1

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SABBATIAN MOVEMENT

A survey of Jewish history during the period immediately preceding the outbreak of Sabbatian messianism would unduly surpass the limits of the present study. Nonetheless there are problems that cannot go unmentioned if we are to understand the generation that gave birth to this messianic movement. Many factors were involved in producing the events described in the following pages. An analysis of their relative importance is all the more urgent as historians have reached no unanimity in answering the great initial question: What exactly were the decisive factors that brought about the messianic outbreak?

The usual, somewhat simplistic explanation posits a direct historical connection between the Sabbatian movement and certain other events of the same period. According to this view, the messianic outbreak was a direct consequence of the terrible catastrophe that had overtaken Polish Jewry in 1648–49 (see below, pp. 88–93) and had shaken the very foundations of the great Jewish community in Poland. The destruction had, in fact, surpassed anything known of earlier persecutions in other countries. This explanation was plausible enough as long as it could be maintained—as, indeed, it has been until now—
that Sabbatianism as a popular movement started as far back as 1648, when Sabbatai Şevi came forward for the first time with messianic claims. It was supposed that Sabbatai’s followers conducted a propaganda campaign, converting more and more believers until the movement reached its climax in 1666. Though it will be argued in what follows that there is no foundation whatever for this view, at the outset we may duly take note of one grimly concrete historical fact: there had been a major disaster, and soon afterward there was a messianic outbreak. The real significance of the former for an understanding of the genesis of the latter will become clearer as our story unfolds.

Even on its own premises the aforementioned explanation accounts for only half the facts—and the lesser half, for that matter. The weightiest argument against overestimating the causative role of the massacres of 1648 follows from a consideration of the difference between the Sabbatian outbreak and previous messianic movements. This difference lies in the extension, in space and time, of Sabbatianism. All earlier messianic movements, from Bar Kokhba, who led the Jewish revolt against Rome in 132–35 C.E., onward, were limited to a certain area. Somewhere a prophet, or possibly a messiah himself, arose proclaiming that the end of days was at hand and launched a movement limited to a province or a country. Never before had there been a movement that swept the whole House of Israel. It would seem unwise to try and explain this wide extension by factors that were operative in one area only, whatever their weight and significance there. Our caution will increase when we consider the fact that the Sabbatian movement did not originate in Poland but in Palestine. If the massacres of 1648 were in any sense its principal cause, why did the messiah not arise within Polish Jewry? And if there was such a messiah, why did he fail to rouse the masses, and why did he sink into oblivion? The Sabbatian movement spread wherever Jews lived—from the Yemen, Persia, and Kurdistan to Poland, Holland, Italy, and Morocco. There is no reason for assuming that Moroccan Jewry was particularly affected by the massacres of 1648, of which they probably had heard very little anyway. It is also a remarkable fact that Polish Jews were not particularly conspicuous among the main propagandists of the movement.

Of even greater relevance to our argument is the collapse of earlier messianic movements as a result of disappointment. Initial reports turned out to be untrue, the messiah disappeared or was killed,
and the movement petered out. This was the usual course of things; but for some contemporary chroniclers or letter writers not even an echo of many of these movements would have reached us. Occasionally traditions about such an outbreak would linger in popular memory, but after a generation or two everything would be forgotten. The Sabbatian movement is the great exception to this rule: not only did history belie its message, but the disillusionment was so exceptionally cruel that normally it should have been the last nail to the movement’s coffin. The messiah had apostatized and publicly betrayed his mission. If the movement did not die out there and then but survived the seemingly fatal crisis, persisting for generations in various forms and metamorphoses, then its roots must have lain deeper than in local circumstances and conditions. Indeed, they must have reached down to the layer of common heritage on which the attitudes of seventeenth-century Jewry as a whole were founded. The massacres of 1648 no doubt contributed their share, but as an historical factor they lack the dimension of depth within which alone the Sabbatian movement becomes intelligible. We must, therefore, look for other factors of wider and more fundamental validity.

The quest for other specific conditions, common to Poland as well as other Jewish communities, is not likely to be more successful. In some countries the situation was actually or potentially one of persecution, and the message of redemption could reasonably be expected to find ready ears. Persia, the Yemen, and Morocco are instances of this kind. However, the movement did not manifest any lesser momentum in those Jewish centers that enjoyed peace and prosperity. If these communities too were haunted by a sense of catastrophe, it did not stem from their immediate experience but from deeper and less specific causes.

For the same reason we must view with grave doubts all attempts at an easy sociological or economic explanation of the Sabbatian success, all the more so as there is no possibility at all of describing the movement in terms of an eruption of social or class tensions within Jewry. As regards the economic situation, one is struck by the similarity of responses to the messianic tidings in ruined and pauperized communities, such as Poland, and in the most prosperous and flourishing centers. The Jewries of Constantinople, Salonika, Leghorn, Amsterdam, and Hamburg, whose star had for some time been in the ascendant, were in the vanguard of Sabbatian enthusiasm. Christian
contemporaries more than once voiced their angry surprise at the privileges and freedoms enjoyed by the Jews of Salonika, Leghorn, and Amsterdam. Yet these Jews threw all economic considerations to the winds and, as far as we can ascertain, gave way to unbridled messianic enthusiasm. Our knowledge of the last-named communities and of their attitudes during the messianic outbreak is good. Turkish Jewry was safely established and had not yet passed its prime. Palestinian Jewry was, as usual, sunk in the depths of misery, but its misery has no bearing on our evaluation of the position of the Jews in the rest of the expanding Ottoman Empire in which anti-Jewish persecutions were extremely rare and ran counter to the considered policy of its rulers. Here, in the empire, by far the great majority of Spanish Jews, the main bearers of the Sabbatian movement, had settled. The amazing rise of the communities of Amsterdam and Hamburg is well known. Yet the members of these communities, descendants of marranos, reacted no differently from their brethren in Morocco who smarted under almost continuous oppression and persecution.

