his open violation of Jewish practices and for encouraging others to violate them (Scholem 1973:250); they later urged everyone to “separate yourselves from the tents of these madmen, lest both we and you be found sinning against the king [that is, the Sultan], but neither Sabbatai nor Nathan would listen to the voice of the rabbis of Jerusalem” (Scholem 1973:251). Though with the authority to expel Sabbatai from Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, the rabbis could not stop the outpouring of enthusiasm Sabbatai had ignited far and wide.

On September 19, 1665, Sabbatai began a messianic procession from Jerusalem to Safed, then to Aleppo, Syria and Smyrna, with Constantinople (Istanbul) the final destination (Scholem 1978:248). One Jewish witness in northern Europe chronicled the enthusiasm:

First of all, there were many people everywhere who fasted the whole week and immersed themselves (in rivers, lakes, and oceans) every day . . . They devoted the whole day to good works, and recited the daily devotions as arranged at the time . . . .

People tried to sell goods and belongings at any price they could get, and kept themselves in readiness for the moment when the messiah and the prophet Elijah would appear and announce the end, so as to be able to proceed [to the holy land] without delay . . . . And let no one say that I have exaggerated in my
Sexuality and purity (civilization/religion) are often at war and these can roughly follow Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) paradigm of the id (sexual impulses) and the super-ego (ethics). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud theorized that humanity is essentially hostile toward civilization because it forces a repression of sexual impulses for civilization to continue (1930:4–5). Indeed, one could argue, as Freud did (Freud 1930:73), that the antinomian spirit that promotes "social equality" is partly sexual, since conservative hierarchies based on race or social class forbid the elites from marrying members of minorities or inferiors. Sexual liberation by definition is part of messianic movements, and this was certainly true of Sabbatianism. Sabbatai had married a former prostitute, Sarah, following the prophet Hosea (c. eight-century BCE), also symbolic of the New Age (Silverman 1998:202), part of abolishing the present age's divisions between sacred and profane.

Many accounts of Sabbatai Tzvi's conversion to Islam are extant: We have Christian accounts (British, Dutch, and French) both from members of the clergy and diplomats to the Ottoman Empire and Jewish accounts from supporters of the movement and its enemies. The Turkish records seem to have been destroyed by fire (Scholem 1978:385). All accounts agree that Sabbatai was arrested on February 6 while on a ship in the Sea of Marmara bound for Constantinople. Shortly after, the Sultan's Grand Vizier, Ahmed Köprüülü (1635–1676), a remarkably capable administrator, interviewed him. The meeting was extraordinary for its leniency. Frequent sedition in the Ottoman Empire was always brutally put down by immediate execution. Nathan had earlier predicted that the Sultan would willingly give Sabbatai his crown (Scholem 1971:145), which would have been enough to make the charge of sedition stick. The Vizier instead sent Sabbatai to Gallipoli for confinement.

While in custody for seven months, Sabbatai, perhaps from the bribes of his followers, had comfortable accommodations and was allowed visitors, who flocked from far and wide to see him. Sabbatai may have created some of the ritualized violations there (including those sexual in nature) that characterized later Sabbatianism (Scholem 1978:262–264).

On September 15, 1666 the Ottoman authorities brought Sabbatai to Adrianople where he appeared before the Privy Council the following day in a large room with a balcony where the Sultan could watch from behind a latticed screen (*kafes*). High government and court officials attended, including the Sultan's chief preacher, Mehmed Vani Effendi (d. 1689). The chief preacher's presence perhaps shows the underlying motives for the proceedings (Scholem 1973:675). The Sultan Mehmed IV (1642–1693), a devout Muslim, and perhaps encouraged by his chief preacher, hoped for the conversion of Ottoman Jews to Islam. They must have felt Sabbatai could deliver the Jewish world to the Islamic fold.

The Privy Council gave Sabbatai three choices: 1) to perform a miracle (by surviving the arrows of the Sultan's archers) to prove he was the Messiah; 2) to endure a slow death by spears on a stake at the Gate of Seraglio (the place for public execution), to become a martyr for his faith; or 3) to become a Muslim. Sabbatai may have expected to convert (this may have been the prearranged understanding). As a circum-
ized Jew, converting for Sabbatai would involve only a change of clothing, from Jewish to Muslim attire (Dan 1987:295). Sabbatai accepted the Muslim garments.

The Sultan, all reports agree, overjoyed with Sabbatai’s conversion, gave him a Muslim name (Mehemed Effendi or Aziz Mehemed Effendi) and a special office “Kapici Bashi” Keeper of the Palace. In addition to the honorarium from this office, the Sultan added a pension of one hundred fifty silver coins a day (Scholem 1973:681). Sabbatai, destined for a life of luxury as the result of his apostasy, wrote a letter around 1668–69, some two years later, to tell his followers that his conversion was sincere (he must descend into the abyss to launch a new age). Also, since he was manic-depressive, Sabbatai dealt with the issue of his firmness of conviction despite his mental instability:

Know ye my brethren, my children, and my friends that I recognized with great clarity that the True [God] whom I alone know for many generations and for whom I have done so much, has willed that I should enter with my heart into the Islamic religion [din islam], the religion of Ishmael, to permit what it permits, and to forbid what it forbids, and to nullify the Torah of Moses until the time of the End. . . . The Torah of Moses is nullified, as is also esoterically implied in the Talmudic saying [where God is reported to have said to Moses]: May thy strength increase because you broke the tablets of the Covenant. . . . And so do not believe, my brethren, that I did this [becoming a Muslim] on the strength of an illumination so that you become terrified and say: today or tomorrow the illumination will depart from him and he will regret what he had said and will be very sorry for it. This is not so, but I did this on my own, through the great power and strength of the Truth and Faith which no wind in the world and no sages and prophets can cause me to leave my place (Sabbatai Tzvi as quoted by Scholem 1973:840–841).

Finally, in 1672, the Ottomans exiled Sabbatai to a fortress called Dulcigo (Ulcinj, Montenegro). For six years Sabbatai had lived the life of an esteemed Ottoman courtier, holding his own court, receiving visitors and dignitaries from around the Jewish world, but Sabbatai’s “strange acts,” with the suspicion that his conversion was insincere, sealed his fate. Yet it is amazing that he continued for as long as he did, given that execution was the punishment for Muslims who did not practice Islam. In 1672 reports surfaced that Sabbatai had led a procession and celebrated the Sabbath in a synagogue where he wore Jewish phylacteries (tefillin) and Jewish garb, with “wine and women” (Scholem 1973:874)—the implication being it was a ritualized sexual ceremony. The Grand Vizier, who had earlier been Sabbatai’s protector, now wanted his execution. It seems the Sultan’s mother intervened on Sabbatai’s behalf for exile instead. Shortly before he died, and still convinced he was the Messiah, Sabbatai wrote:

But if thou shall indeed obey his voice and do all that I speak to you (Exodus 23:22), then I shall indeed go up and fill your treasures (Proverbs 8:21). Thus saith the man who is raised to the heights of the Father, the Celestial Lion and Celestial Stag, the Anointed of the God of Israel and Judah, Sabbatai Mehemed Tzvi (Sabbatai Tzvi as quoted by Scholem 1973:916).

Sabbatai’s apostasy had caused more turmoil than any “internal” event in the annals of Jewish history. The pogroms, the persecutions, and all the external traumas had tended to reinforce group identity and cohesion,
but Sabbatai’s apostasy wounded and divided Jewish interior life. Nothing in Judaism’s sacred writings prepared anyone for an apostate Messiah (Scholem 1973:793). The inner renewal many felt was genuine and despite all objective evidence to the contrary some continued to nurture this inner awakening:

The efforts of the believers to discover a positive and constructive meaning in what was an essentially negative and destructive act, constitutes their peculiar contribution to the history of religion in general and to the subsequent history of Judaism in particular. Their faith required of them a measure of tension and a struggle with paradox that went beyond anything demanded of the Christian believer (Scholem 1973:799).

3. Isaac Luria’s groundwork

Lurianic Kabbalah, the crown jewel of mystical teachings from the community in Safed, Israel, aided by the newly invented printing press, had spread quickly throughout the Jewish world from 1630 to 1640 (Scholem 1978:245). As these ideas were internalized they would paradoxically form the foundation Sabbatianism built on:

The spread of Lurianic Kabbalism with its doctrine of Tikkun, of the restitution of cosmic harmony through the earthly medium of a mystically elevated Judaism, this doctrine could not but lead to an explosive manifestation of all those forces to which it owed its rise and its success (Scholem 1941:287).

Original visionaries are extremely rare: Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321) and John Milton (1608–1674) are two from among a handful who through symbolic language transformed fundamental perceptions. Isaac Luria (1534–1575) is in their league, the most original kabbalist ever. Before Luria, Kabbalah was a mishmash of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism (Scholem 1978:45) grafted into traditional Jewish practices, with the Sefer ha-Zohar as materia poetica. Plotinus (c. 204/5–270), Neo-Platonism’s originator (Enneads 270), developed the idea of emanations from the Divine One that resulted in three levels of reality: 1) the highest is intelligence and Divine mind (nous); 2) next comes the world of nature (world soul); and 3) lowest is the physical body and spirit (soul).

Classical Kabbalah begins with a Neo-Platonic vision of divinity: The Sefirot, with the Ein-Sof hidden and unknowable (Bloom 1987:2–8), emanated in ten forms (characteristics of the Divine) at creation; this concept was also developed in more detail from an ancient esoteric writing, the Sefer Yetzirah.12) Neo-Platonism also accorded Kabbalah’s tripartite division of human consciousness: the nefesh, the ru’ah, and the neshamah, from the lower to the higher consciousness (Bloom 1987:17).

Gnosticism may have its origins in ancient Judaism, according to Scholem (Dan 2007:24–26) and Hans Jonas (1958:33–34): the Merkavah (Chariots) traditions (c. sixth-century BCE) that Ezekiel wrote of (Ezekiel 1:28), though scholars in our time have yet to find evidence to support this thesis (Dan 2007:24–26). While Neo-Platonism brought Greek divisions into Jewish thought, Gnosticism brought experiential enlightenment (Scholem 1941:42). Luria took this brew of contrasting ideas and turned it into an individual and universal ethic for redemption.
Luria restored the dynamic aspects of early Judaism with a mythology to live by (Bloom 1987:1–19), extrapolating in fresh ways the origins of the cosmos, the redemptive power of ethics and practices, and the destiny of humanity in a redeemed world (Scholem 1973:27). Its sheer scope in the way it answered questions is rare among world religions. Though it is complex, it is also remarkably nimble as an inward ethic and surprisingly accessible to a general audience.

