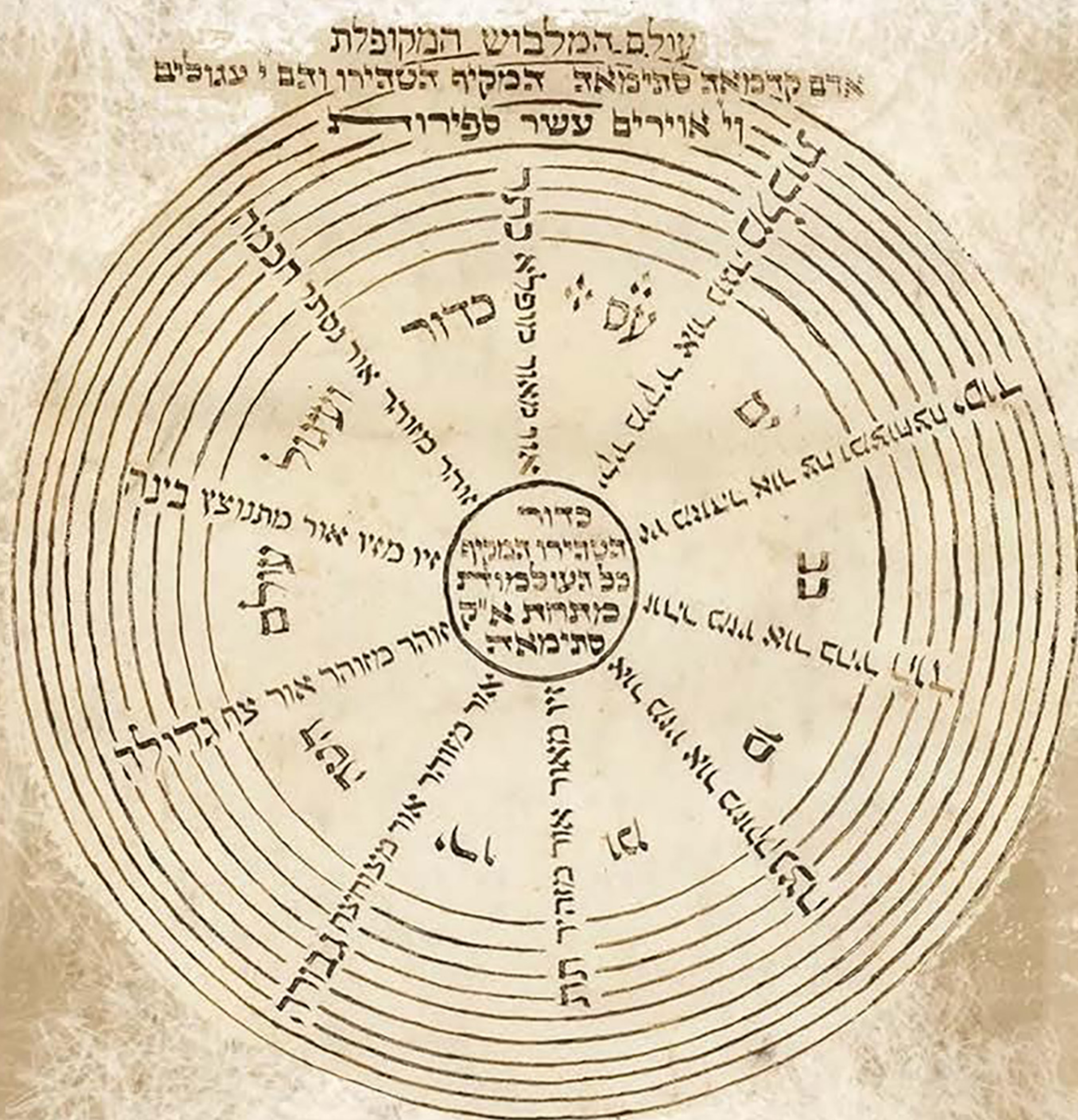


AS MESSIANISM TURNS TO HERESY

Gershom Scholem

*The Regenstein Chair Lectures on Lurianic Kabbalah and Shabbatai Tzevi
at Hebrew Union College Cincinnati, 1966*