The question of internal social relations is far more delicate and obscure and requires very careful examination. Whatever the legitimacy of generalizations about the attitudes of particular communities to Sabbatianism, we ought still to ask what were the personal and social differences in the attitudes of the rich and the poor, of the ruling class and the masses. The problem is much confused by the subsequent arguments of both Sabbatian believers and opponents. In the years of the great disillusionment following Sabbatai’s apostasy, the opponents again raised their heads and contended that the “rabble” had forced the unwilling rabbis and sages to comply or, at least, to keep quiet. Conversely we find the Sabbatians themselves accusing the rabbis and the rich, that is, the social elite, of opposing the movement.1 The suspicion that the response to the Sabbatian message was conditioned by social factors thus appears to be confirmed by both sides and supported by such diverse witnesses as Jacob Sasportas and Joseph ha-Levi on the one hand, and Abraham Miguel Cardozo on

1. Abraham Miguel Cardozo, in a Spanish letter addressed to his brother (MS. Oxford 2481, fol. 4b), argues that opposition from the leading classes was necessary in order that the truth about the messiah should appear doubtful and belief in him be an act of faith. Cardozo’s argument seems to reflect the state of affairs after Sabbatai’s apostasy. Also, the prophet Nathan began to accuse the “rich misers” after the apostasy; see below, ch. 7.
the other. This unanimity, however, is misleading, and the measure of truth that it contains is less than appears at first sight. We are dealing here with an explanation after the fact, useful to both sides, though for opposite reasons. It provided an easy way out to the leaders of the Jewish communities—particularly if they were anti-Sabbatians—who could now exculpate themselves and their colleagues by claiming that their unwilling co-operation had been extorted under pressure from the "mob." The Sabbatians, on the other hand, who wanted an explanation for the failure of the movement, could easily agree with their opponents and point to them as the scapegoats whose lack of true faith had led to the messianic debacle.

None of these explanations is borne out, however, by the documents composed during the high tide of the movement. True enough, the opposition to Sabbatai Ševi included rich merchants, lay leaders, and rabbis, that is, members of the ruling class. There is nothing surprising in this. The theologians were faced with grave religious and intellectual difficulties by the personality and behavior of the "messiah"; their doubts could easily turn to opposition. The rich had something to lose by the new order which the messiah was supposed to inaugurate. The "small man" was more easily drawn into the emotional vortex generated by the messianic proclamation; he had neither reason nor strength to resist. All the more surprising is the real proportion of believers and unbelievers within the ruling classes. All later statements notwithstanding, the majority of the ruling class was in the camp of the believers, and the prominent and active part played by many of them is attested by all reliable documents. No doubt there was also pressure from below, yet most of the communal leaders did not wait for this pressure; as a matter of fact, they did not require it in order to be spurred into action. The essential correctness of this picture is not impugned in the least by the "revised version" of events that was put forward afterward by a kind of self-imposed censorship. As a matter of fact, this picture is supported by some later writers who had long ago given up all their former hopes and wrote without special pleading, but just spoke their minds. Their reports tend to confirm the earlier documents. The movement knew no class distinctions. It embraced the millionaires of Amsterdam who, much as Abraham Pereira, offered their whole fortunes to the messiah, as well as the poorest beggars in forlorn corners of the Diaspora. Social stratification cannot account for the actual alignment of forces, which contra-
dicts all expectations based on social instinct or interest alone. Very
possibly there were economic reasons for the hesitancy of some of
the rich, and we can easily appreciate the tendency of some of them
to hold fast to the status quo. But what about the majority who acted
against their ostensible interests? The messianic awakening clearly
transcended all classes, insofar as we are at all entitled to apply this
term to Jewish society, where the social mobility of individuals and
the frequency of sudden changes of fortune were hardly conducive
to the consolidation of "classes."

It should be possible, no doubt, to draw a picture of Jewish social
life in the middle of the seventeenth century that would bring out
its inner tensions. Exploitation of authority or of connections with
gentile rulers for private or clique interests, graft, and even occasional
corruption in the direction of communal affairs, the helplessness
of the small artisan and shopkeeper—all these are facts which social
historians have had no difficulty in establishing wherever sufficient
documentary evidence has survived. Even if there is much exaggera-
tion in the fulminations and criticisms of preachers and moralists, the
substance of their charges is amply confirmed² by the documentary
material that has been preserved in archives. No doubt the specific
social conditions in any given community and the relations obtaining
between individuals and groups duly influenced the responses to the
messianic movement. The strained personal relations between the
rabbis of Smyrna at the time of Sabbatai's revelation in 1665 present
one such instance among many which we shall come across. Local
conditions certainly shaped and colored the movement in many places;
yet, without wishing to minimize their significance, we must also be-
ware of overestimating their role as a general factor explaining the

2. Complaints about grinding the poor and abuse of power by the rich
were made practically everywhere. At about the same time that the famous
preacher Berakhya Berakh pilloried the social abuses in Polish Jewry, Moses
Judah Abbas in Turkey wrote his poems, one of which (dedicated to Abraham
Yakhini) is a bitter indictment of the shamelessness and injustice with which
the poor are robbed. The poem was written before the Sabbatian outbreak,
and Abraham Yakhini, who played an important part in the movement, had
nothing to do with the incidents to which it refers. The poem, published by
M. Wallenstein in the JSS, I (1956), 165–71, provides valuable testimony of
the social tensions and abuses in a Turkish (or possibly Egyptian) community
under a "patrician" regime.
phenomenon as a whole. If there was one general factor underlying the patent unity of the Sabbatian movement everywhere, then this factor was essentially religious in character and as such obeyed its own autonomous laws, even if today these are often obscured behind smokescreens of sociological verbiage. The interrelations and interaction of religion and society should not make us forget that ultimately the two are not identical. It was this religious factor that set up the peculiar spiritual tension out of which Sabbatian messianism could be born, manifesting itself as an historical force throughout Israel, and not merely in one of the many branches of the Diaspora. Religious factors are not isolated entities and they never operate in a vacuum. Impinging on the social situation, the religious factor caused the various groups, the leading classes in particular, to join the messianic movement. As it happens, we are in a position to identify and name this religious factor. It was none other than Lurianic kabbalism, that is, that form of kabbalah which had developed at Safed, in the Galilee, during the sixteenth century and which dominated Jewish religiosity in the seventeenth century.

The powerful kabbalistic movement that issued from Safed and quickly spread over the Jewish world is an excellent and perhaps unique example of the reciprocity between center and periphery in Jewish history. Safed, which had never before possessed any special status or significance, became a major center of Judaism in the sixteenth century as a result of a steady flow of immigrants from the Diaspora. 3 The principal founders of the new center were Spanish exiles, but they were soon joined by enthusiasts from other communities, until Safed became a kind of miniature distillation of the whole Jewish Diaspora. The creative genius of the Galilean center drew its strength from the Diaspora, and it was thither that its influence radiated back, transforming Jewish spirituality everywhere. The doctrines developed in the schools of Safed apparently embodied some fundamental and universal Jewish quality that transcended all local variations, some kind of quintessential historical experience of Jewry in exile, for otherwise they would hardly have succeeded in opening up a new dimension to the traditional universe of Jewish religiosity.

As the kabbalistic movement, highly charged with messianic tension, spread from Safed and conquered the Diaspora, it also laid the foundations for the future discharge of this tension. Here we may have part of the answer to our initial question. The kabbalism of the age was the spiritual heritage common to all Jewish communities; it had provided them with an interpretation of history and with a fund of ideas and practices without which the Sabbatian movement is unthinkable.