Luria’s teachings became the people’s poetry (Davies 1987:86), giving meaning to the abused and the oppressed: Jewry (the true sparks) is trapped among the nations (the true qelippoth), its vitality siphoned for their own evil purposes in opposition to the Divine (Silberman 1998:179–180). By Nathan of Gaza’s time Jews everywhere had internalized Luria’s new spins on the reasons for practices: Tzimtzum (Contraction), Shevirat ha-Kelim (Breaking of the Vessels) Tikun Olam (Restoration of the World), and Nitzotzot Hade-doshim (Lifting Holy Sparks) (Bloom 1996:212).13

Luria’s sweeping vision nonetheless reinforced the Exile (Galuth), as it pulled the curtain back on a universal emptiness of catastrophic proportions (Scholem 1971:104)—a nightmare vision where even the Divine suffers: The Shekhinah exiled from the nine other Sefi  rot wanders in mourning as Jews wander in Exile (Scholem 1941:230–235).

Lurianic Kabbalah was absolute in its stress on collective responsibility: Jews can through Mitzvot (Good Works) bring Tikun Olam (Healing of the World) (Scholem 1965:115–17). For some this message empowered, but the passive, lazy, and unenlightened, if unable to live up to the high standards of holiness and righteousness, could postpone Tikun Olam indefinitely (Dan 1987:277), a very frightening prospect indeed. Luria’s Kabbalah created many Jewish saints, but with its high imperatives Jews relinquished some measure of autonomy (from a humanistic perspective), for Luria taught that every thought, every intention, had eternal consequences for prolonging Exile or for restoring the world.

Made up of a rather small group of mystics, the kabbalistic community of Safed saw itself with a special role as enlightened ones, but this role did not extend to ordinary people (Dan 1987:259; 277). Luria himself wrote little that we know of, except for three poems still in liturgical use today. Hayyim Vital (1542–1620) and Joseph Ibn T’bul (b. 1545), two of Luria’s closest disciples, recorded his teachings and their records are at times are contradictory.14 Vital was the most prolific but he refused to publish Luria’s teachings for fear they may fall into unworthy hands (Scholem 1973:24).15 His manuscripts, obtained by stealth,16 were published only toward the end of his life and against his wishes (Levine 2003:92).17

Lurianic Kabbalah had also left all traditional Jewish practices in place, as behooves a community centered on Kabbalah (Kabbalah in Hebrew meaning “Tradition” or “That Which Is Received”) even as it offered a revolutionary new scope of ideas (Scholem 1973:570). Yet, life in Exile, what traditional practices were based on, could be a dark vision of religion, as Franz Kafka (1883–1924), whom Scholem esteemed as “a secular kabbalist” (Mendes-Flohr 1994:16–17), expressed in numerous stories where characters are suspended somewhere between life and death and whose redemption remains equivocal.18 This sense of eternal suspension was followed hard by the burden of transforming this mega-catastrophe. Did this burden turn people in quest of a Messiah?

Do people need a Messiah, a savior, or a heroic person to express something deeper in the psyche, an alter ego or an idealized vision of one’s deepest self? Freud in The Uncanny wrote: “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1919:123). This sense of
the uncanny is projected onto a hero, what Freud called the worship of a “Superman,” to allay fears. We find hero worship in nearly all cultures, heroes that descend into the underworld to redeem life in this world (Eliade 1951:367–374).

The time was ripe for Messianism and when Nathan of Gaza opened its door it exploded with a fury unmatched in Jewish history. And once opened it was not possible to close the door again completely—though many did try—and powerful new perspectives breached the hearts and minds of nearly everyone exposed to it. It asked the heretical question: Could traditional Jewish practices keep the sparks in captivity? Generally, Messianism propels social transformation: “Messianism can function as a powerful progressive and revolutionary force, especially when its dynamism has yielded before the petrified patterns of ancient popular myth” (Scholem 1973:464).

Though Luria allowed for messianic figures—gifted souls who may further redemption on earth more than others—no one person had a special mission to single-handedly complete Tikkun Olam. Messiahs were in the background quietly performing Tikkun and may even be unaware of their great accomplishment for redemption (Levine 2003:97–98). Only at the end of time would they receive their rewards.

This final redemption, however, cannot be achieved by one single messianic act, but will be affected through a long chain of activities that prepare the way. . . which is the essential task of the Jewish people—and the final result, the state of redemption announced by the appearance of the Messiah, who marks the last stage (Scholem 1978:245).

4. Nathan of Gaza

Nathan of Gaza (Abraham Nathan ben Elisha Hayyim Ashkenazi), also known as “Ghazzati,” whom admirers also called “the Holy Lamp” (Buzina Kaddisha), remains a baffling figure in Jewish history. No one has doubted his singular sincerity and devotion to his mission. Nathan’s father, a respected scholar of rabbinical and kabbalistic Judaism, had migrated from Germany or Poland earlier in the seventeenth-century to Jerusalem where Nathan was born. Nathan was an ardent student and studied under one of the world’s most respected scholars of the Talmud, Jacob Hagiz (1620–1674). With his formidable intellect and fertile and creative imagination, Nathan took up the study of Lurianic Kabbalah in 1664, adopting the ascetic lifestyle of kabbalistic devotees, and began to have visions of angels and the spirits of past sages (Scholem 1978:435):

I studied the Torah in purity until I was twenty years of age, and I carried out the great Tikkun which Isaac Luria prescribes for everyone who has committed great faults. Although, praise be to God, I have not inadvertently committed any sins, nevertheless I carried it out in case my soul be sullied from an earlier stage of transmigration. When I had attained the age of twenty I began to study the book Zohar and some of the Lurianic writings. But he who comes to purify himself receives the aid of Heaven, and thus He sent me some of His holy angels and blessed spirits and revealed to me many of the mysteries of the Torah (Nathan of Gaza as quoted by Scholem 1941:294).

Nathan of Gaza—to draw a parallel with Christianity—was both John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul in one
person (Scholem 1941:295). Not only did he announce the coming of the Messiah, Nathan also prolifically expounded on the reasons the Messiah had to come and created an overpowering literature supporting his declaration. Scholem has shown that Sabbatianism in fact came from Nathan of Gaza rather than from Sabbatai Tzvi, who tended to be passive and at times not at all confident in himself as the Messiah (Scholem 1978:250). If not for Nathan of Gaza, Sabbatai Tzvi would no doubt have remained unknown to history (Scholem 1941:289).

Nathan seemed to intuit the spiritual needs of the Jewish people en masse as he mixed Zoharic teachings and Lurianic Kabbalah with earlier ideas of an unfulfilled messianic prophecy from Sefer Zerubbabel (c. seventh-century CE). Though a trained Talmudist, Nathan avoided using the Talmud for his messianic pronouncements (Maciejko 2011:76). Nathan’s most striking deviation from Luria, however, was that Jews by their good works alone were unable to complete redemption (from a Lurianic point of view redemption came by “raising the sparks” through Mitzvot).

During the feast of Purim (late February or early March 1665), Nathan had a vision that lasted twenty-four hours (Scholem 1973:211; 269n). It centered on the Ma’aseh Bereshith (the Mystery of the Creation) and the Ma’aseh Merkavah (Mystery of the Chariots)—visions of the creation in its various stages and of the chariots from the book of Ezekiel. Nathan saw emblazed on one of the chariots SABBATAI TZVI next to the name of the patriarch Jacob (Nathan must have first met or seen Sabbatai Tzvi in Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter where Sabbatai lived in 1663 and it made a deep impression on him). This chariot also carried the shining countenance of AMIRAH (the new name for Sabbatai Tzvi), an acronym in Hebrew for “Our Lord and King, His Majesty to be Exalted” (Adoneinu Malkeinu Yarum Hodo) (Scholem 1973:263). Nathan also heard a voice: “Thus saith the Lord, behold your savior cometh, Sabbatai Tzvi is his name. He will cry, yea, roar, he shall prevail against his enemies.” Nathan further elaborated:

In that same year (1665), . . . I was undergoing a long fast in the week after the feast of Purim. Having now locked myself in holiness and purity in a separate room and completed the morning prayer under many tears, the spirit came over me, my hair stood on end and my knees shook and I saw the Merkavah, and I saw visions of God all day long and all night, and I was vouchsafed true prophecy like any other prophet, as the voice spoke to me and began with the words: ‘Thus speaks the Lord.’ And with the utmost clarity my heart perceived towards whom my prophecy was directed [i.e. towards Sabbatai Tzvi], and until this day I have never yet had so great a vision, but it remained hidden in my heart until the Redeemer revealed himself in Gaza and proclaimed himself the Messiah; only then did the angel permit me to proclaim what I had seen” (Nathan of Gaza as quoted by Scholem 1941:294–295).

Nathan added: “Moreover I was told that Israel ought to believe [in the Messiah]. And whoever does not believe, it is evident that his soul contains an admixture of evil from the generations that rebelled against the Kingdom of Heaven and against the Kingdom of David” (Nathan of Gaza as quoted by Scholem 1973:211). Even from this dazzling beginning Nathan’s prophetic vision had an edge (evident in other messianic movements): Those who did not accept the Messiah were associated with “evil.” This was Nathan’s one vision, which he was not to reveal until the summer of 1665, and all his later writings were expositions on its meaning, though he claimed to hear the voices of Maggadim (voices of angels or sages) continuously after
the vision. Nathan was precise about the dates: The Messiah will announce himself in 1665 in Israel and in 1667 the age of the Messiah would begin (Scholem 1973:287), with the rebuilding of the Temple set to start in 1672.

How could the people of that time have been so gullible, with estimates of over fifty-percent of the Jewish population believing that Sabbatai was the Messiah (Rabow 2002:101)? Many have offered good reasons for what happened: The then recent pogroms in Poland (1647) created a deeper longing for deliverance from cruel political subjugation.21) But the fact that Jews everywhere embraced Sabbatianism, from every social class, even those of Salonika (Thessaloniki, Greece), Amsterdam, and Leghorn (Livorno, Italy) where Jewish communities were prosperous and where Jews enjoyed a measure of tolerance, is often overlooked (Dan 1987:292–294). And where persecution was greater, in Eastern Europe and Western Russia for example, Jewry was not so enthralled with Sabbatianism in its initial declarations. Others have said that less educated Jews had ignorantly fueled this fervor, yet the rabbis, the educated, and the leaders of Jewish communities everywhere shared a mutual responsibility in leading the movement (Scholem 1973:478). Indeed, Nathan had tapped into the Jewish collective unconscious with his prophecy, reaching in and touching deep spiritual needs across all social classes and cultures.

The most important reason for what happened, however, was the place “prophecy” held in the Jewish imagination of the time. While most larger communities around the world had messianic pretenders from time to time, prophecy was much more rare. The Mishnah states that prophecy can only come from Israel (Scholem 1973:464). The Zohar was accepted as a sacred text because its assumed author, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (c. 100–160 CE), a Tannic sage, had written it while he was in hiding from the Romans in Galilee (the Zohar, with the Tanakh and the Talmud, are the three sacred books in Judaism today).22) The Mishnah, a collection of rabbinical pronouncements also known as the Oral Law, was compiled over several generations (about 130 years) in Israel (c. 220 CE), with R. Yehudah ha-Nasi (d. 217) editing the final document. The Talmud, the foundational text of rabbinical Judaism today, though composed outside of Israel in today’s Iraq,23) focused on interpreting the Mishnah, called the Gemara (Aramaic for “Study”), making it acceptable as a sacred text.