Edited and Introduced by
Avraham Oriah Kelman and Ariel Evan Mayse

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For our families, with love beyond measure

Shlomit, Peli Zeev, and Yedidya; Adina Ora Naama,
Ezra Elimelech Meir, Menahem Nahum Eliyahu,
and Daniel Ohr Yisrael

It was to an excessive reliance on reason when dealing with the suprarational, and a corresponding absence of trust in mystical intuition that heresy was due.

– Evelyn Underhill

Nay, the narrow categories of the schoolmen, applied to the transcendent mysteries of religion, do greater violence to their truth than the soft, and vague, and vanishing tones with which the Mystics shadow forth in their language the distant objects which transcend the horizon of the human understanding. As to the charge of heresy, we must consider by whom it was brought. There is something in the word Heretic that makes one shudder – yet what would the world have been without Heretics?

The Saturday Review, January 9, 1858, p. 42

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Beyond the affordance of time constantly demanded by such projects, our spouses and children have given us wisdom, critical insight, and generosity of spirit. This is for you, as always, and with boundless love.

Introduction

Finding a Narrative

“Whoever is concerned with kabbalistic studies – under whatever aspect and in whatever capacity – is, almost by definition, a disciple of Professor G. Scholem.”¹

R.J.Z. Werblowsky

The young Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem (1897–1982) seemed an unlikely candidate for becoming the preeminent historian of Jewish mysticism.² Raised in a highly assimilated family in Berlin, his secular upbringing afforded the young Scholem scant connection to the literatures and practices of Judaism.³ He was an intellectually curious youth, however, and, like many of his generation, Scholem came to reject the bourgeois sensibility of his parents and siblings. He set out in search of a more dynamic way to conceive of Jewish history, studying religious texts

1. Raphael Jehudah Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), xii.
2. Studies of Scholem’s life and legacy have grown into a subfield of their own. For a few recent biographies, see David Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); David Biale, *Master of the Kabbalah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Noam Zadoff, *Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back: An Intellectual Biography* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018); Daniel Weidner, *The Father of Jewish Mysticism: The Writing of Gershom Scholem*, trans. Sage Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).
3. See Jay Howard Geller, *The Scholems: A Story of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Noam Zadoff, *Werner Scholem: A German Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

and briefly experimenting with traditional Jewish observance, but he quickly abandoned Orthodoxy in favor of socialism and the romantic philosophy of Martin Buber. His youthful diaries, published long after his death, reveal the young Scholem to be an intellectual rambler. Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra – a character much beloved by Scholem – he wandered the mountains of intellectual history and became particularly enamored with the mythic, demonic, and anarchic realms of religion.⁴ Though interested in mathematics and philosophy, Scholem, largely an autodidact, chose to devote himself to the study of Kabbalah.

This engagement with the textual sources of Jewish mysticism led Scholem to commit himself to writing the philological and intellectual history of Kabbalah. The undertaking was, for Scholem, part of a larger project of cultural renewal. He was drawn to Zionism under the influence of Buber, and he sought to work toward Jewish political reawakening, spiritual rebirth, and the resurrection of Hebrew as a language of Jewish creativity and expression.⁵ He settled in Palestine in 1923, and over his long and influential career in the decades that followed he authored an enormous number of books, articles, and essays on the history and development of Kabbalah. Even as his theses and theories continue to be revised and challenged by later scholars, Scholem's vast influence upon the study of Jewish mysticism – and Jewish intellectual history writ large – is undeniable.⁶

Much as he rejected the secular liberal German ideals of his family, Scholem rebelled against the rationalism of previous generations of scholars who had either ignored or maligned Kabbalah.⁷ Scholem, by contrast,