II

Before, however, defining more precisely the specific contribution of Lurianic kabbalism to the spiritual climate of the seventeenth century, a few words are in order about the nature and function of the messianic idea in Jewish history. It cannot be our task to discuss the origin of the messianic idea and its impact on Judaism during the decisive periods of its formation. Our immediate and more limited aim is an understanding of the messianic idea as it affected medieval Judaism, existing as it did in conditions of exile. To this end we must distinguish two main tendencies in which the messianic longing of generations had crystallized. These were the popular-mythological and the philosophical-rationalist traditions. They existed side by side. They often converged and even merged. Nevertheless, we are entitled to treat them as basically distinct.

What, we may ask, did the messianic idea imply for the simple Jew whose hopes were nourished, in addition to the biblical prophecies, by a number of popular and well-known legends and apocalyptic midrashim? Traditional popular messianism was characterized by catastrophe and utopianism, and both elements play an important role in the dynamics of the messianic faith. Both have their roots in biblical prophecy, the one in the vision of the end of days (as in Isaiah), the other in the notion of a day of the Lord (as in Amos). In the system of values as well as in the practical life of the ordinary


5. Apocalyptic texts and midrashim from the end of the Talmudic period to the late Middle Ages have been collected and edited by J. Even-Shemu‘el, Midreshey Ge‘ullah, 2nd edn. (Jerusalem, 1954).
medieval Jew, these two tendencies fulfilled different functions, with regard to both his surrounding environment and his own universe of rabbinic tradition.

Messianic legend indulges in uninhibited fantasies about the catastrophic aspects of redemption. Partly drawing on old mythologies, partly creating a popular mythology of its own, it paints a picture of violent upheaval, wars, plague, famine, a general defection from God and His Law, license, and heresy. There is no continuity between the present and the messianic era; the latter is not the fruit of previous developments, let alone of a gradual evolution. Far from being the result of historical process, redemption arises on the ruins of history, which collapses amid the "birth pangs" of the messianic age. The bitter experience of many generations that had tasted the heavy yoke of alien rule, oppression, and humiliation was not likely to mitigate the violence of this type of eschatology, whose roots go back to the apocalyptic literature of the period of the Second Temple. It has been one of the strangest errors of the modern Wissenschaft des Judentums to deny the continuity of Jewish apocalypticism. The endeavors of leading scholars to dissociate apocalyptic from rabbinic Judaism and to associate it exclusively with Christianity have contributed much to the modern falsification of Jewish history and to the concealment of some of its most dynamic forces, both constructive and destructive. The continued existence of popular apocalyptic literature and the history of the many messianic movements during the Middle Ages sufficiently dispose of such wishful rewriting of the past. As a matter of fact Jewish experience during the thousand years following the destruction of the Temple could only intensify the catastrophic traits of the eschatological picture, whose basic outline had been drawn in a famous Talmudic passage.\(^6\) Redemption meant a revolution in history. Apocalyptic imagination supplied the details in which comfort and horror had an equal share and in which a persecuted and downtrodden people settled many a bitter account with its torturers. The apocalyptic war was described in all its stages. Israel too, though ultimately led through all tribulations to national restoration, would have to bear its share of suffering in the final cataclysm. The figure of the messiah of the House of Joseph, who would fall at the gates of Jerusalem fighting against the gentiles, constituted a new mythological

\(^6\) B. Sanhedrin 97 f.; also the last mishnah of the Tractate Sotah.
trait whose function it was to differentiate between the messiah of catastrophe and that of utopia.

The utopian aspect of traditional eschatology fulfilled a special function in the world of the medieval Jew, for it implied much more than merely the hope of a quiet life of moral perfection and human freedom. It contained all the qualities of a golden age, including miraculous manifestations and a radical transformation of the natural order. To express these hopes and ideas, there were detailed descriptions of the future Jerusalem as well as of the ideal contemplative life: the rabbinic scholars would devote themselves to the study of the law and would enjoy revelations of the mysteries of the Torah in the academy of the messiah. But messianic utopia also harbored explosive elements. Its overt intention was, no doubt, the perfection and completion of the rule of traditional religious law (halakhah) and its extension to those spheres of life to which it could not be applied in conditions of exile. Hence also the rabbinic term “halakhah of the messianic age.” Yet messianic utopia also contained forces that tended to undermine its very intentions. In the closed world of narrowly circumscribed Jewish existence, messianic utopia represented the possibility of something radically and wonderfully different. It opened vistas which traditional halakhah had tended to cover up. The tendency had manifested itself more than once in clear symptoms of antinomianism in some medieval messianic movements. As long as the messianic hope existed in the abstract, real for the imagination only, the gap between traditional law and “messianic law” was relatively easy to bridge: the latter was simply the application of traditional law to life in the messianic age. Popular piety undoubtedly took this view for granted. But whenever messianic hopes assumed actuality, the tension with regard to rabbinic tradition became manifest. There seems to be an intrinsic connection between active messianism and the courage for religious innovation. Messianic movements would often produce individuals with sufficient charismatic authority to challenge the established authority of rabbinic Judaism. Attempts to realize the messianic dream inevitably brought out, that is, manifested and strengthened, this hidden tension.

Rabbinic authority and messianic authority could not but

7. Cf. Jacob Mann, “Messianic Movements at the Time of the First Crusade” (Hebrew), *ha-Tequfah*, XXIII (1925), 243–61 (particularly p. 251), and XXIV (1928), 335–58.
clash. No doubt many a pious and faithful soul lived in blithe unawareness of the dangerous tensions implicit in every assertion of messianism. On the other hand, we may assume that there were always some individuals who realized the truth and who were attracted by the revolutionary aspects of the notion of a “renewed Torah” in the messianic age. There is, admittedly, not much evidence of this in popular eschatological literature, which obviously passed a thorough editorial censorship before attaining the form in which it has come down to us. The tension does, however, break through in rather extreme form in the eschatology of a kabbalistic book, the Raʿya Mehemna (Faithful Shepherd). The author of this part of the Zohar, evidently a capable if somewhat embittered Talmudic scholar, expresses in telling symbolic images what he, and probably some others as well, thought about the possible meaning of the law of the Lord in a messianic world. Very possibly the author of the Raʿya Mehemna does not voice the opinions of his fellow kabbalists in this respect, and his speculations are not representative of any definite social tendency or movement (though I, for one, have some doubts on this score). Indeed, it appears that this extraordinary text did not exert any noticeable influence for a considerable time after its composition. Nevertheless, it is evident that the author expresses not merely his own views but also those of certain other individuals less articulate than himself. Like other kabbalists, he distinguished between the revealed and the hidden aspects of the Torah, but unlike them he was led by this distinction to extreme conclusions. The Torah manifests itself under two aspects: that of the “Tree of Life” and that of the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The latter aspect is characteristic of the period of exile. As the Tree of Knowledge comprises good and evil, so the Torah deriving from it comprises permission and prohibition, pure and impure; in other words, it is the law of the Bible and of rabbinic tradition. In the age of redemption, however, the Torah will manifest itself under the aspect of the Tree of Life, and all previous distinctions will pass away. The positive manifestation of the Torah as the Tree of Life is thus accompanied by the abrogation of all those laws and rules whose authority and validity obtain unconditionally during the present era of exile. The pure