In the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), only Ezekiel (c. 622–570 BCE) had prophesied outside of Israel as an exile in Babylon, yet the Talmud declares that Ezekiel received his prophecies in Israel before he was taken into Exile.24)

There was nothing unusual in a person pretending to be a Messiah, but the claim to prophecy, coming from the Holy Land, was a new experience for Jews. Because the Talmud states that there is no prophecy but in the land of Israel, they tended to listen and believe. Nathan’s message was expressed in Lurianic, orthodox terms (Dan 2007:87).

In 1666, some Jerusalem rabbis signed a letter to Jewish communities in the Diaspora vouching for Nathan of Gaza’s “prophetic dignity” (Scholem 1973:244); (Dan 1987:289), and this of course gave him an aura of credibility.25) Nothing in Nathan’s prophecies and teachings up until the apostasy had contradicted accepted kabbalistic teachings from the Zohar or Lurianic Kabbalah, neither could any of Nathan’s writings be considered heretical (Scholem 1973:298). I will sketch a few of Nathan’s original ideas below.
a. Origins of evil

Lurianic Kabbalah, as it developed in the century before Nathan of Gaza, had grown into distinct schools, each with a different vision of how “evil” originated (Scholem 1973:35). Hayyim Vital, the primary recorder of Luria’s teachings, showed some bias in resisting Luria’s most radical teaching of “evil as part of the Divine” (Scholem 1973:299–300). Israel Sarug (fl. 1590–1610), a pseudo follower but who was at times an accurate portrayer of Luria’s teachings based on manuscripts stolen from Vital, with Joseph Ibn T’bul, gave a fuller version of the “otherness” (sitra ahra) that appeared as Divine self-awareness emerged. While in the Zohar evil is a servant to good, since all is of God, with the division between good and evil an illusion (Dan 1987:215), in Lurianic Kabbalah evil is a metaphysical reality—the very reason the universe exists. Luria’s vision also differed fundamentally from earlier kabbalists: Humanity was not the reason for creation but another realm where the combat between good and evil takes place; indeed humanity is merely another mending agent (Dan 1987:266). From Luria “Israel’s task. . . was not to be a light to the nations, but, on the contrary, to extract from them [the nations] the very last sparks of holiness and life” (Scholem 1973:46):

The focus of the Kabbalistic theurgy is God, not man; the latter is given unimaginable powers, to be used in order to repair the Divine glory or the Divine image; only his initiative can improve divinity. . . .

The theurgical Kabbalah articulates a basic feature of Jewish religion in general: because he concentrates more upon action than upon thought, the Jew is responsible for everything, including God, since his activity is crucial for the welfare of the cosmos in general (Moshe Idel as quoted by Bloom 1992:105).

“Otherness,” from Luria’s view, aroused the Divine to self-awareness. Why the presence of this “otherness” and why it was troubling is a matter for conjecture. Prompted to action, the Creator began to plan and take the necessary steps to deal with it. From a human perspective, the Divine chose to be responsible for who He is and what He would become. Creation in the various stages that Luria articulated (constriction, catastrophe, and restoration) was the Divine’s attempt to address this “otherness,” with “purging” before “reincorporation” the two primal goals. Since with the Divine “thought” immediately becomes reality—a separate reality with the potential of a separate personhood—God has created evil and once created, evil does not go gently into that goodnight.

Freud also identified “otherness” as a normal psychic pattern: “There are cases in which parts of a person’s. . . mental life—his thought and feelings—appear alien to him and as not belonging to his ego” (Freud 1930:13), with love having the power to purge the separateness (here Freud meant the erotic drive). Can one assume that the Creator had this urge? Sexuality in Kabbalah is between Teferet (male) and Shekhinah (female) and so one can assume love, in all its manifold meanings, is part of creation and the drive for wholeness.

Why had Hayyim Vital avoided this essential concept from the great master (Dan 1987:215)? One can guess it was too radical a departure from normative sensibilities, for it not only implied a duality within the Godhead but also a Creator that did not have complete control. Further, this “otherness,” having the potential to take full control, could result in a duality of rival but equal Divine personages, one Good and the other Evil.

For Luria the Ein-Sof first “Contracted” (Tzintzum) to create an empty space, what the Zohar termed
tehiru ("emptiness" in Aramaic), a Divine workshop for self-healing and restoration. Here Freud remains the great analyst even of the Divine when he said that a person “falls in love” so his or her spirit will not collapse in on itself, at a time when a person is never more defenseless (Freud 1930:13). As love is necessary for wholeness on a human level, the Divine, from Luria’s expositions, also needs to create for wholeness (Bloom 1987:16).

Without the tehiru (desolation), creation and human freewill could not exist, since it allowed for a place outside the Divine, who is also known as Ha-Makom (The Place):

Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking of anything that was not God. Without such an act of self-limitation, after all, there would be only God—and obviously nothing else. A being that is not God could only become possible and originate by virtue of such a contraction, such a paradoxical retreat of God into Himself. By positing a negative factor in Himself, God liberates Creation (Gershom Scholem as quoted by Bloom 1987:214).

We see in Lurianic Kabbalah a divided Divine Personage, parts of whom after breaking apart had formed separate entities and powers of their own—indeed together these entities collectively challenged divinity’s intentions and personhood. Exile, the great theme of Kabbalah, reaches even into the higher realms. Luria also called this Divine “otherness” the reshimu (“residue” in Hebrew), itself sources of holy powers. All Lurianic schools agree with this fundamental concept. The debate is how the reshimu developed into the qelipoth (husks of evil) (Scholem 1973:33–35), a tougher resistance to the Divine will. I will touch briefly on the more widely accepted concept.

After the Tzimtzum, the Ein-Sof (Nothingness/Unknowable) projected the “otherness” into the tehiru, (from the fifth Sefirah Din or Gevurah). Was “creation” successful from a Divine perspective? Yes and No. God succeeded in the first stage of creation: the Tzimtzum and the isolation of the reshimu. Now ready to purge and to re-incorporate it in what the Divine had intended as a new partnership for wholeness, the Divine completely misunderstood the reshimu’s intentions, its refusal to participate. The heart of the Divine, then, is not of violence toward the “otherness,” but healing for wholeness.

Still, the Divine went ahead with creation without the reshimu. In order to channel light, as the Sefirot unfolded in Space/Time (please see Appendix), the Divine created “vessels” or “shells” to both direct and to contain the Divine manifestation in the tehiru (Scholem 1973:33). Kabbalists are somewhat divided on whether the “vessels” are also Divine—most feel that these are created of somewhat courser light that gives them shape, similar to Aristotle’s formulations of form and matter (Dan 2007:75).

The “shattering” of these vessels—the primal catastrophe and the beginning of the creation—occurred both from the overwhelming force of Divine light and the resistance of the reshimu to taking part in creation (Dan 1987:265). Luria called this the Shevirat ha-Helim (Breaking of the Vessels). The reshimu, which the Divine naively intended to join in for healing and restoration, instead “stole the show” and took the sparks or particles of Divine light captive (Scholem 1991:77).

I mentioned above that Kabbalah is essentially a myth of Exile. It could also be called a myth of the Kidnapped. Other kabbalistic works—the Zohar is one example—offer a pristine beginning of primal harmony. Not so with Lurianic Kabbalah: The primal beginnings only had disorder and confusion:
Existence does not begin with a perfect Creator bringing into being an imperfect universe; rather, the existence of the universe is the result of an inherent flaw or crisis within the infinite Godhead, and the purpose of creation is to correct it (Dan 2007:75).

Nathan, in articulating the need for Sabbatai’s appearance, concentrated on the moment of creation when the Ein-Sof sent Divine light into the tehiru and taught that the Divine divided the light into two realms: The “thought-some light” and the “thought-less light.” Nathan also gave the tehiru a new context (it was already a hot bed of rebellion according to Luria): forces of “otherness” became violent toward the Divine’s purpose of creation, with the reshimu forming husks, qelippo (the Zohar calls these “bark”), a more insidious concentration of resistance. Unfortunately “thought-less light” also crystalized with the qelippo to become a more menacing counter-force (Scholem 1973:300). Nothing went right for the Divine, who with every action or innovation worsened the catastrophe.

The “thought-some light” had a focused mission: to create life (and humanity) in the tehiru (Scholem 1973:301). After the contraction, and while the reshimu and qelippo were forming, the “thought-some light” first shot in a straight line into the void (Scholem 1973:300). The “thought-less light,” which Nathan called “golem,” or “unformed” or “undifferentiated light” (Scholem 1973:301), was fundamentally disgruntled. The creation in Lurianic Kabbalah is also a catastrophe, but Nathan shows creation as a great “gamble,” too, with no certainty of a positive outcome. The streak of light entering the tehiru, then, brought both positive and negative consequences, as it stirred up the primal soup as it were, creating life but also reinforcing resistance to the Divine.

b. Struggling with leviathan

The “thought-some light” accomplished its purposes only in the upper three Sefirot: Keter, Hokhmah, and Binah (the Sefirot expressing Divine intentions and the implementation of creation)—Luria had also said that the Shevira (Breaking) occurred only in the lower seven Sefirot (Dan 1987:262)—with creation springing forth from Binah (Bloom 1987:9). But this light could not enter the lower seven Sefirot, which for Nathan was an abyss, a vision of hell and so much darker than even Lurianic Kabbalah, which had been the darkest. Here the Divine was withering away, with the qelippo potentially infecting even the upper Sefirot. Where will restoration come from? From humanity, which itself is in the tehiru?

Nathan’s metaphysics for the Messiah stressed that Lurianic Kabbalah’s imperatives for Jews to follow Mitzvot for Tikkun Olam applied only to the upper three Sefirot. Jews had no redemptive power among the lower seven Sefirot: a nightmare vision that haunts the imagination (there is nothing like it in any other religious tradition). Nathan’s vision of a self-consuming divinity showed that the Messiah, and only the Messiah, could bring healing by destroying the qelippo, reconfiguring the matrix that would dissolve the dark forces and free the captive sparks. These freed sparks would automatically rejuvenate the Sefirot and heal the universe (Dan 1987:292).

For Nathan, Job (Job 41:1–34) symbolized the Messiah at war with Leviathan (sea monsters, symbols for qelippo), also mentioned in Isaiah 27:1: “In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea.” Leviathan, an archaic force of darkness in the archaic beginning, opposed creation (Bloom
1990:28–31) and must be destroyed before creation can take place: “God breaks the heads of Leviathan in pieces” (Psalm 74:14). The Messiah, then, has to struggle against the Leviathan to free both the trapped souls (from the fall of Adam) and the Divine sparks.