4. See Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 136, 148–50, 188.
5. In a 1914 diary entry, the young Scholem records: "A month later I left Orthodoxy. It wasn't an easy decision and it caused quite a stir, but I'm now sailing full speed ahead in the direction of Martin Buber. I've also become a socialist." See Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 26; and Biale, *Master of the Kabbalah*, 12.
6. Daniel Abrams, "Defining Modern Academic Scholarship: Gershom Scholem and the Establishment of a New (?) Discipline," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 9 (2000): 267–302.
7. For an example of Scholem's indictment of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars,

argued that mysticism was the vital force that animated Judaism.⁸ He painstakingly assembled what had appeared to be diffuse texts, figures, and historical moments into a coherent narrative stretching from antiquity into the early decades of the nineteenth century. Scholem described these mystical “trends” and movements as unfolding from, and against, one another in a series of direct – if dialectical – developments.⁹ He presented one version of this monumental history in a series of lectures delivered at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1938, later publishing them as *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941). This gripping historical drama, a tour de force of erudition and intellectual achievement that opened the world of Kabbalah to an untold number of new readers, has been republished countless times and has never been out of print.

The themes of madness, anarchy, and heresy dominated Scholem’s scholarly writings and, it seems, his own religious imagination. The many faces of messianism – the subject of the lectures in this volume – occupied a central place in Scholem’s historiography as well as his political thinking.¹⁰ “Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations,” claimed Scholem, “has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the

see Gershom Scholem, “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 51–71; and see Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*. For a different reading of Scholem’s role in the academic study of Jewish mysticism, see Abrams, “Defining Modern Academic Scholarship,” 267–302.

8. Scholem, “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” 51–71.
9. See Moshe Idel, “Rabbinism versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem’s Phenomenology of Judaism,” *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 281–96; Moshe Idel, “On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship,” in *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 154–56; Joseph Dan, “גרשם שלום: בין היסטוריה להיסטוריוגרפיה,” *Binah* 2 (1989): 219–49; Boaz Huss, “Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and The Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism,” *Modern Judaism* 25 (2005): 141–58; and Pawel Maciejko, “Gershom Scholem’s Dialectic of Jewish History: The Case of Sabbatianism,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3 (2004): 207–20.
10. Moshe Idel, “Messianic Scholars: On Early Israeli Scholarship, Politics and Messianism,” *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 1 (2012): 22–53.

community.”¹¹ This longing for personal, national, and cosmic deliverance – what Scholem often called “the messianic impulse” – would take on many different forms and often combined with “the elements of the catastrophic and the visions of doom.”¹² Cataclysm was, according to Scholem, not the opposite of salvation but a dialectical necessity for the redemption that “cannot be realized without dread and ruin.”¹³ Though they had remained a constant feature of rabbinic Judaism and classical Kabbalah, he argued that yearnings for salvation and energetic attempts to catalyze redemption were particularly strong currents in the influential theology that emerged in sixteenth-century Safed. This eruption of mystical creativity and messianic expectation, as he interpreted it, fed directly into the misadventure of Shabbatai Tzevi, the infamous and captivating figure to whom Scholem devoted not only the present lectures, but the lion’s share of his career across six decades.

Tracing the Redemption

The true story of the star-crossed Messiah of Izmir, as Scholem reconstructed the narrative, actually started over a century before his birth. This beginning was marked by a cataclysm: the tragic and shocking expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, which ended a golden period of Iberian Jewish life, albeit one that had slowly been eroding. The exiled Spanish Jews were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean and Europe, some as individuals and others as whole communities, and many took up residence within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. While the economic situation in much of the land was rather poor, the small Galilean town of Safed boasted financial opportunity (especially in the textile industry) and stable living conditions. Particularly attractive to Jewish mystics was the fact that this mountain city is located near the burial

11. Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).
12. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding,” 9, and Gershom Scholem, “Messianism – A Never-Ending Quest,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 108.
13. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding,” 13.

ground of several important sages, including Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, the illustrious hero of the *Zohar*. This confluence of conditions allowed sixteenth-century Safed to become the home of a great revival of Jewish spiritual disciplines, including halakhah, poetry, biblical interpretation, and above all, Kabbalah.¹⁴