8. See Y. F. Baer, “The Historical Background of the Raʿya Mehemna” (Hebrew), Zion, V (1939-40), 1-44.
essence of the Torah will be revealed and its outer shell cast off. The remarkable thing about this conception is its clear consciousness of possible contradictions and of a revaluation of values within the one absolutely valid Torah which, for the kabbalist, was nothing less than the manifestation of God’s holy name.

The popular mythological versions of eschatology combined literary and legendary traditions with the grim experience of exile. Apocryphal legends easily found their way into the hearts of men where they satisfied secret needs and longings by their descriptions of messianic catastrophe and utopia. They established themselves not only in the mind of the masses but even in the writings of leading rabbinic authorities, as is apparent from the eighth chapter (“On Redemption”) of Saadia Gaon’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Others viewed the rank growth of apocalyptic imagination with undisguised misgivings and endeavored to minimize its influence. There is an unmistakable tone of hostility in their references to the doctrine of an apocalyptic catastrophe, and they may well have been aware of the explosive charge inherent in the messianic idea as such. Utopianism not only arouses hopes and expectations; it also threatens existing traditional patterns. Once the longing for a new world and for the tree of life seizes the hearts, who knows what may come next? Every utopia that is more than an abstract formula has a revolutionary sting. It hardly occasions surprise that Maimonides, the most extreme representative of the antiapocalyptic tendency, rejected all those myths that lived in the hearts of the believing masses, whom he contemptuously referred to as the “rabble.” Against the luxurious and rank growth of legend from which the “rabble” derived hope and comfort, Maimonides formulated an eschatological doctrine from which utopian elements were as far as possible excluded. As the hallowed character of tradition did not permit him to suppress them completely, he resorted to careful sifting. The utterances of the early teachers on the subject were declared to be theologically not authoritative; details concerning redemption could be known only after the event. This antiapocalyptic bias found its definite expression in Maimonides’ well-known formulations in chapters eleven and twelve of “Laws of Kingship” in book fourteen of his great code *Mishneh Torah*:

Do not think that the messiah will have to work signs and miracles or perform any spectacular deeds or resurrect the dead and the

like. . . . But this is the truth of the matter: the Torah with all its laws and ordinances is everlastingingly valid and nothing will be added to it or taken away from it. When a king arises out of the House of David who diligently studies the law and, like his ancestor David, assiduously performs good works according to the written and the oral law, and who compels all Israel to walk therein . . . and who will fight the battles of the Lord, then it may be presumed that he is the messiah. If he proves successful and succeeds in rebuilding the Temple and in gathering in all the exiles, then it is certain that he is the messiah. He will reform the world so that all shall serve the Lord. . . . And do not think that in the days of the messiah there will be any departure from the normal course of things or any change in the cosmic order. That which is prophesied in the Book of Isaiah [11:6]—"the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid"—is merely a parable and a figure of speech . . . and the same holds for similar prophecies concerning the messiah. They are all parables, though only in the days of the messianic king will people understand the precise meaning and intention of the parables. . . . There is none that now knows how these things shall come to pass, . . . for even scholars have no [clear] traditions on this matter but merely the interpretation of Scripture; therefore, there is much difference of opinion among them. In any case, neither the sequence of events nor their details are articles of faith. One should make it a rule not to occupy oneself with legends and midrashim on the subject . . . as they are conducive neither to the fear nor to the love of God. . . . Sages and prophets longed for the messianic age not in order that they should dominate the world and rule over the gentiles . . . but solely in order to be free to devote themselves to the Torah and divine wisdom without oppression and hindrance, so as to merit eternal life. . . . The sole occupation of the world will be to know the Lord. Therefore [the children of] Israel shall all be great scholars; they shall know hidden things and attain to the knowledge of God as far as is within human reach.

The quotation from Maimonides illustrates the difficulties of formulating a messianic and thus essentially utopian doctrine while at the same time trying to eliminate its utopian elements. The attempt could hardly be expected to succeed, and the compromise is clearly discernible in Maimonides' wording. What Maimonides did succeed in doing was to suppress completely the apocalyptic moment. There is no hint of a cataclysmic end of history, no catastrophe, not even
miracles. The reader might also think that the historical process initiated by the appearance of the messianic king would lead, by a gradual and continuous transition, to the ideal state of things, that is, to the perfect contemplative life—Maimonides’ version of utopia. Maimonides very skillfully concealed the dangerous dialectics inherent in messianism, and the carefully chosen words with which he emphasizes the conservative function of the messiah in safeguarding the Torah and traditional law tell their own story. Maimonides was well aware of the messianic movements that had agitated previous generations as well as his own. His Epistle to the Jews of Yemen\(^\text{10}\) shows that he entertained no illusions as to the dangers which such movements harbored for traditional religion. In a way the struggle of Maimonides and his followers against the “beliefs of the rabble” was also inspired by utopian ideal, albeit an aristocratic utopia in which philosophic mysteries had taken the place of historic dynamism. His antiapocalyptic utterances, designed to abolish messianism as a historic force, were subsequently invoked by all who opposed messianic actualization and by all who distrusted the messianic idea as a motive force in social life. The authority of the “Great Eagle” (as Maimonides was called) was considerable, but it could not conceal the essential weakness of his eschatology. The two classical writers on the subject of messianism, Don Isaac Abravanel, writing soon after the expulsion from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century and R. Loew of Prague, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, both retreated from Maimonides’ extreme position. Living through times of dire misery and persecution, they could not afford to ignore the apocalyptic tradition and its message of catastrophe. Each reintroduces in his own manner those elements that Maimonides had sought to eradicate. It is only fair to add that both authors were also at pains to safeguard the continuity of the historical process culminating in redemption. Both preserve a large measure of common sense, expressing itself in allegorical interpretations of eschatological legends. Yet the fact that they both felt constrained to readmit apocalypse and popular mythology is sufficient proof of the strength of these elements in their times. The eschatological writings of Abravanel and R. Loew exerted a profound influence on later generations, and even adherents of the Sab-

\(10\). Written by Maimonides in 1172 to counter the messianic preaching of a false prophet who agitated Yemenite Jewry.
batian movement would quote them in support of their contentions. In a way, the two main tendencies of Jewish eschatology had merged in the writings of these two authors, with the result that everyone could find in them whatever best suited his temper.