In Zoharic Kabbalah the “other side” is also a parallel force, centered on the left side of the Sefirot (near the fifth Sefirah Din or Gevurah), yet separate from the Ein-Sof (Dan 2007:51–54). In Nathan’s Treatise on Dragons (1665), however, the “other side” makes up fully one half of the Ein-Sof (Scholem 1973:300–303), a radical departure from all other kabbalistic expositions, except classic Lurianism, since in principle the sitra ahra is an equal Divine power. The “thought-some light” entering the primal abyss also severed the two spheres: One good, the other Satanic.

Kabbalah, from the Sefer ha-Bahir and Sefer ha-Zohar through Luria, presents a gnostic-oriented mythology, though any direct influence from other gnostic myths has yet to be discovered (Scholem 1941:175–177; 260). Nathan certainly built on gnostic mythology (Scholem 1941:322f). When evil is creative, the balance is tipped toward a gnostic vision. In classic Gnosticism an evil, rival power created the universe, so the true God was not only uninvolved but is now removed from creation, yet remains in the world only deep in the human spirit (Jonas 1958:123–124).

Gnostic tendencies also occur when subjective inner realities trump objective realities, when people hold their “inner truth” as an absolute. With the Messiah’s apostasy, Sabbatianism became subjectively and mystically gnostic: The new Torah (Atziluth) and the new kingdom (appearing only in the heart) had taken precedence over all objective reality. Many early Sabbatians refused to deny this inner reality (Scholem 1941:306–307).

c. Cosmic cycles

Nathan of Gaza, then, to capitalize on this inner awakening, needed to expound on why the inner reality must remain inner and why the objective messianic kingdom had not materialized. Nathan had earlier said that Sabbatai’s sacrilegious actions (ma’asim zarim), his sacramental trampling of sacred, showed the new age had come. What is the basis of this new age?

Kabbalistic texts had earlier spoken of different ages spanning civilization and with each new age a different expression of the Torah was necessary. The Sefer ha-Temunah (Book of the Figure), attributed to the Tannaim (compliers of the Mishnah) Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah and Rabbi Ishmael, is one such example (Scholars believe a Spanish kabbalist wrote it around the time the Zohar was first published, c. 1280). Its focus is on Shemittot (cosmic cycles), where each of the seven lower (or emotional) Sefirot—Gevurah, Tiferet, Hesed, Hod, Yesod, Netzach, and Malkhut/Shekhinah are represented in seven ages, each age consisting of seven thousand years. At the end of the complete cycle, the fifty-thousandth year, the “Great Jubilee” or “Age of the Messiah” will begin. Each Sefirah will then return to Binah (Wisdom), the Cosmic Mother, from which the present creation came, when the task of both creation and universal restoration is consummated (Scholem 1973:811–812).

The letters and words of the Torah do not change with each Shemittah—since these are the eternal words the Creator created the world with—but their combinations (sounds/numerical values) change with a different focus in each age. Gevurah (Stern Judgment), according to the Temunah, is already the second age (Hesed was the first age) and so the Gevurah’s Torah focuses on commandments and prohibitions (Scholem
The Temunah states that a new age appears only after a cataclysm, now seen in the transition from the age of Gevurah to the age of Te’feret (Scholem 1973:814).

Nathan, an astute student of kabbalistic writings, applied these cycles in his Treatise on the Menorah (published by Scholem in 1944) to show that Sabbatai Tzvi had inaugurated a new age. Conversely, Nathan believed the present Shemittah was Hesed (Mercy) not Gevurah (Judgment), with the Messiah (rather than a catastrophe) inaugurating the new age of Gevurah; this fit Nathan’s sense of Sabbatai’s mission: Sabbatai would redeem the qelippoth aligned with Gevurah. The “staff of Moses” is symbolic of the correctness and rectitude of the then present age (Hesed), while the age of Gevurah, symbolized by the Holy Serpent, is crooked and fluid. Moses’ staff at YHWH’s command became a snake after he threw it down, which so frightened Moses that he ran away (Exodus 4:3). For Nathan this passage revealed the transition from Hesed to Gevurah. Sabbatai Tzvi, when signing letters and documents, sometimes drew a crooked snake symbol next to his name (Scholem 1973:236).

In conjunction with the Sefirotic ages are four levels of awareness: Atziluth (emanation), Beriah (creation), Yetzirah (formation), and Asiyah (action). Though these two teachings of the Shemittah and the four levels of awareness are mutually exclusive systems, Nathan awkwardly combined them. Now that the age of Atziluth is here, the previous Torah of Beriah no longer applied (Dan 2007:91); the Messiah now determines the Torah (Scholem 1973:390). Sabbatians would internalize the new age of Atziluth as a central ethic in succeeding generations.

Nathan died in Skopje (Üsküb), Macedonia in 1680, three years before the Great Apostasy that created the Dönmeh, which I will discuss below.

5. Sabbatianism forms

Mystical heresies have succeeded in all ages and have led to surprisingly similar ends: the overthrow of dominant religious dogmas. Christianity is Judaism’s mystical heresy, as Protestantism is Roman Catholicism’s. The Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah Witnesses are mystical Protestant heresies. The Anabaptists and Quakers at their origins, though remaining uneasily in the Protestant fold, are other venerable interpretations that wreaked havoc on normative religious sensibilities (Scholem 1941:301). Shi’ism is Islam’s great mystical heresy. Sabbatianism by contrast had no universal evangel. Sabbatai’s Eighteen Commandments forbade even the conversion of fellow Jews (Mazower 2004:73), the reason Sabbatianism has been passed down among families (Scholem 1978:305). Because Sabbatians wanted a new Judaism, based on Jewish hereditary, they did not create a new religion.

When Nathan of Gaza finessed the reasons why the Messiah’s apostasy was necessary and why the new age must be accepted by faith alone, he gave birth to Sabbatianism, as we know it today. First, Nathan showed that “the believers” were in an intermediary stage (much as Christians and later Socialists). Ellen G. White (1827–1915) similarly crafted the foundational teaching for what became the Seventh Day Adventist Church after a failed prophecy. William Miller (1782–1849), using the book of Daniel’s “seventy weeks of years,” predicted that Jesus would return in 1843. When this did not happen, Miller recalculated the date and it fell on October 22, 1844 (Armstrong 2000:90–1). After October 23rd dawned Mrs. White wrote that Jesus had entered the Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Temple (of which the earthly First and Second Temples in Jerusalem were representations) to finish the atonement, suspending believers forever in this eternal
moment just before redemption. Since redemption in Kabbalah takes place when the Shekhinah, the tenth Sefirah, rises in union with the other nine Sefirot, Nathan taught that the Shekhinah, though lifted from the dust, remains in Exile. As in other failed prophecies, its fulfillment hovered close, just out of reach, as the rainbow over the horizon, in a “limbo” between the times; in essence this was no different from the Exile.

Second, the completion of Tikkun Olam rests with the work of the Messiah and those with faith in him. Since the Messiah’s soul originated from the qelippoth (Scholem 1973:302), only he experiences “hell” in its fullest sense to redeem the world. While Christianity’s Nicene Creed (325 CE) proclaims Jesus Christ as the same substance as the Divine, as “true God from true God” (Rubenstein 1999:82), Sabbatai had the more arduous task of transforming himself from the lowest, basest substance to the highest substance of light: the divinity of the Ein-Sof (Scholem 1973:307).

Third, and again building on Lurianic Kabbalah, where the holy sparks once lifted no longer give life to evil, Nathan wrote in Treatise on Dragons before the apostasy that the good works of Jewry for redemption were blocked by the “heel of evil,” which the Messiah must vaporize by descending into it. Nathan continued to elaborate on this theme: Though the Messiah’s apostasy “appears” to increase evil, “goodness,” by becoming evil, implodes evil. Like termites infesting a tree, the tree (the nations, Islam, and Christianity) only appears healthy (Scholem 1973:741–743).

Finally, Sabbatians, thanks to Nathan and others, drew from Israel’s sacred narrative to affirm that the Messiah’s apostasy was a biblical hypocrisy (Scholem 1973:804). Faced with a dilemma in Egypt when the Pharaoh asked who the beautiful woman with him was, Abraham said that Sarah (his wife) was really his sister (technically she was his half-sister), yet Abraham’s duplicity furthered the Divine’s purposes (Genesis 20:2). Moses had grown up in Pharaoh’s court as an Egyptian prince (Exodus 2:1–10), hiding his true identity until he killed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew (Exodus 2:11–12), later to lead the exodus from slavery. Likewise, Queen Esther (Hadassah in Hebrew) hid her Jewish identity until her uncle, Mordecai, urged her to reveal herself to King Ahasuerus (her husband) to save her people. Esther agreed, asserting: “If I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). And as Christians before him, Nathan appropriated Isaiah 53:4, the poem of the suffering servant, to refer to Sabbatai: “Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our suffering that he endured. We accounted him plagued, smitten and afflicted by God.”

Redemption in prison or in Exile (among the qelippoth) was another Sabbatian theme: For thirteen years Joseph suffered, first as Potiphar’s slave and later in Pharaoh’s dungeon from a false accusation (Genesis 40, 41), to save the fledgling nation of Israel. Samson, living in the Philistine’s Temple as a slave after he was blinded, pulled the Temple down on himself and everyone (Judges 16:28–30) to destroy evil from within. King David, fleeing for his life from King Saul, went to Gath (Philistine) to seek asylum from King Achish (1 Samuel 21:1–22:4). Afraid King Achish would kill him, David feigned mental illness by making marks on the doors of the gates and letting saliva run down his beard. Altogether, David may have spent fifteen years as a fugitive. Was David any less a Jew for seeking asylum and feigning insanity? Did not King David further Divine purposes by this hypocrisy? An angel protected Daniel (Daniel 6) after King Darius’ jealous administrators had him thrown into a lion’s den. Daniel remained “pure” though immersed in evil. Each of these heroes redeemed sparks by descending into the realms of qelippoth.
a. The sacred wounded

Some did follow Sabbatai Tzvi in converting to the religion of mainstream culture, to Islam and Christianity, forming the “Dönmeh” and the “Frankists” respectively (I will discuss both in more detail below) to enter the paradox of destroying evil from within, as Jacob Frank articulated:

But there were more radical possibilities to be explored [than just taking the cloak of evil]: only the complete transformation of good into evil would exhaust the full potential of the latter and thereby explode it, as it were, from within. This dialectical liquidation of evil requires not only the disguise of good in the form of evil but total identification with it (Jacob Frank as quoted by Scholem 1973:801).

The Marranos (forced converts to Christianity on the Iberian Peninsula) gave Sabbatianism its ethical and spiritual force. Also called “Christianos Nuevos” (New Christians) and “crypto-Jews,” in 1391 alone about two hundred thousand saved themselves by converting to Roman Catholicism. On March 31, 1492 the Catholic monarchs Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516) announced the Alhambra Decree (the Edict of Expulsions) for all of Jewish descent—even many who had converted to Christianity (Mazover 2004:67)—to leave the Iberian Peninsula and all their territories by July 31st of the same year. Scholars disagree on how many were expelled: from one hundred thirty thousand to seven hundred thousand (Silberman 1997:109–110).