Perhaps as a direct response to this catastrophe, claimed Scholem, the religious categories of exile and redemption were of great concern to the mystics of Safed. Foremost among them was Isaac Luria (1534–1572), whose life and thought occupied a central place in Scholem's historical narrative.¹⁵ Whereas previous Kabbalists had focused their messianic longing on the “quest for a way back to the creation,”¹⁶ Luria and his colleagues metabolized the memory of historical catastrophe into a dramatic new myth in which creation – from the formation of the cosmos to the fall of Adam – prefigured redemption.¹⁷ This tale begins with an abstract and endless God (*Eyn Sof*) whose self-imposed contraction of the infinite light (*tzimtzum*) left a vacuum in which creation could take place.¹⁸ Into this void was projected a beam of light, refracted through an array of ten vessels – the *sefirot*, also referred to as *adam qadmon* (the “Primordial Man”). But these divine vessels shattered in a tragic moment called *shevirat hakelim*, and sparks of God's light were scattered throughout the cosmos and held captive within the “husks” (*qelippot*). After this calamity, the *sefirot* emanated into the void once more, now stabilized and recombined into five basic divine constellations or personalities

14. See, for example, Eyal Davidson, “חכמי צפת בין השנים 1540–1615: מעמדם הדתי והחברתי,” PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2009; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 41–77; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *צפת והתרבות, תודעת מקרא: צפת והתרבות, תודעת משנה, תודעת מדרש* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2022).
15. Scholem's writings on Lurianic Kabbalah have been collected in Gershom Scholem, *אוסף מאמרים מאת גרשם שלום: קבלת האר”י*, ed. Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles, CA: Cherub Press, 2008).
16. Scholem, “Messianism – An Unending Quest,” 109. See also Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 245.
17. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 245.
18. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 260–64; Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 128–31. See also Moshe Idel, “על תולדות מושג ה'צמצום' בקבלה ובמחקר,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992): 59–112.

(*partzufim*). Those scattered traces of sacred vitality must be released from the husks, redeemed by acts of human devotion. “The historical process and its innermost soul, the religious act of the Jew,” claimed Scholem, “prepare the way for the final restitution of all the scattered and exiled lights and sparks.”¹⁹ This myth, he argued, pushed the messianic impulse to the heart of Luria’s kabbalistic system.

These acute yearnings for redemption fed the meteoric rise of Shabbatai Tzevi (1626–1673), whose story Scholem told through several major monographs – first in Hebrew, then in English – as well as in countless essays, composed across nearly five decades of active research. Shabbatai Tzevi was born in the prosperous economic hub of Izmir (located in present-day Turkey). Growing up in this Ottoman city, surrounded by a community descended from Spanish conversos, Shabbatai Tzevi proved an adept student. He was given to periods of intense piety and asceticism that were increasingly coupled with severe mood swings and eventually characterized by the flagrant transgression of normative boundaries of Jewish law. In 1648, still in his early twenties, Shabbatai Tzevi declared himself the messiah.²⁰ He was then excommunicated, exiled, and forced into a peripatetic existence for the next decade.

This trajectory shifted when Shabbatai Tzevi met the young and talented scholar Nathan Ashkenazi of Gaza (ca. 1643/4–1680) in 1665.²¹ Scholem frequently demeaned Shabbatai Tzevi’s originality, creativity, and erudition (“he does not appear to have raised himself above mediocrity”), describing Nathan, an accomplished scholar of Lurianic and other types of Kabbalah from a rabbinic family, as Shabbatai Tzevi’s theological and philosophical Boswell.²² Nathan had a seasoned reputation for being able to divine people’s sins and to give them the correct spiritual remedy

19. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 274.

20. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, 88–90 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Halperin, *Testimonies*, 5.

21. On Nathan of Gaza’s life and prophetic teachings, see Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 199–325, Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 56–88; Isaiah Tishby, *נתיבי אמונה ומינות* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1982), 30–51; and Yehuda Liebes, “המשיחיות השבתאית,” in *סוד האמונה השבתאית: קובץ מאמרים* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), 15–17.

22. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 293.

(*tiqqun*),²³ and Shabbatai Tzevi may well have traveled to him for this purpose. In February or March 1665, Nathan experienced a prophetic vision that identified Shabbatai Tzevi as the messiah, which was confirmed by another revelation that he received on Shavu'ot the same year.²⁴ Nathan thus became Shabbatai Tzevi's prophet and his social and theological architect, using his literary propaganda to catalyze messianic claims into what emerged as a mass movement. The spread of Lurianic Kabbalah throughout Europe and the Ottoman Empire undoubtedly primed these communities for such a messianic outburst; however, Shabbatai Tzevi's success cannot be explained by circumstance alone – it was also rooted in his dynamic and theatrical charisma.

With multitudes of visionaries publicly championing his cause, and with the support of a large percentage of Turkish Jewry, in late 1665 Shabbatai Tzevi set out to usurp the crown from the Ottoman sultan. His audacity was rewarded with imprisonment in 1666, and later that year he converted to Islam, most likely after having been threatened with death by the sultan. For many believers, this was the end of the road. However, for others, the messianic fever did not end here, with some of Shabbatai Tzevi's faithful followers reinterpreting his apostasy as an integral – if paradoxical – step of the redemptive process.²⁵ He was exiled to Dulcigno in 1673, where he died three years later. Shabbatai Tzevi's death was another blow to his messianic candidacy, but many committed believers maintained the faith and struggled to make sense of these events as the revolutionary momentum of Sabbatianism went underground.²⁶

"I have written this book on the basis of a particular dialectical view of Jewish history and the forces acting within it," says Scholem in the

23. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 214–15; Halperin, *Testimonies*, 4–5; Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 62.

24. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 206–7, 217–18.

25. In at least some instances, Shabbatai Tzevi seems to have hoped that his followers would convert along with him. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 668–93; Halperin, *Testimonies*, 11.

26. Gershom Scholem, "The Historical Development of Jewish Mysticism," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1997, 153).

introduction to his monograph on Shabbatai Tzevi.²⁷ The spiritual power unleashed by Sabbatianism, he claimed, was an intensified form of the religious impulses at play in all types of Jewish mysticism. Heresy is distinguished from the anarchic vitality of Kabbalah by a very thin line, and the advent of Sabbatianism – itself inspired by the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah – sparked an enormous variety of responses. Previous scholars had dismissed Shabbatai Tzevi and Nathan of Gaza as spiritual charlatans, thus failing to grasp the historical and religious significance of this movement. “The reason for this obtuseness,” wrote Scholem, “is obviously the rationalist outlook, which narrows the historical perspective and prevents an unbiased understanding of phenomena such as the mystical movement in Judaism.”²⁸ They misunderstood Sabbatianism and could not see it for what it was: “A movement which shook the House of Israel to its very foundations and has revealed not only the vitality of the Jewish people but also the deep, dangerous, and destructive dialectics inherent in the messianic idea [that] cannot be understood without considering questions that reach down to fundamentals.”²⁹

Enthralled by the movement’s paradoxical theology and captivated by the personalities of Shabbatai Tzevi and Nathan of Gaza, Scholem took delight in the decades of detective work required to piece together this episode of Jewish history.³⁰ His first major essay on Sabbatianism appeared in 1928, and the subject was already central to Scholem’s writing and teaching in the 1930s.³¹ Recent archival work has suggested that a lecture given by Scholem in 1939 at the Schocken library may have been a moment of transition, with Scholem suggesting that the mystic may have suffered from manic depression (known today as bipolar disorder)

27. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, xxii.

28. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, xi.

29. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, xii.

30. See Biale, *Master of the Kabbalah*, 171, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “גרשם שלום,” *HaAretz*, December 27, 1957, 11, for a description of this historian as a “detective who sleuths and seeks to understand what happened.” Below, in Lecture 6, Scholem agrees: “I went into it for twenty years as a detective, as a sleuth, as a *balash* [detective].”