III

The contribution of the kabbalah to the religious revival that followed upon the expulsion from Spain can be adequately appreciated only by paying attention to its novel attitude toward the messianic tradition. In its earlier stages kabbalism had shown little interest in messianism. The early kabbalists drew on old gnostic traditions and on philosophical ideas that lent themselves to a mystical and symbolic view of the world. These ideas, together with the inner experiences of contemplative mystics for whom “adhesion” or “cleaving” to God (debequth) was the final goal on the ladder of spiritual ascent, shaped contemplative kabbalism with its twofold aim of grasping the mysteries of the Godhead and of the Torah, on the one hand, and of teaching elect souls the way of total debequth, on the other. The kabbalists were conservative in outlook, and they shared the hopes and views of traditional religion. Their own peculiar spiritual impulse had no specifically messianic quality. Their ideal of the contemplative life in communion with God did not require a messianic world for its realization; it was quite compatible with life in exile. Like other mystical movements, kabbalism began as a way of spiritual renewal for individuals or groups of individuals (which, of course, did not prevent it from becoming a social force). Redemption, that is, redemption of the soul, was a private, individual matter and therefore independent of the sphere of national redemption with which traditional messianism was concerned.

Kabbalistic doctrine developed apart from eschatology because in its original setting it concentrated less on the end of the world than on the primordial beginning of creation. For this is what the kabbalistic conception of the Godhead, as enshrined in the doctrine of sefirot, really amounts to. The hidden God, known in kabbalistic terminology as En-Sof (the Infinite) is far removed from everything created; he is unrevealed, nonmanifest, and unknown. Only the emanation of his power, operating in the creation of both the higher and the nether worlds, transforms En-Sof into the Creator-God. The different stages of emanation manifest the hidden potencies and at-
tributes by which God acts and which are all essentially one in the unity of God, even "as the flame is bound to the coal." Ten such stages, known as sefirot, constitute the inner life of the Godhead; in them He becomes manifest as a personal God. Though inaccessible to immediate comprehension or contemplation, they can be apprehended through the structure of all being—from the beginning of creation in the supernal worlds down to the last and lowest creature. The mystical contemplation of the universe reveals its symbolic character. Creation does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of pointing to the divine emanation that shines through it. The inner meaning of creation, as well as the Law and the commandments, is revealed to the kabbalist through an understanding of the mysteries of mystical symbolism. "All proceeds from the One and returns to the One." In other words, even as the whole chain of being proceeded, link by link, from the manifestation of the Creator in His sefirot, so everything would return in the end to its original source.

The kabbalist, however, jumps this cosmic rhythm and takes a short cut. By means of proper contemplative concentration, particularly during prayer or when performing a religious act, the human will cleaves to the divine will and to the world of the sefirot. Here we have a real ascent of the soul, not of the actual kind as in the concrete ecstatic experience of a heavenly journey, but in a purely spiritual process produced by meditation. The mystic who in his contemplative ascent attains the point of communion with the source of all being has by that act reached the end of the path to his individual redemption. Kabbalistic contemplation is a kind of individual anticipation of eschatological messianism. The kabbalists were aware that the historical and public character of traditional messianic belief precluded any identification or confusion of the latter with their own mystical ideal of an individual, contemplative ascent. They consequently had no reason for tampering with traditional messianism, though they did not hesitate to interpret it in their manner as an event within the inner life of the Godhead. Their interpretation presupposes the new meaning with which the author of the Zohar had invested the old concept of the "exile of the Shekhinah," based on the Talmudic saying that wher-

11. Such as practiced by earlier Jewish mystics; see Major Trends, ch. 2.
ever Israel is exiled, the Shekhinah goes with it.\(^{12}\) For the Talmud, Shekhinah simply meant the presence of God. Not so for the kabbalists for whom Shekhinah served as a technical term for the tenth and last sefirah, while the term “the Holy One Blessed Be He” (the usual rabbinic idiom for God) referred to the sixth sefirah, otherwise known as Tifereth. During the present period of exile, the Shekhinah, or “bride,” was separated and exiled from her “husband,” the Holy One Blessed Be He. The disjunction of these two aspects of the Godhead signifies that in the present state of things the unity of the divine attributes is not complete. Only with the advent of messianic redemption will the perfect unity of the divine sefirot be permanently re-established. Then, to use the symbolic language of the kabbalists, the Shekhinah will be restored to perpetual union with her husband.

In its eschatological teaching the main part of the Zohar continues the apocalyptic and utopian tradition against which Maimonides had so sternly warned. In spite of some changes of detail as compared with earlier apocalyptic midrashim, the attitude is fundamentally the same: the messianic events are all of a supernatural character. Mention has already been made of the utopian conception of the “messianic Torah” to be found in the later parts of the Zohar, the Ra’ya Mehemna and the Tiqquney Zohar. A very special and novel feature of some trends in Spanish kabbalism was the emphasis on the close connection between the approach of redemption and the increasing knowledge of kabbalistic mysteries. In the days of exile, minds have been beclouded and are unfit to receive esoteric lore; but now, with the end of time approaching, the mysteries of the kabbalah are increasingly revealed. This doctrine provided a justification for the boldness of the kabbalists’ speculative innovations, and it was invoked as such by the authors of the Zohar and by many others. Yet it never led to a thorough reinterpretation of eschatological ideas. The creative originality of the early kabbalists spent itself exclusively on the mysteries of creation and the mysteries of the “divine chariot,” that is, on mystical cosmology and the doctrine of the sefirot. No messianic

movements of any consequence arose among kabbalists, and the few instances of individuals claiming angelic revelations or actual prophecy evoked no serious response. The agitations around the prophet of Ávila in Castile (1295), or of Abraham Abulafia at about the same time, did not lead to any widespread messianic unrest. Apocalyptic messianism and kabbalah remained distinct spheres of religious life.