The exiled Marranos scattered among the communities of Amsterdam, Leghorn, and the Ottoman Empire suffered the stigma of betrayal. Some synagogues worked out procedures to return them to the Jewish fold (Silberman 1998:147). Abraham Miguel Cardozo (c. 1626–1706), a Marrano who converted back to Judaism, became the second great theologian of Sabbatianism after Nathan of Gaza. Since Sabbatianism had proclaimed conversion a sacred act to destroy evil from within, many who became radicals were of Marrano descent.

Though enigmatic for us today, this ethic was transformative for vast numbers of Jews (and not only the Marranos) who lived separate existences from the mainstream cultures in isolated communities. It answered a deep yearning for ways to be authentic and aligned with their traditions in the dual roles many were forced into. Having the “appearance of evil,” while remaining Jewish within, spoke to Jews who at times were forced to hide their true identity for self-preservation. The Sabbatian messianic secret, then, is that the Messiah by suffering the outward humiliation and scorn for his apostasy performed the ultimate Tikkun Olam. Taking the appearance of evil became a central ethic of radical Sabbatianism.

Sabbatianism rattled Judaism to its foundations, for it began the questioning of the structure and nature of Judaism itself. What had been absolute in Jewish life, for lack of any alternative, suddenly became open to scrutiny (Scholem 1941:320). On a more positive note, Sabbatianism showed new possibilities: One can descend in order to ascend and the ascension can take many forms. Normative Judaism responded by branding Sabbatians as amoral renegades and traitors. The term “Sabbatian” from the eighteenth-century was synonymous with “libertine,” “anarchist,” “revolutionary,” and “nihilist” (Scholem 1941:301).

Groups against the grain, which struggle against coercion to preserve spiritual autonomy, wreak havoc on mainstream values. The dominant religion’s inclination has been to destroy them, as the Roman Catholic Church did to the Cathars (or Albigensians) of Southern France when it slaughtered tens of thousands of
them from 1209 to 1229 (Rubenstein 2003:156). Surprisingly, dissident groups tend to nurture a climate for the secularization of religious values (Scholem 1941:299; 301; 304). Why this is so is open to debate, but by challenging the dominant view’s absoluteness, dissident groups can lay the groundwork for alternative ways of looking at life.

The German Reformation under Martin Luther (1517), and later piety movements that grew from it, eventually evolved into the nineteenth-century’s secular and aesthetic Romantic Movement (Berlin 1999:145–146). The Calvinist Reformation kindled the Enlightenment (Fukuyama 1992:194–195)—if only because the masses had grown weary of conflict over unseen metaphysics—the greatest liberalizing movement of Western civilization. Later Sabbatians, nurtured by a fierce antinomianism, would become leaders of movements for secular emancipation (Scholem 1941:299–304).

6. Sabbatianism’s legacy

Sabbatianism began a change that continued for centuries within the religious life of Judaism. While scholars have identified at least a score of different Sabbatian groups, Sabbatianism is generally divided between moderates who did not believe in Sabbatai Tzvi’s divinity (Scholem 1973:835) and radicals who did (Scholem 1971:124). The moderates tended to stay within the Jewish fold while the radicals tended to separate, with some apostatizing. All Sabbatians shared a few fundamental beliefs (Scholem 1971:126):

1) The Messiah’s apostasy began the work to break apart the qelippoth and to raise the Shekhinah.
2) “Believers” must shield their true identity to outsiders: falsehood, hypocrisy, and two-facedness were sacred duties.
3) The Torah of Beriah must be violated in order to realize the Torah of Atziluth—this Torah has yet to unfold (both moderates and radicals created ceremonies to ritually violate the Torah, with some violations as simple as eating a piece of fruit on Tu B’Av, the day of fasting and mourning the destruction of the First and Second Temples).
4) The Godhead, for radical Sabbatians, will be realized in three separate incarnations.
5) The First Cause (the philosopher’s God) and the God of Israel (the God of Religion) are different deities (below I will mention how Jacob Frank applied this to himself).
6) Traditional Judaism, led by rabbis, unwittingly maintains the age of Beriah.

Sabbatianism indeed offers profound insight into group psychology: it demythologizes a homogeneous past while it more accurately reflects the collective trauma and aspirations of Jewish experience. As Freud wrote in Mass Psychology (1922), groups in ideological or metaphysical opposition to mainstream sensibilities allowed people to act on antinomian impulses that gave them a feeling of power and security, since the group—not the individual—is ultimately responsible. Freud quoted Gustave Le Bon’s (1841–1931) The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (1895):

The first is that the individual forming part of a group acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint. He will be the less disposed to check himself from the consideration
that, a group being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely (Gustave Le Bon as quoted by Freud 1921:22).

Group psychologies, perhaps unsurprisingly, are often psychosexual, as I discussed briefly above when Sabbatai Tzvi, after announcing his Messiahship, ate heleb as he recited the profane blessing: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who permitted that which is forbidden." Scholem understood, however, that Sabbatianism, though a release from sexual divisions and repression, sprang from deeper recesses:

Feelings such as these formed the psychological background for the great nihilistic conflagration that was to break out in the "radical" wing of the Sabbatian Movement. The fires were fed by powerful religious emotion, but in the crucial moment these were to join forces with passions of an entirely different sort, namely, with the instinct of anarchy and lawlessness that lie deeply buried in every human soul. Traditionally Judaism had always sought to suppress such impulses, but now that they were allowed to emerge in the revolutionary exhilaration brought on by the experience of redemption and its freedom, they burst forth more violently than ever (Scholem 1971:109).

a. The Dönmeh

In 1683, some seven years after Sabbatai Tzvi’s death, up to three hundred Sabbatian families converted to Islam (Scholem 1971:147). They considered apostasy a sacred “calling” and saw themselves as a new elite force to deliver the death knell to the qelipoth. Sabbatai Tzvi had sporadically encouraged some of his followers to convert, since it pleased the Sultan to have Jewish converts to Islam (Scholem 1973:847), and even a few Goyim (People of the Nations) may have joined the Sabbatian movement (Scholem 1973:832). But conversion to Islam had never been en mass. Soon Salonika became its center.

They called themselves the Ma’aminim (the Faithful or Believers), but the Turkish authorities named the group the " Dönmeh," meaning "to turn" or "to convert," to distinguish them from the "Dhimmi," People of the Book—Jews and Christians—who though protected paid special taxes (jizya) under Islamic Law. The authorities at first were pleased with the mass conversion and hoped the entire Jewish population would follow and gave special grants of land, with at least one Sabbatian synagogue/mosque in Thessaloniki remaining today (Mazower 2004:76). Yet, as the authorities soon realized, these converts had no intention of mingling with Muslims or of practicing Islam (though they publicly presented themselves as Muslims): They married only among themselves, kept in close contact with other Jewish communities, and secretly practiced their version of Sabbatian Judaism, though some Dönmeh groups did forge links with Islamic Sufi groups (Mazower 2004:74).

In about 1700 the Dönmeh split into three groups after Baruchya Russo (Osman Baba), who declared himself a reincarnation of Sabbatai Tzvi, attempted to assume leadership; these became the most radical of the Dönmeh (Maciejko 2011:14). "The Jakubi" who broke with Baruchya (d. 1721) claimed loyalty to Jacob Querido (c. 1650–1690), a leader of the mass apostasy of 1683 and also a claimant of Sabbatai’s reincarnated soul (Maciejko 2011:13). A third group, which identified themselves as “the Papulars” (Old Ones), also known as the “Karakash,” among other names, considered themselves followers of Sabbatai Tzvi alone. The Papulars were made up mostly of craftsmen while the Jakubi were professionals and officials (the Jakubi
have left the greatest number of documents). All three Dönme groups would eventually contribute to the modernization of Turkey (Scholem 1971:159), among the ranks of what historians term “The Young Turks” (1906–1908)—officially known as Committee of Union and Progress—to create a constitutional monarchy in a secular Turkish state, realized when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) became the first president of Turkey (1923–1938). Nazım Bey (1870–1926), Mehmet Cavit Bey (1875–1926), and Munis Tekinalp (1883–1961) are a few of the more famous Dönme. Astonishingly, remnants of the Dönme continue today (Scholem 1971:166).

All Sabbatians from their origins had been accused of ritualized sexual license, of sacred fornication and holy wife swapping, with the Dönme as special targets of these accusations. Similar accusations have often been unjustifiably leveled against almost all sectarian religious groups throughout history. But there is ample evidence to show that Sabbatians practiced theurgical sexual rituals (Scholem 1971:162), practices that deeply offended normative Jews, the reason for the collective effort over generations to isolate the Dönme and other Sabbatian radicals, to destroy their literature whenever possible, and to minimize how widespread the movement had been.40)

Sexual theurgies (“theurgy” meaning human efforts to direct Divine purposes) within a group’s religious dynamic repel even as they attract, since they tap into some kind of collective unconscious: Ancient tribal life was universally sexually theurgical, as sexual forces spilled forth to create religious meaning. The young men of the tribe, Freud theorized of past tribal life, murdered the aging ancestor because he kept all the young women to himself; they then cannibalized him and deified him to assuage guilt, the primal forces for religious meaning and ceremonial rites (Freud 1918:121–123). Further, in many religious traditions, sexuality on the edge is sanctified through mythological orientations, as Eliade Mircea (1907–1986) has shown in Hinduism, when it served Divine purposes (Eliade 1957:170–172).

Sexual prohibitions in the Torah, radicals believed, had become positive commandments—one must violate the prohibitions to establish the age of Atziluth—and they found biblical support in obscure passages. The Prophet Elisha (c. ninth-century BCE), in his visit to the childless woman of Shunem (2 Kings 4:8–17), had “sanctified intercourse” with her (though the narrative leaves this unspoken) in order for her to have a child, since her husband was too old to perform the service. Samson (c. 1118–1078 BCE), also a Sabbatian hero, had opened “the door to transgressive sexuality as part of extraordinary religious achievements, a path that would become central in Sabbatianism” (Idel 2005:145). The law of the Red Heifer (Numbers 19) teaches that one becomes “unclean” when in contact with the dead and so must offer a red heifer for slaughter and burning. The priest who sprinkles water dipped in cedar wood, hyssop, and wool dyed scarlet also becomes “unclean” (interpreted both as Sabbatai’s apostasy and sexual violations by Sabbatians) as he makes the worshiper “clean.” Likewise Sabbatai and Sabbatians, the “clean,” became “unclean” (in apostasy and violations) in order to make everyone “clean.”