31. Jonatan Meir and Shinichi Yamamoto, “הספר הפתוח ומחקר השבתאות,” in Gershom Scholem, 1940–1939 תולדות התנועה השבתאית: הרצאות באוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים, ed. Jonatan Meir and Shinichi Yamamoto (Tel Aviv: JTS-Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 2018), 14–15.

and debating the issue with the many doctors and psychiatrists in attendance.³² In 1955 his student Rivka Schatz (Uffenheimer) published her summaries of a series of lectures on the Sabbatian movement from its beginning to the eighteenth century Scholem had given at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem over the previous year.³³ Scholem's first monograph on Shabbatai Tzevi, published in Hebrew in 1957, caused a huge splash and was widely reviewed in a range of cultural and scholarly venues.³⁴ Scholem continued to revise his work as new sources enabled him to reconsider certain facts and corroborate others, eventually building toward his *chef d'oeuvre*: an enormously influential English-language biography of Shabbatai Tzevi, published in 1973.³⁵

The dialectical links and hinges of Scholem's historical narrative have been problematized by recent research. The close connection between Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbatianism has given way to an understanding that an enormous variety of Jewish mystical ideas and texts were circulating in the seventeenth century; Sabbatianism may well have generated widespread interest in Lurianic Kabbalah rather than the other way around.³⁶ A similar reversal can be seen with regard to Scholem's gambit assessing Sabbatianism as a partial catalyst of Jewish modernity, from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to early Zionism.³⁷

32. Jonatan Meir and Shinichi Yamamoto, *Gershom Scholem and the Research of Sabbatianism* (Jerusalem: Blima Books, 2021), 49–51.
33. *פרשת השבתאות*, ed. Rivka Schatz (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1955). These lectures were reprinted recently with a new preface and annotations, see *פרשת השבתאות*, ed. Avi Elqayam (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019).
34. Biale, *Master of the Kabbalah*, 170–71.
35. See Scholem's letter to Renee Goddard from Nov. 16, 1972 in *Briefe* (München: C.H. Beck, 1994–1999), 3:40; and, inter alia, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 191n235, 401n153, and 780n253. See also Yaacob Dweck, "Introduction to the New Princeton Classics Edition," in *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), lviii.
36. Moshe Idel, "'One from a Town, Two from a Clan': The Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Reexamination," *Jewish History* 7, no. 2 (1993): 79–104; Ze'ev Gries, *ספרות ההנהגות: תולדותיה ומקומה בחיי חסידיו של הבעש"ט* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 41–102.
37. Jacob Katz, "The Suggested Relationship between Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform," in *Divine Law in Human Hands: Case Studies in Halakhic Flexibility* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1988), esp. 23; Shmuel Werses, *השכלה ושבתאות*:

Scholars have also rightfully noted that Scholem downplayed the social dimensions of the Sabbatian movement.³⁸ He largely ignored the influence of the political and economic shifts of the seventeenth century and diminished the important role of women in the movement's development and spread.³⁹ Among the deluge of prophets championing the reign of Shabbatai Tzevi, many were female, and, perhaps more than Nathan's own cerebral texts, these popular preachers were instrumental in convincing multitudes that the prodigal son of Izmir was the messiah.⁴⁰

Scholem's compelling narrative presents Sabbatianism as an internal phenomenon driven forward by intellectual and spiritual currents within Judaism. He had a capacious sense of intellectual history and employed comparative perspectives, but this breadth was often occluded by his commitment to charting an insular vision of Jewish history.⁴¹ This dedication to the particularly Jewish contours of Sabbatianism led him to deny the influence of external social or intellectual forces. While he did note the striking similarities between Sabbatianism and fervent Christian

תולדותיו של מאבק (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1988), esp. 265–67. See also Hannah Arendt, "Jewish History Revised," in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 303; and Haviva Pedaya, "זרמים ראשיים במיסטיקה היהודית בפרספקטיבה של מגמות," in Gershom Scholem, *זרמים ראשיים במיסטיקה היהודית*, trans. Cedric Cohen Skalli, ed. Dov Elbaum (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2016), 423.