The expulsion from Spain (1492) wrought a radical change also in this respect. The traumatic upheaval, which so profoundly altered the situation of a large part of the nation, inevitably called forth corresponding reactions in the specifically religious sphere. The exiles proceeded to their new abodes and created a new Diaspora which, as a matter of fact, soon flourished, at least in parts. Yet even after Sephardic Jewry had ostensibly recovered from the shock, many minds still continued to search for the meaning of the catastrophe that had overtaken them. The first generation of Spanish exiles responded to the events with a wave of apocalyptic agitation. The Spanish disaster was the beginning of the “messianic birth pangs.” 13 The eschatological perspective soon embraced other contemporaneous events, among which the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was no doubt the most dramatic and one that could easily assume symbolic significance as the outver the wars of Gog and Magog. Apocalypse flourished not only in its conventional form—as, for example, in the writings of Don Isaac Abravanel—but also in a specifically kabbalistic guise. In the same years in which Abravanel wrote his book Yeshu’oth Mashiho (Deliverance of His Anointed), an anonymous kabbalist composed the commentary Kaf ha-Qetoreth (The Spoonful of Incense), 14 which interpreted Psalms as songs of war for the great apocalyptic struggle. Messianic movements developed around the public activity of kabbalists such as Asher Lemmlein in northern Italy 15 and the marrano Solomon

13. R. Joseph She’altiel b. Moses ha-Kohen added in the margin of a MS. of the book Peli‘ah (MS. Vatican 187): “I think that the afflictions visited on the Jews in all the Christian kingdoms between the years 5250–55 [1490–95] . . . are the messianic birth pangs.” These lines were written on the Island of Rhodes in 1495.


15. Lemmlein’s kabbalistic background is proved by his replies to R. Moses Ḥefeṣ of Salonika; see A. Marx in RÊJ, LXI (1911), 135–38.
Molkho in whose writings apocalyptic and speculative kabbalah had fused.

Eschatological tension abated after the failure of the messianic prophecies for the year 1530. The intensive messianic propaganda conducted by the kabbalists of Jerusalem in particular ended in a complete fiasco. Nevertheless messianism had penetrated the heart of kabbalism, and it continued to influence kabbalistic development in diverse ways. The creation of the new spiritual center of Jewry in Safed was itself a decisive positive response to the expulsion. The movement of spiritual and moral reform that spread from Safed sprang from the innermost heart of Judaism. Nourished by the living experience and memory of exile at its very worst, the movement aimed at “fulfilling” this exile and thereby preparing redemption. Apocalypse disappeared or, at least, went underground and was transformed in the process. Ascetic piety reigned supreme in Safed. At first the religious ideal of a mystical elite only, asceticism now allied itself to an individual and public morality based on the new kabbalism; it struck deep roots in the collective consciousness. According to certain eschatological texts the messiah was due to make his first appearance in Galilee, and it is not impossible that this and similar expectations contributed to the establishment of the community of saints in Safed, which numbered more inspired enthusiasts and devout seekers of mystical salvation than any other city. Though the messiah did not come from Safed, there were many who heard the wing-beats of approaching redemption in the kabbalistic teaching that went forth from there. Even the purely halakhic achievements of the great Talmudic scholars of Safed were largely inspired by the new messianic kabbalah. R. Joseph Karo deliberately ignored kabbalism in his great rabbinic code Shulḥan ṿ‘Arukh, yet there is little doubt as to the secret eschatological motives of its composition. Unsuccessful attempts have been made to deny Karo’s authorship of the mystical diary Maggid Mesharim (Preacher of Righteousness) in which the writer describes the regular manifestations of a celestial mentor, or maggid, who was none other than the Mishnah herself. We may take this mani-


festation as an indication of the essentially conservative character of Safed kabbalism and of its firm anchorage in rabbinic tradition. The personified Mishnah, that is, the oral law, represented nothing less than historic Judaism as a whole. Only by virtue of its conservative character and its patent continuity with rabbinic tradition could the new kabbalism gain popular appeal and even succeed in carrying on its wings—or perhaps hidden under its wings—some startling novel ideas.

In Safed, where all the arteries of Jewish spiritual life converged, kabbalism became a social and historical force. The process by which kabbalah established its supremacy over the religious consciousness of those who were themselves no kabbalists calls for some explanation. Though it is true that the kabbalists at last emerged from their solitary esotericism and began to seek ways of influencing the masses, yet their spectacular success remains something of an historical problem. Both philosophy and kabbalah were aristocratic disciplines, appealing primarily to an intellectual and spiritual elite. How and why did the kabbalists succeed—where the philosophers had failed—in decisively shaping the religious consciousness of the Jewish people? The actual triumph of kabbalism in the sixteenth century is a fact beyond dispute. It is only the interpretation of this fact which is at issue. Rationalist historians, such as Graetz and others, have offered an engagingly simple explanation: persecution and suffering had dimmed the light of reason and paved the way for an eruption of mystical obscurantism. It is hardly necessary to expend many words over an “explanation” whose bias is so obvious. The real answer to the question should be positive, not negative in character. Kabbalism triumphed because it provided a valid answer to the great problems of the time. To a generation for which the facts of exile and the precariousness of existence in it had become a most pressing and cruel problem, kabbalism could give an answer unparalleled in breadth and in depth of vision. The kabbalistic answer illuminated the significance of exile and redemption and accounted for the unique historical situation of Israel within the wider, in fact cosmic, context of creation itself.

The kabbalistic appeal to the public, unheard of before the expulsion from Spain, is in evidence soon afterward. There was, of course, much hostility and opposition on the part of those “who jeer at and scoff at the students of kabbalistic books, and who greatly insult and revile them . . . and whenever they hear of the kabbalah, of a
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prophet, or visionary, they [mockingly] enquire of each other 'what hath this madman spoken unto thee.'”¹⁸ On the other hand Joseph Yabes (or Jabez), a typical representative of orthodox public opinion after the expulsion, complains of the inordinate popular success of kabbalism. His complaints were echoed by later moralists who were alarmed at the growing attraction of kabbalistic lore for the masses, namely, for people without previous rabbinc training. “There are today many ignorant people, smitten with the blindness of pride, who believe that they have attained the hidden mysteries of the Torah without ever having savored [rabbinic] learning or tasted good works.”¹⁹ Yabes and his like continue the line of conservative theological thinking which passes from Judah ha-Levi’s Kuzari through Nahmanides, Jonah of Gerona, Solomon b. Adreth, and Ḥasdai Crescas. His attitude toward kabbalah (whose mysteries “one should not contemplate” in an age of ignorance), like that toward the philosophy of Maimonides, is one of extreme reserve. Yet in spite of his public exhibition of reserve, we find Joseph Yabes, when in Mantua, entreating a fellow exile from Spain, Judah Ḥayyat, to compose a treatise on the principles of kabbalah.²¹

Of course, nobody at that time would have explicitly suggested that kabbalism should supersede the study of traditional nonesoteric teaching. Nevertheless the intensive propaganda for kabbalistic studies did not fail to produce its results. A sixteenth-century kabbalist has left us a valuable testimony of the general feeling prevalent at the time:

I have found it written that the heavenly decree prohibiting the study of kabbalah in public was valid only until the end of the year 250 [1490 C.E.]. Thereafter it [the generation living at that time] would be called the last

¹⁸. "Ohel Mo‘ed (MS. Cambridge Add. 673¹, fol. 13a). This work, a kind of introduction to the kabbalah, was probably written at the beginning of the 16th century.