Abraham Cardozo showed how David’s ancestors transgressed sexual restrictions to create the Davidic line, in a theurgical trampling of sacred taboos for Divine purposes: Lot’s incest with his daughters (Genesis 19:30–38) produced Moab and Ammon, Israel’s perpetual enemies that served Divine purposes; Judah’s sexual relations with his daughter-in-law Tamar (from Tamar’s seduction) whom he thought was a prostitute (Genesis 38:1–30) (Tamar, after her two husbands died, was entitled by law to Judah’s younger son, whom Judah had refused to grant); Tamar entered the “Blessing” to become an ancestor of King David; Ruth the
Moabite who “uncovered Boaz’ feet” (Ruth 3:7), a euphemism for sexual intercourse, is King David’s great-grandmother; King David’s lust for the Hittite Bathsheba resulted in a union that produced King Solomon (2 Samuel 11:1–4). Cardozo expounded on a new vision of the sacred, where all prohibitions—including the eating of pork—would be abolished (Scholem 1973:818). Indeed, he said that to unveil the age of the Messiah (Atziluth), “every Jew must become a Marrano” (Bielik-Robson 2014:33).

b. The Frankists

Finally, Jacob ben Judah Leib (1726–1791), who later changed his surname to “Frank,” brought renewal within Sabbatianism that “destroyed it from within.” Infamous today as Judaism’s most nihilistic vitalist ever, even more extreme than the writer of Qoheleth (the book of Ecclesiastes), Frank followed the Dönmeh’s Baruchya Russo branch and declared himself a third reincarnation of Sabbatai Tzvi (after Baruchya), the incarnation to finish the work that Sabbatai had begun. Affirming classic Sabbatianism that “to violate the Torah is to honor it,” Frank expanded Sabbatian sexual rituals to include his twelve concubines who represented the twelve tribes of Israel. Today Frankists are known for their orgies but in reality these were customs of “hospitality” that Sabbatians had practiced in some form for almost a hundred years before the Frankist sect arose in which the husband, host, or father offers his wife or adult daughters to guests (Maciejko 2011:38), based on ancient biblical precedents (Genesis 19:7–8; Judges 19:22–30).

Scholem called Frank a “the most hideous and uncanny figure in the whole history of Jewish Messianism. . . [whose] words exercise a considerable though sinister fascination” (Scholem 1941:308). Does this “fascination” redeem something of the “hideous and uncanny figure?” Frankists were involved in a “blood libel” against Polish Jewry (Maciejko 2011:107–109),41) the reason Frank has never been forgiven (Frankists were forced to seek Christian protection). Yet, to be fair, Frank had only led a reform movement within Sabbatianism and merely built on radical beliefs and practices that had been in place for over two generations. History more easily blames one person to avoid the uncomfortable complexity inherent in collective responsibility.

Strangely, Frank’s brand of Sabbatianism linked sexual libertinism with asceticism (Frankists often flogged themselves in repentance). Frank, who had earlier converted to Islam (Maciejko 2011:88), also converted to Polish Roman Catholic Christianity with his more than three thousand followers (Maciejko 2011:129–131).42) But as the Dönmeh had done before him, Frank forbade his followers from intermarrying with those not of Jewish descent or even from associating with them, and successfully advocated for the group to retain its Jewish identity (Scholem 1971:130–131).43)

A Frankist prayer from Podolia, Poland from the mid-seventeenth century, recorded by Jacob Emden (1697–1776), Sabbatianism’s great antagonist, shows the Frankist connection with Baruchya in its use of “Senor Santo” (from Judeo-Spanish) for Sabbatai Tzvi:

May it be Thy will that we prosper in Thy Torah and cling to Thy commandments, and mayst Thou purify my thoughts to worship Thee in truth. . . and may all our deeds in the Torah of atziluth [meaning: transgressions!] be only for the sake of Thy great name, O Senor Santo, that we may recognize Thy greatness, for Thou art the true God and King of the universe, our living Messiah who wast in this earthly world and didst nullify the Torah of beriah and didst reascend to Thy place to conduct all the
worlds (Sefer Shimmush, 7a by Jacob Emden as quoted by Scholem 1971:124).

Frank’s theology, though not as rich as Nathan of Gaza or Abraham Cardozo’s, still retains a pungent authenticity. His original work, The Words of the Lord (c. 1790), consisting mostly of autobiographical musings, perhaps originally published in Polish (Lenowitz 2004:xii), is singularly vivid and razor sharp. Based on the Hebrew Bible with his own earthy spins, the work was composed by a person living on a mythological level. Though Frank was a renegade, since his context is well-known, he was also a gifted storyteller and an imaginative and original myth-maker; his writing if taken on its own (if one expunges the gnostic and heretical declarations) is similar to the Hasidic stories and “midrashim” (interpretations) of one hundred years later.

Frank, in contrast to his Sabbatian predecessors, turned away from Kabbalah and its terminology (Maciejko 2011:81–82) and constructed a purely gnostic myth (Scholem 1971:129): The Good or Living God did not create this world, but is hidden from all humanity, with only “the believers” truly knowing Him (Frank 1790:177). The universe, created by an Evil Power, which Frank identified as feminine (as did the Sefer ha-Bahir) (Dan 1987:139), is visible in the “Rules of the World” (Frank also called them the “Rulers of this World”). These must be violated in order to annihilate them. In fact, all laws, both civil and religious, serve the Rulers; these include the Laws of Moses:

Wherever Adam trod, a city was built, but wherever I set foot, all will be destroyed, for I came into this world to destroy and to annihilate. But what I build will last forever. . . . This much I tell you: Christ, as you know, said that he had come to redeem the world from the hands of the devil. . . but I have come to redeem it from all the laws and customs that ever existed. It is my task to annihilate all this so the Good God can reveal himself (Frank 1790:337).

The Polish Catholic Church, growing suspicious of Frank after followers in apostasy confessed they believed Frank (not Jesus Christ) was the Divine incarnation (Maciejko 2011:164–65), arrested him on February 6, 1760 and after lengthy interrogations exiled him to a castle fortress in Częstochowa, Poland where he lived for thirteen years (Lenowitz 2004:iv). But the movement continued to grow, with Frankists later engaging in “religious rites of a typical sexual orgiastic nature inside the fortress” (Scholem 1978:302). After his release Frank moved to Brünn, Moravia (1773–1789), and then to Offenbach where, supported by wealthy patrons, he continued to hold court in regal splendor until his death in 1791. One of Frank’s more acrid statements sums up his brand of Sabbatianism, an articulation that inverts all reference points in its lunge for the destruction of the corrupt present age:

I did not come into this world to lift you but rather to cast you down to the bottom of the abyss. Further than this it is impossible to descend, nor can one ascend again by virtue of one’s own strength, for only the Lord can raise one up from the depths by the power of his hand (Jacob Frank as quoted by Scholem 1971:130).

Sexual theurgies broaden sanctified sexuality and these are not always male dominated. Frank, who said his
purpose was to “make in the flesh everything that has been in spirit” (Maciejko 2011:179), predicted the arrival of a female Messiah, an incarnation of the Shekhinah, the tenth Sefirah, whom he called “the Virgin.” Frank probably referred to his daughter, Eve (Rachel) Frank (1754–1817). A “Cult of Eve” evolved after Frank’s death, which involved an erotic liturgy with her at its center (Maciejko 2011:178–179; Levine 2003:124). The Virgin will give birth to the next Messiah and with Frank (the God of Israel) and Sabbatai Tzvi (the First Cause) will form a new Holy Trinity.45) We find a consistent internal logic in all Sabbatianism, of audacious violations (strange acts) that lead to personal and universal redemption:

The annihilation of every religion and positive religion and positive system of belief—this was the “true way” the “believers” were expected to follow. . . . The descent into the abyss requires not only the rejection of all religions and conventions, but also the commission of “strange acts,” and this in turn demands the voluntary abasement of one’s own sense of self, so that libertinism and the achievement of that state of utter shamelessness which leads to a tikkun of the soul are one and the same thing (Gershom Scholem as quoted by Bloom 1987:211).

The Frankists, and indeed all other radical Sabbatians, modified their extremism by the nineteenth-century. The sexual rites, with the hope of the age of Atziluth’s appearance, began to whither away. For the loyal Frankists “faith” rather than “strange acts” became the prime ethic. Frankists in particular and Sabbatians in general became people of high moral caliber and sincere faith (Scholem 1978:308). Made up to a surprising degree of lawyers and writers, Frankists became leaders of secularism, reform movements, and assimilation, elevating the yearning for reform within Judaism to create a less hierarchical, more democratic, religious structure. This led not only to Reform Judaism (Judaism’s most liberal branch) but also to the secular liberal Jew, the consummate modern person (Scholem 1971:140).

Historians even today have trouble tracing Sabbatian ancestry: Sabbatians hid their identities even as normative Judaism destroyed their history and literature. Yet Sabbatians have been discovered as leaders of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) in Hungary and Moravia (Scholem 1941:301), with Aaron Chorin (1766–1744) and Leopold Loew (1811–1875) as early pioneers of religious reform (Scholem 1941:301–304). Shockingly, Jonathan Eybeschutz (1690–1764), a chief rabbi of Prague, was a secret Sabbatian.46) Other notable Sabbatian descendants: Moses Dobruschka (1753–1794), an activist in the French Revolution, Ephraim Joseph Hirschfeld (1758–1820), co-founder with Dobruschka of the “Society of Freemasons,” the piano virtuoso Marianna Agata Wołowska (1789–1831), U.S Supreme Court Justices Louis Brandeis (1856–1941) and Felix Frankfurter (1882–1965), and the former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012).

The Dönme, beginning with the modernization of Turkish society from the early twentieth-century, began to spiral into oblivion (Mazower 2004:74–76). Already in the nineteenth-century the Dönme began to lose their Hebrew language abilities and switched the language of worship and songs to Judeo-Spanish (which they spoke at home) and finally in the twentieth-century to Turkish written in a Hebrew script (Scholem 1971:161–162). Yet the Dönme have not died out completely.

7. Conclusion

“The desire to destroy,” declared Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), “is also a creative desire.” Today we view
Sabbatianism from the prism of twentieth-century hedonistic movements, of amoral self-gratification, where all excess for its own sake is the goal—decadence for decadence’s sake. Sabbatians were not like that. While I have identified Jacob Frank as “a nihilistic vitalist,” Sabbatian nihilism was only toward this present world: to break apart the illusions that religious and civil authorities maintained. Weary of all mystical teachings that “suspended” people in a vacuum, whether in Exile or with a hovering Shekhinah that falls short of redemption, Sabbatianism’s sacred violations were for peeling away the age that was already passed. The new age of Atziluth is already here and would automatically gush forth in all its glory and fullness through “strange acts.” Purity, a concept created in the age of Beriah, also had to be ruined.

Franz Kafka, the great artist of Kabbalah in a secular age, showed that social inertia and myopic personal expectations blur the realization that Paradise (the age of Atziluth) is the present world—Atziluth had never left but is only dimmed by the human mind, reflecting Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) aphorism that people can really only see themselves:47)

The expulsion from Paradise is in its main significance eternal: Consequently the expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in this world irrevocable, but the eternal occurrence (or, temporally expressed, the eternal recapitulation of the occurrence) makes it nevertheless possible that not only could we live continuously in Paradise, but that we are continuously there in actual fact, no matter whether we know it here or not (Kafka 1954:31)

If the present world is Paradise, was Nathan of Gaza right about Sabbatai’s Messiahship but wrong about how the messianic age would emerge? Gershom Scholem splendidly taught that the “Jewishness in the religiosity of any particular period is not measured by dogmatic criteria... but solely by what sincere Jews do, in fact, believe” (Gershom Scholem quoted by Bloom 1987:210). “Sincerity,” as a measure of spiritual or religious impulses, can include a great deal. The Jews who became Sabbatians could not choose to be born among a persecuted minority, but they did choose to suffer a double-sigma of being considered heretics by their own community—since for them this was the way to universal salvation.