38. Jacob Barnai, *שבתאות: היבטים חברתיים* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2000).
39. See David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 133–89; Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi 1666–1816*, trans. Deborah Greniman (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011); and Cengiz Şişman, *The Burden of Silence: Sabbatai Sevi and the Evolution of the Ottoman-Turkish Dönmes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 34–38.
40. Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 121–22.
41. Dweck, "Introduction," I. See also Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 15; and, in the present volume, Lecture 12: "... what's going on in the minds of believers and how new exegesis coming up in this case of Sabbatianism, certainly not essentially under Christian inspiration, but because of the inner drive and immanent logic of their own beliefs, whatever may have been there some tenets or other ideas. But, certainly the main point here is this utterly Jewish attempt to read the *Jewish* texts and sources in the light of a new experience."

messianic movements, such as the Quakers, he tended to downplay the historical importance of these similarities, arguing that the Sabbatian “messianic awakening was nourished from internal sources.”⁴² Moreover, while he noted, in passing, similarities to Christian theology, Scholem’s Eurocentric perspective, characteristic to the German and Israeli intellectual atmospheres from which he hailed, overlooked almost entirely the immediate setting of the movement within the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic world. Later scholars have delved into the similarities and connections to Islamic theology in order to recontextualize the Sabbatian movement in its place and time, and to use these contexts to shed new light on its religiosity.⁴³

The reading of Sabbatianism advanced by Scholem highlights the movement’s political implications, but others have argued that Sabbatianism was first and foremost an attempt at radical theological and religious renewal, and that its success in capturing the hearts of so many should be seen in this light.⁴⁴ Recent scholarship has questioned Scholem’s analysis of Shabbatai Tzevi’s odd gestures, called “strange deeds” (*ma’asim zarim*) in the movement’s own lexicon, arguing that these were attempts to fulfill God’s personal, private revelations rather than random, or haphazard, antinomian breaches.⁴⁵ Scholem portrayed

42. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 101, and see also 93–102, 420, 547–48.

43. Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, ix, 12–40, 110–12; Michael Heyd, “The Jewish Quaker: Christian Perceptions of Sabbatai Zevi as an Enthusiast,” *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 234–65; Richard H. Popkin, “Christian Interest and Concerns about Sabbatai Zevi,” *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture* 173 (2001): 91–106; Liebes, “המשיחיות השבתאית,” 19; Yehuda Liebes, “יחסו של שבתי צבי להמרת דתו,” in סוד תורה של יחסו של שבתי צבי להמרת דתו (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), 30–34; and Şişman, *Burden*, esp. 3–4; Avi Elqayam “בין שבתאות לאסלאם,” and “בין שבתאות לנצרות,” in פרשת תורה השבתאית, ed. Avi Elqayam (Los Angeles, CA: Cherub Press, 2019), 12–56.

44. Liebes, “המשיחיות השבתאית,” 9–14; and Abraham Elqayam, סוד האמונה בכתבי נתן, PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1993.

45. Liebes, “המשיחיות השבתאית,” 14–15, 18; Liebes, “יחסו של שבתי צבי,” 20–26; Yehuda Liebes, “Sabbetai Sevi’s Religious Faith,” in *Studies in Jewish Myth and Messianism*, trans. Batya Stein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 110–11; Pawel Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2017), xxviii; Elliot R.