¹⁹. Joseph Yabes (Jabez), "Or ha-Ḥayyim, fol. 4a.

²⁰. Very characteristic of this critical attitude is the bon mot Yabes quotes from a “certain great thinker” (perhaps Don Isaac Abravanel) who was wont to conclude his lectures on Maimonides’ Guide with the words: “This is the teaching of our Master Moses [Maimonides], but not of Moses our Master [scil. the biblical Moses]” (ibid., fol. 21a).

²¹. See Judah Ḥayyat’s introduction to his commentary Minhath Yehudah on Ma‘arekheth ha‘Elokhuth (Mantua, 1558), fol. 3a.
generation [before the final redemption]. The decree was abrogated and permission was granted to study the Zohar. From the year 300 [1540 C.E., the beginning of the kabbalistic movement in Safed] onward it will be accounted an act of special merit to both old and young to study [kabbalah] in public, as it is stated in the Ra'ya Mehemna. And since the messianic king will appear through the merits [of this study] and through none other, it behooves us not to be remiss.

The principle that the study of kabbalah was itself a factor in hastening the advent of redemption became established as a generally accepted doctrine and represents a significant development of the notion, already mentioned before, that at the end of days the mysteries of kabbalism would be revealed anew. Henceforth kabbalistic esotericism and messianic eschatology were intertwined and acted in combination.

IV

The attempts of the sixteenth-century kabbalists—and those of Safed in particular—to codify or at least formulate their doctrines present themselves under a double aspect. On the one hand, they continue the old traditions of pre-expulsion Spanish kabbalism; on the other hand, they testify to a mystical revival whose speculative originality is evident in the teachings of the more inspired masters. The ideas which they produced differ widely even on fundamental issues, and to lump them all together would be doing them less than justice. There were masters whose teaching developed by way of commentary on earlier, classical texts; others were more systematic thinkers who used earlier authorities merely as pegs on which to hang their own speculations. Some were essentially speculative types; others derived their ideas from visions and from contemplative insights attained through mystical meditation.

By and large the older generation of kabbalists seems to have been of a predominantly speculative cast of mind. Their teaching endeavored to clothe the mystical symbols of kabbalah with a conceptual garb. This holds true of Solomon Alkabes, of the author of Pardes Rimmonim and ʿElimah, Moses Cordovero (1522–70), and of Sheftel Horovitz, the author of Shefaʾ Tal. But with the younger

22. Referring probably to the statement (Zohar III, 124b) that through the merits of the book Zohar the children of Israel would be redeemed from exile.

23. Quoted by Abraham Azulay of Hebron in the introduction to his commentary on the Zohar, entitled ʿOr ha-Hammah (Jerusalem, 1879).
generation the symbolic element and the concomitant tendency to think in mythological images came to the fore. The tension between the speculative and the mythological tendencies and their mutual attraction and repulsion have to a large extent determined the history of kabbalism.\textsuperscript{24} If it is true that the great achievement of the kabbalists was their creation of genuine symbols, then the presence of mythical elements need occasion no surprise, for mythology inevitably appears wherever reality is apprehended in symbolic forms. The kabbalists not only produced symbolic images of the historical realities surrounding them, but they also endowed their images with the vitality of genuine myth. Symbols are produced and nourished by historical and social experience. Those of the kabbalah, pregnant with myth from the very beginning, immediately appealed to the unsophisticated masses, whose “popular religion” had always had room for mythology and, for that reason, had always incurred the displeasure of the philosophical theologians. The inner world which the kabbalists discovered in their symbolic forms did not have a function primarily in terms of a social ideology of any kind. But once kabbalism came to perform a social function, it did so by providing an ideology for popular religion. It was able to perform this function in spite of its fundamentally aristocratic character, because its symbols, reflecting as they did the historical experience of the group, provided the faith of the masses with a theoretical justification. The powerful momentum which kabbalism developed in Safed derived more from its social, that is, ideological, function than from the profundity of its mystical vision—however great and significant the latter may have been for the kabbalists themselves.

The above holds true more particularly for the kabbalistic doctrines of the great “Lion” of Safed, Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–72). When Luria died in the prime of his life, his teachings had not yet spread, though his reputation as a holy man of God was high.\textsuperscript{25} Of the different kabbalistic systems developed in Safed,


\textsuperscript{25} Many semihistorical and semilegendary traditions about Luria’s life have been preserved, particularly in the epistles of Solomon Dresnitz, written in Safed between 1603–9 and printed for the first time in 1629. They were subsequently reprinted many times under the title \textit{Shibvey ha-‘Ari} (\textit{Praises of the Lion}).
Cordovero’s was the first to make a wide impact. Cordovero had been Luria’s teacher and died two years before him. His writings spread together with the movement that issued from Safed and dominated kabbalistic thinking for about half a century. Lurianic teaching, whose originality and novelty set it apart from all other kabbalistic systems, was known only to a small circle of elect in Safed, Jerusalem, and Damascus. Originating in Luria’s visions and meditations, his teaching was revealed orally to his disciples in Safed but was never published. When two of Luria’s disciples, Hayyim Vital and Joseph ibn T’boul, committed this oral teaching to paper, they jealously guarded their notes and did not permit them to circulate. Not until the end of the sixteenth century did copies of parts of Vital’s writings begin to circulate in Palestine and outside it, much against Vital’s wish. Vital, an extraordinary personality, spent most of his long life (1534–1620) concealing his master’s teaching from his contemporaries who, he thought, were not yet worthy of receiving it. By that time, however, a complete description of Luria’s teaching, composed by another pupil, had reached Europe in manuscript copies. This was the book Kanfey Yonah (Wings of a Dove) by R. Moses Jonah.

Meanwhile Luria’s doctrine underwent further developments at the hands of Vital and those other kabbalists who studied Vital’s or Ibn T’boul’s papers. By the time Lurianic teaching became known, at first in manuscript, but after 1630 also in print, the original doctrines had suffered additions and revisions. It was this mixture of authentic tradition and later accretions which henceforth circulated under the designation “the writings of the Sacred Lion,” namely, the Lurianic writings. The ground had been well prepared for Luria by earlier kabbalists. During the three decades following Vital’s death, the new Lurianic kabbalah conquered Judaism and superseded all earlier systems, particularly in those circles that were the real bearers of the religious revival. Lurianism was considered the final and ultimate revelation of kabbalistic truth. The hidden processes in the divine world of the sefirot which it described were felt by adherents of the system to refer to far deeper levels of the divine realm than were dealt with in the kabbalah of Cordovero and others. When Luria was questioned about

26. On Joseph ibn T’boul, whom historians have overlooked completely, see my article in Zion, V (1939–40), 149–60.
the relationship between his own revelations and earlier teaching, Cordovero's in particular, he replied that the latter described the "world of confusion or disorder"; whereas he had come to reveal the structure of the "world of tikquun, or harmony." As the influence of the religious revival radiating from Safed become more and more specifically Lurianic, it impressed its characteristic traits on Jewish religion everywhere. The ritual, liturgical, and other practical innovations of the Safed kabbalists became public property with a distinctively Lurianic slant. By 1650, only one generation after the actual dissemination of Lurianism had begun, the system had established an almost unchallenged supremacy. In fact, Lurianic kabbalism was the one well-articulated and generally accepted form of Jewish theology at the time.