Unlike twentieth-century revolutions—the Russian, the Chinese, the Cuban, among so many others—that had goals to rid the world of social pollution only to sputter out, Sabbatianism’s first goal was the redemption of the Divine in pushing ahead the time-line for universal redemption, to enter the pollution to break it apart. When universal redemption tarried, the bitter disappointment could not help but close up the heavens for most of them. Yet, as all other revolutions, one wonders: Was it possible for the people of this time to usher in a new age of universal harmony?

Haim Hazaz’ (1898–1973) play In The End of Days sums up the Sabbatian vision: “We will bury ourselves, a burial of the dead, in license, in promiscuity and raw instinct, in order to arise from the void and chaos of this world like the sleepers of the dust who are destined to be resurrected, pure and clean and seven times more alive.”

Notes
1) Muhammad’s universal vision also elevated the status of women, as religious reform movements tend to do—this includes Sabbatianism—with the Medina Constitution giving women some basic rights (Armstrong 1993:157–158).
2) “Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things.”

3) Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon—c. 1135–1204) in his Commentary on the Mishnah (1173/4), Sanhedrin 10:1: “The Messianic age is when the Jews will regain their independence and all return to the land of Israel. The Messiah will be a very great king, he will achieve great fame, and his reputation among the gentile nations will be even greater than that of King Solomon. Nothing will change in the Messianic age, however, except that Jews will regain their independence. Rich and poor, strong and weak, will still exist. However it will be very easy for people to make a living, and with very little effort they will be able to accomplish very much. . . . it will be a time when the number of wise men will increase. . . . war shall not exist, and nation shall no longer lift up sword against nation. . . . The Messiah, a righteous and honest king, outstanding in wisdom, and close to God, will rule it. . . . All nations will return to the true religion with very little effort they will be able to accomplish very much. . . . It will be a time when the number of wise men will increase. . . . war shall not exist, and nation shall no longer lift up sword against nation. . . . The Messiah, a righteous and honest king, outstanding in wisdom, and close to God, will rule it. . . . All nations will return to the true religion and will no longer steal or oppress. . . . Our sages and prophets did not long for the Messianic age in order that they might rule the world and dominate the gentiles, the only thing they wanted was to be free for Jews to involve themselves with the Torah and its wisdom.”

4) Cf, Zion vol. III p. 228, (Nathan of Gaza, 1667) quoted in Gershom Scholem, “Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,” p. 314: “For if he were not the Redeemer, these deviations would not occur to him; when God lets His light shine over him, he commits many acts which are strange and wonderful in the eyes of the world, and that is proof of his truth.”

5) Yehuda Liebes, Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism (1993:107), offers some evidence that Sabbatai Tzvi wrote the treatise Raza de-Meheimanuta (Mystery of the True Faith), though it is more likely that the work was written by Miguel Abraham Cardozo (1626–1706), an earlier follower of Sabbatai Tzvi and the movement’s principal theologian after Nathan of Gaza. Sabbatai may have written another work, Mystery of the Godhead, or he may have communicated it to someone who wrote it. This work contains what may have been Sabbatai Tzvi’s central insight that Teferet should be the focus of religious devotion.

6) The High Priest during the First and Second Temple periods spoke the Tetragrammaton only once a year when he went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Today, the consonants are written as YHWH.

7) Nathan was reputed to be able to identify a person’s “soul root,” as Isaac Luria had done, and to prescribe a special practice or chant for the Tikkun (Healing) the soul required (Scholem 1978:249).

8) Sabbatai Tzvi had been fascinated with Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE–30 CE), Simon Bar Kochba (d. 135 CE), and David Alroy (fl. 1160), the latter he imitated, wearing green as did Alroy, whose name may mean “the inspired one” as he led his followers in Bagdad (Scholem 1973:241). Though the Talmud tells of the terrible punishment that Jesus of Nazareth was bound to receive for leading people astray (Be’equoth Mashiach, p. 43), Nathan of Gaza expounded that the Messiah (Sabbatai) can save anyone, even Jesus of Nazareth, whom Jews considered the messianic qelippoth (Scholem 1973:284–285). Jews of the time saw Christianity, from the generations of persecution, as the great evil in the world. The Talmud mentions the grim punishment that Jesus faced because he sought “to entice Israel and lead it astray.” But Sabbatai saw Jesus’ root as coming from absolute evil and out of this evil, good would grow, as Nathan of Gaza wrote: “And finally he [that is, the messiah] will restore [to holiness] his qelippah which is Jesus Christ” (Gershom 1973:285).

9) Leyb b. Ozer collected his descriptions, as quoted by Gershom Scholem, from travelers. Another interesting witness in the Ottoman Empire was French Catholic diplomat Chevalier De la Croix, who lived in Constantinople at the time. He also took a keen interest in the events and recorded them as they unfolded in his Mémoire (1684), where he summarized the extraordinary enthusiasm of a letter from a believer (1684:290–292). Scholem borrowed heavily from Chevalier De la Croix to reconstruct Sabbatianism’s early history.

10) Saint Paul’s preaching of “freedom from the Law” led to such sexual exuberance that Paul finally had to deal with it (I Corinthians 5:1). A later school of Paul also declared: “To the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15). In 1164 an Ismaili messianic group in Persia arose (Scholem 1971:164): Shiite Islam, it claimed, was but a shell covering the kernel of truth that emerged only by breaking its prohibitions through sacramental violation. Hassan II (reigning...
from 1164–68) proclaimed that the age of the Qiyamah (Resurrection) had arrived and commanded continual feasting and rejoicing (implying sexual liberation), with no fasting, since the Hidden Imam had now become visible and all the law of the Shari‘ah was void (Peters 2003:143–145).

11) It is doubtful that Sabbatai engaged in sexual rituals to prove his point before his apostasy, although there is some evidence that he began ritual sexual transgressions while in confinement on Gallipoli. The Turkish authorities, however, seem to have built a case against Sabbatai for this after his apostasy. Certainly Nathan of Gaza, as a devout Jew, would not have been open to sexual experimentation, if even to destroy the age of Beriah, yet Nathan promoted the idea that all prohibitions had been cancelled out, which included all sexual prohibitions.

12) The Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Formation) is one of the most ancient mystical texts (apart from the Bible). Scholars have called this work “gnostic-leaning” because of its focus on inner enlightenment. Parts of it, according to some analyses, are in the same style as the Mishnah, and so some date it to the second-century CE. It is also the first known work to mention the Sefirot: “Ten Sefirot of nothingness, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.”

13) Harold Bloom, Omens of Millennium (1996) p. 212: “Everything in Luria’s thought moves in great triple rhythm. God contracts or withdraws himself; this absence brings about the cosmological catastrophe that Luria called the ‘breaking of the vessels’; human prayer, study, and ecstatic contemplation bring about a mending that yet may restore a shattered world.”

14) Israel Sarug (fl. 1590–1610), posing as a student of Luria (which he had not been), also disseminated Luria’s teachings among the Jewish world from Vital’s stolen manuscripts, with his own interpretations (Scholem 1973:25–26). Yet Sarug was a gifted interpreter of Lurianic Kabbalah.

15) Laurence Fine (2003), Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship, pp. 80–81: “Vital provides us with the names of thirty-eight individuals who according to him made up Luria’s discipleship. . . . The fellowship was divided into four hierarchically ordered groups. The first, and most important, was composed of eleven men, listed in this order: Hayyim Vital, Jonathan Sagis, Joseph Arzin, Isaac Kohen, Gedaliah ha-Levi, Samuel Uceda, Judah Mishan, Abraham Gavriel, Shabbatai Menashe, Joseph ibn Tabul, and Elijah Falko (or Falkon). It is largely accepted that within a year Hayyim Vital emerged as the leading student, so that when the Arizal (Luria) died in 1572, at the age of 38, Vital succeeded him. Since the Arizal had left almost none of his teachings in writing, Vital began to write down everything he had learned from his master.”

16) The evidence is circumstantial that Isaac Sarug ended up with the manuscript copies and later became a kind of an Apostle of Lurianic Kabbalah to Italy, Salonika, and Poland (Silverman 1998:195–196).

17) Morris M. Faierstein, in “Traces of Lurianic Kabbalah: Texts and their Histories,” The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 103, no. 1 (Winter 2013) 101–106, wrote that Hayyim Vital kept all his manuscripts locked in a chest, allowing only a few scholars to read them every now and then. Theses scholars tried to memorize as much of the texts as they could before returning home to copy them down. Once, when Vital fell sick, Joshua ben Nun, a wealthy person in the area, bribed Vital’s brother to get the manuscripts, about six hundred pages. Ben Nun hired scholars to copy the manuscripts and returned them days later. It would take two hundred years, though, for the complete ideas of Luria to be gathered and published.

18) Gershom Scholem identified deeply with the writing of Franz Kafka and felt his work was the truest representation of Judaism, as a secular kabbalist. Scholem wrote: “Many exciting thoughts had led me [in the years 1916–1918] . . . to an intuitive affirmation of mystical propositions [Thesen] which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism. I later [found in Kafka] the most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line, an expression which, as a secular statement of the kabalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka’s writings in the halo of the canonical” (Cited in D. Biale, Kabbalah and Counter-History, p. 75, as quoted by Paul Mendes-Flohr in Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work, p. 16).

19) Christian sects that originated in the United States—the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Jehovah Witnesses (among many others)—have tended to overthrow denominational, institutional faith with their new visions.
In their own way, each mentioned above began with its own messianic figure or revelator: Joseph Smith (1805–1844), Ellen G. White (1827–1915), and Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) respectively. Messianism today tends to be more prevalent in the United States, yet this is not always the case. The Solar Temple sect from Switzerland and Quebec (1994–1997), founded by Joseph Di Mambro and Luc Jouret, rose to infamy with a mass suicide (of about fifty members) in 1994. Later, in 1995, another twenty or so joined them in death. And of course Shoko Asahara’s Aum Shin-rikyou in 1995 began mass-terror in Japan with its gassing of six thousand people in a Tokyo subway station. Two hundred seventy-five were seriously injured, with eight people dying. Later it was discovered that Aum Shin-rikyou had its own Buddhist-style kingdom with Asahara as its head.

20) The Sefer Zerubbabel (seventh-century CE) was a highly respected work in the Jewish world. Zerubbabel, whose name means “born in Babylon,” the last heir of the Davidic line through Solomon and Jeconiah, foretold the coming of a Messiah, whose name is Manahem ben Ammiel (the Messiah ben David). This Messiah would appear nine hundred-ninety years after the destruction of the Second Temple disguised as a beggar. This would have been around the year 1058.