Shabbatai Tzevi's conversion as little more than a "façade," but Pawel Maciejko has shown that the syncretistic, "transreligious" yearnings of Sabbatianism were key to the movement's experiential power and the openness of its theology beyond the threshold of Judaism.⁴⁶ "It is not merely that different religions 'exerted influence' on Sabbatian groups or that some of their tenets were 'absorbed' by the Sabbatians," claims Maciejko, but "it is that combining elements of different religions became a nexus of a religious program in itself."⁴⁷

Yet Scholem's writings on Sabbatianism remain classics even as so many of his theses have been steadily revised and challenged.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy, too, that Scholem produced little consequential analysis of Lurianic Kabbalah after *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, despite the enormous importance of the spiritual renaissance of Safed to his narrative.⁴⁹ Rather than the abstract mythic theology of Luria, it was the dynamic, anarchic, and intimate God of Sabbatai Tzevi – and the

Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 277–78; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Ascesis, Hypernomianism, and the Excess of Lack: Semiotic Transfiguration of the Somatic," in *Accounting for the Commandments in Medieval Judaism*, ed. Jeremy P. Brown and Marc Herman (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 260–75; Maoz Kahana, "שבתי צבי: איש ההלכה," *Zion* 81, no. 3/4 (2016): 391–433; Maoz Kahana, "Cosmos and Nomos – Sacred Space and Legal Action, from Rabbi Yosef Karo to Shabbatai Tzevi," *El Prezente* 10 (2016): 143–53; Even Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 147, noted that seeming transgressions were "positive commandments to Sabbatai and acts of *tiqqun*, which he performed at a superior, divine behest." See also Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 224, 228, 235. Classical Sabbatianism should thus be distinguished from the movement started by Jacob Frank in the eighteenth century that celebrated the destruction of all norms and conventions, see Gershom Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 78–141; Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755–1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Jay Michaelson, "Conceptualizing Jewish Antinomianism in the Teachings of Jacob Frank," *Modern Judaism* 37, no. 3 (2017): 338–62.

46. Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy*, xxi; and Pawel Maciejko, "הסכנות והתענוגות שבסיניקריזם," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 23 (2011): 249–78.
47. Maciejko, *Sabbatian Heresy*, xxiv
48. Dweck, "Introduction," lix.
49. On this striking lacuna, see the comments by Joseph Dan cited in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 366n14.

figure of the fallen messiah himself – that seems to have taken root in Scholem's imagination. He labored on these subjects for fifty years, dying without fulfilling his dream of tracing the development of Sabbatianism after Shabbatai Tzevi's apostasy and the movement's fragmentation into many and various forms. Why, then, did Scholem work tirelessly to pull this irrational mystical redeemer from the margins of history?

A Jewish Messiah

Scholem often denied – quite vociferously – that his philological or historical investigations were grounded in personal interests or concerns. Attacked by figures like Baruch Kurzweil, who argued that Scholem emphasized the anarchic dimensions of Sabbatianism as an advocate, Scholem defended himself as a chronicler of the past: “I am not a Sabbatian, nor am I Orthodox, I seek nothing but the truth.”⁵⁰ He frequently spoke of historical philology, his own work included, as a pure science untouched by the subjectivity of other interpretive approaches.

But such protestations are revealing, and should hardly be taken at face value. While the story of Sabbatianism and the spiritual forces it represented were an important part of Scholem's attempts at bringing about broader cultural renewal, they were also of tremendous personal significance. All historians write about themselves, and Scholem was no exception. Joseph Weiss, his erstwhile disciple, noted: “[H]is metaphysics reveals itself through concealment; it is camouflaged utterly to the point of imperceptibility within sentences and half-sentences tucked away within ‘pure’ analysis.... His scholarship is Scholem incognito.”⁵¹

50. A letter to Isaiah Sonne, quoted in Meir and Yamamoto, *Gershom Scholem*, 71. See also in this regard his letter from January 13, 1958, published in Gershom Scholem, *Briefe* II, 38–46, 244–48. See also Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 172–74, 192–93; David Myers, “The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate and Modern Jewish Historiography,” *Modern Judaism* 6, no. 3 (1986): 261–86; and Ofer Chen, *המשכיות ומפנה: מגרמניה לארץ* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015), 235–49.
51. Joseph Weiss, “Gershom Scholem: Fünfzig Jahre,” *Yedioth haYom*, December 5, 1947, translated in Skinner, *Lamentations of Youth*, 4. See also recently in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Phenomenology, Theosophic Topography and the Structures of Being: Unveiling