21) The Cossacks, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki (c. 1595–1657), as they rebelled against Polish rule, tried to establish an independent Ukraine and the Jewish population became their target. They killed between 100,000 to 300,000 Jews and destroyed about three hundred Jewish communities. They saw the Jews as loyal to the Polish crown.

22) Gershom Scholem’s numerous studies show that Moses de Leon wrote the Sefer ha-Zohar, parts of which were first published in Spain around 1280 (de Leon lived near Castile) (Scholem 1941:159). Generally, Scholem based his conclusions on the Zohar’s awkward and eccentric Aramaic grammatical constructions (largely invented by de Leon for his purposes), his use of medieval Spanish and Portuguese words and phrases transliterated into Aramaic throughout the work, with the author’s complete lack of topographical understanding of Galilee, where most of the scenes take place (Scholem 1972:222; 225–28). While de Leon took concepts from such works as the Sefer Yetzirah and the Sefer ha-Bahir, his original spins have been transformative in ways that continue to alter world religious-consciousness. The Zohar is so compelling and so original that it has to be considered one of the great aesthetic triumphs in world literature.

23) The Jewish centers of learning during late antiquity in Iraq were Nehardea, Nisibis, Mahoza (near present day Bagdad), Pumbeditha (near Anbar), and the Sura Academy near what today is Fallujah.

24) Most Jews believed that prophecy had not ended with the Bible (completed in its present form by about 200 BCE).


26) In Lurianic Kabbalah the “vessels” (kelim) were created for channeling divinity (Sefirot) in the material world. But since they could not contain the power and brilliance of the divine, they broke apart, with divine sparks exiled in the Olam Tohu (The World of Chaos). When the vessels shattered from the intensity of divine light (Ohr), the entire Sefirot became discordant, resulting in a divine paralysis. Kabbalists single out Gevrurah (judgment) as the Sefirah most responsible for the imbalance, with judgment, severity, and harshness increasing the shattering; the Sefirot then became somewhat separate entities and lost something of their original wholeness, yet are mending in the process of Tikkun Olam. Restoration revolves around and emerges from the sixth Sefirah, Te’feret (Beauty).

27) Scholem wrote: “It is these sparks (Netzutzot) that now shine even in those spheres over which evil gains control. Their activity is strangely ambivalent: on the one hand, these sparks animate evil, guaranteeing its existence and its power of action; on the other, they are like captives, awaiting their own redemption from evil.”

28) The Sefer ha-Zohar (Book of Splendor or Radiance) is one of the great triumphs of mystical literature. A literary and
mystical genius, Moses de Leon wrote in a simple Aramaic (a language he was not completely fluent in and in fact created for his purposes). Today the Zohar is, with the Talmud and Tanakh, a sacred writing of modern Judaism. Kabbalists, however, attribute the Zohar to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (c. 135–170 CE), a second century sage who lived in Galilee (his tomb in Safed, Israel remains a sacred pilgrimage site today). Moses de Leon may have felt this venerable sage was transmitting the Zohar directly to him.

29) Sabbatianism has obvious similarities with Christianity, but the Jews living in the Ottoman Empire who founded this movement would have had little contact with Christianity, because it was either nonexistent or not visible, with some exceptions in Jerusalem, Salonika, and elsewhere. It is doubtful that devout Jews, as the founders were, would have had any extended or deep engagement with Christian doctrines. More likely the forces that were at work in Sabbatianism were from the internal dynamics of Judaism itself, a dynamic that created early Christianity.

30) Astonishingly the Sefer Temunah speaks of a missing letter to the Hebrew alphabet, a consonant that is yet to be revealed and this shows why the creation cannot be complete or whole until the missing letter is in place.

31) The great Safed mystics Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) and Isaac Luria believed the Shemittot described “spiritual” states rather than cosmic cycles.

32) Prior to the shattering and the unfolding of the Sefirot and the Four Worlds, Adam Kadmon’s abode was in the pristine world with God as Divine awareness and the material creation unfolded:

\[
\begin{align*}
AK & (Adam Kadmon) \\
Atziluth & (World of Emanation) \\
Beriah & (World of Creation) \\
Yetzirah & (World of Formation) \\
Assiah & (World of Action)
\end{align*}
\]

33) Yet, Sabbatai Tzvi himself, at certain points, did win Jewish converts to Islam (Scholem 1973:847), which may have been part of an understanding with the Sultan and the Sultan’s personal minister. At least this was the expectation they had of Sabbatai—for Sabbatai it seems converts were “feathers in his cap,” showing he was living up to expectations of an agreement that resulted in the sparing of his life.

34) Daniel 9:24–27 speaks of the “seventy weeks of years,” from when Israel was conquered by Babylon (597 BCE) and the leaders taken into exile, to the final redemption by the anointed prince’s return, who makes an atonement and anoints the Holy of Holies.

35) Others pondered about what kind of a Messiah Sabbatai Tzvi was. If of the House of David, then the age of redemption was at hand. If of the “House of Joseph,” then he must suffer and Sabbatai is only a forerunner of the House of David’s Messiah (Scholem 1973:784).

36) Richard Rubenstein, Aristotle’s Children (2003:143): “Cathar ethics followed inexorably from this major premise. God sent Jesus to show us the way to escape the vicious chain of sexual reproduction. Each person should therefore see, like Christ, to purify himself by loving his neighbor and overthrowing the tyranny of the flesh.” What was so threatening about this doctrine of attempting to free oneself from earthly desires and of loving one’s neighbor? It was dynamic and it effectively challenged Church authority.

37) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), a fervent Protestant, who called Christianity (Calvinism?) the “Absolute Religion,” also believed the stress on equality, lifestyle, and work fostered a personal dignity that ultimately gave rise to demands for equal political recognition. The American and French revolutions were the fruits of this.

38) The First Temple (586 BCE) and the Second Temple (70 CE), according to tradition, were destroyed on this day, the ninth of Av—the Bar Kokhba Revolt (135 CE) was also put down on this day. Sabbatai Tzvi was born on the ninth of Av, 1626, which fell on the Sabbath. Hence, he was named “Sabbatai” in honor of the Sabbath. Some traditions pointed to the Messiah’s birth on the ninth of Av.
Some other names Papulars used: Izmirlis, Kapandshis, Smyrnians, Kavalieros, and Koniosos.

Sabbatian violations of the sacred centered on three areas: 1) violations of holy days and dietary laws, 2) violations of theology of the divine, particularly the Ten Commandments that forbade idolatry. Here Sabbatians tended to have four deities (all human beings), with one female, similar in some ways to the Christian Trinity, and 3) sexual violations that included ritual adultery, sex with menstruating women, public masturbation, heterosexual incest (violating Leviticus 7:25; 18:1–26), and sexual hospitality—with the male host or head of family offering his daughters or wife to guests (Maciejko 2011:32–33). Perhaps the most famous is a ceremony in which Sabbatians danced around a naked woman, who represented the Torah Atziluth (Maciejko 2011:200).

The “blood libel” was from Europe’s history of anti-Semitism that stretched back hundreds of years by Frank’s time; it centered on the horrible accusation that the Talmud required Jews to use Christian blood in religious celebrations, especially in Passover matzah (unleavened bread). Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), in Canterbury Tales (“Prioress’ Tale”), highlighting the accusation that Jews killed Christian children for this purpose, showed in the devout nun a diseased psyche and underdeveloped spirituality. Frankists used obscure Talmudic passages (Maciejko 2011:103–6; 110–16) in support of the Bishop Kajetan Ignacy Soltýk’s (1715–1788) fresh attempt to revive these ancient accusations (13 Jews in Poland were sentenced to death because of him). The Roman Catholic Church, however, after the case went to Rome, rebutted these charges after it found translators who after the reading the Aramaic passages in the Talmud claimed these were misinterpreted.

There is still no definitive figure for the number of converts. Was it three thousand individuals that eventually converted or three thousand families? If the latter the number is incredible, a great shock to the Jewish communities everywhere that so many abandoned their ancestral faith. Pawel Maciejko (The Mixed Multitude) in his chapter “How Rabbis and Priests Created the Frankist Movement,” shows that the Frankist movement would not have become separate from Judaism had not extremists from both the Christian and Jewish sides been in such deep conflict over doctrinal boundaries.

The Frankists negotiated with the Polish Roman Catholic Church to keep their Jewish identity (Scholer 1978:296): 1) to keep Kashrut (kosher) dietary laws; 2) to keep their Jewish names (they would also take baptismal names); 3) to keep their beards and sidelocks; 4) to continue to wear Jewish clothing; 5) to continue to study the Zohar and other kabbalistic books; 6) to celebrate the Sabbath (they would also participate in Sunday Church worship); 7) and to marry only among themselves (Maciejko 2011:144). While the Church publicly balked at some of these (Maciejko 2011:154), the Frankist community indeed realized these goals, if only through attrition.

The Church of the Latter Day Saints in Jesus Christ (commonly known as the Mormons) is also an heir to Sabbatianism’s sexual theurgy. Known today for their high moral standards, strong families, and close association with the Republican Party of the United States, the Mormons in their first sixty years or so, from about 1840, practiced polygamy (what they called “Celestial Marriages”). Only Celestial Marriage could fulfill the non-Creator God’s purpose of having souls enter the physical realm. Further, polygamy propelled the Mormon people toward personal divinity, toward becoming a God in one’s own right. Mormons and kabalists have many parallels. Both saw the Divine as dependent on humanity to fulfill Divine purposes. As in Sabbatianism with the violation of sexual prohibitions leading to the age of Atziluth, Mormon polygamy was a gateway to the Divine realm. Joseph Smith (1805–1844), the Mormon Church’s visionary founder, may have had eighty-four wives (Bloom 1992:96–111), though Smith’s Mormon biographer, Fawn Brody, lists only forty-nine official Celestial Marriages (Brody 1945:334–347). Smith’s successor, Brigham Young (1801–1877), may have had fifty-five wives that produced fifty-seven children. In the 1890s, the United States government forced the Mormon Church to abandon polygamy in order for Utah to achieve statehood.

Gershom Scholem’s discovery of Joseph Eybeschutz’s secret Sabbatianism led to outraged condemnations from
Israel’s Orthodox community, which attacked Scholem personally (Dan 1987:307–309). The Orthodox community could not accept that someone who had grown up studying the Talmud and other sacred writings of Judaism could fall victim to Sabbatianism, since this violated the deep Jewish sense of the protective power of the Torah. But this, indeed, was the case.

47) Nietzsche had asked: “Why does man not see things? He is himself standing in the way: he conceals things” (Nietzsche Daybreak 1997).

References


Appendix

Ein Sof
(Beyond Infinity)

The Tree of Life The Sefirot (emanations) From Estatic Kabbalah, p. 16 by Rabbi David E. Cooper