One of the most active agents in disseminating Lurianic ideas was Israel Sarug, who appeared in Italy toward the end of the sixteenth century posing as Luria's disciple, which he certainly was not, or which he was, at best, in a metaphorical sense only. In Italy, where he had established schools for kabbalistic studies, as well as in other European countries, Sarug actively propagated the new doctrine in a version of his own making. His missionary zeal stands in strange contrast to Vital's retiring disposition. Sarug's seed fell on fertile ground in Italy and he succeeded in attracting some of the leading scholars, more particularly those with imagination and feeling, such as Menahem Azaryah Fano (1548–1620) and Aaron Berakhya Modena (died 1639). The writings of the Italian (that is, Sarug's) school reached other European countries at about the same time as those of the Palestinian (that is, Vital's) school. In due course both traditions merged, and the new composite version was accepted even by the Palestinian kabbalists as the authentic and authoritative form of Luria's teaching.

The contrast between Sarug's propagandistic activity and Vital's seclusion gains interest when we consider Vital's autobiographical notes, which he himself put together in book form some time between

27. For these and related concepts of Lurianic kabbalism, see Major Trends, p. 265.

28. See G. Scholem, "Was R. Israel Sarug a Disciple of Luria?" (Hebrew), Zion, V (1939–40), 214–41. The possibility should be considered, however, that Sarug had known Luria from the latter's days in Egypt before Luria came to Safed. There is now some evidence that Sarug lived in Egypt at that time.
1610–12. This *Book of Visions*, as it was called, is one of the most curious and revealing documents we possess, for very few authors have revealed their most intimate thoughts and feelings with such disconcerting candor. It appears that Vital not only believed Luria to have been worthy of messiahship but actually saw himself destined for a messianic career. For more than forty years he entertained messianic expectations for himself and collected testimonies and hints to that effect from the dreams and visions of others. Yet he would never move as much as a finger to implement any of his expectations, and he even refused to propagate his master’s doctrines, replete with messianic tension as they were. For all we know, there may have been many such “hidden messiahs” at the time who, unlike Vital, left no autobiographical notes. Sarug, on the other hand, who had no messianic pretensions himself, devoted all his life to the dissemination of the Lurianic doctrine—a doctrine more likely than any other to increase messianic tension among the people.

Many of the tenets of Lurianism were undoubtedly new in the sense that they had been unknown to earlier kabbalists, in spite of the exegetical skill with which the Lurianic writers read their views into the Zohar. But the decisive innovation, that which held the secret of the Lurianic appeal to the age, was the transposition of the central concepts of exile and redemption from the historical to a cosmic and even divine plane. The eschatological vision of redemption from oppression by the gentiles widened in scope to include not only the whole of creation but even the divine realm. Exile and redemption are the two poles of the axis around which the Lurianic system revolves; viewed in a dimension of depth, they now stand out as numinous symbols of a spiritual reality of which historical exile and redemption are merely the concrete expression. Luria himself developed his system without any “ideological” intentions. He merely revealed what in his opinion was the mystical reality of momentous processes in the sphere of the “supernal lights.” But once developed, his system provided what may be described as a new myth of Judaism. The realistic character of Luria’s mythical symbols enabled them to fulfill an ideological function of immediate historic bearing.

The character of Lurianic symbolism presents a special problem.

29. The full text of the *Sefer ha-Hezyonoth* (*Book of Visions*) has been published by A. Z. Aeschcely (*Jerusalem, 1954*), from Vital’s autograph preserved in Leghorn. Earlier editions were incomplete.
The accusation of anthropomorphism directed against the kabbalists is an old one. Their manner of speaking in a material fashion about things spiritual was often held to fall little short of actual blasphemy, yet it merely exemplified the essential paradox of all symbolism. Symbols express in human speech that which is properly inexpressible. Hence they are always material and anthropomorphic, even though the mystic may regard them as mere crutches to aid his frail human understanding. The kabbalists, whose mystical thinking strained after expression in symbolic forms, endeavored to evade responsibility for their symbols by the frequent use of qualifying phrases such as “so to speak,” “as if,” “as it were,” and the like. These reservations were supposed to minimize the real significance of the symbols employed. The kabbalists used the most outrageous material and even physical and sexual imagery but immediately qualified their statements by adding the solemn warning, “Cursed be the man that makes any graven or molten image,” that is, who attributes reality to symbolic expressions.30 From their higher theological vantage point the kabbalists might argue that the material interpretation of their symbols was a misunderstanding, yet it was precisely this creative misunderstanding that determined the public significance of kabbalistic symbolism. He was a bold man indeed who undertook to draw the line between understanding and misunderstanding in such matters. The inescapable dialectic of symbolism is central to a proper appreciation of the historical and social function of kabbalism, even as it underlies most of the discussions between kabbalists and their opponents.

Lurianism is mythological in the precise meaning of the term. It tells the story of divine acts and events, and it accounts for the mystery of the world by an inner, mystical process which, taking place within the Godhead, ultimately produced also the “outer,” material creation. According to the kabbalists everything external is merely a symbol or intimation of an inner reality that actually determines the external reality which we perceive. The main concepts of Lurianism all refer to the mystery of the Godhead, but on each and every level they also point to a corresponding aspect in the manifest cosmos.

Lurianic kabbalism provided the background of the Sabbatian movement. To attempt a concise survey of its essential features and

30. Cf. the characteristic warning at the beginning of the most deliberately anthropomorphic section of the Zohar, the Idra Rabbah (Zohar III, 127b).
their underlying mythology is to risk error and court misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the risk must be taken if we want to clear the way to a satisfactory understanding of the roots and the subsequent development of Sabbatianism. Let us glance, therefore, briefly at the basic notions which contain, in nuce, as it were, the whole of Lurianic kabballah. These are the notions of “retraction,” “the breaking of the vessels,” “restoration” (or tiqqun), and “the raising of the sparks.”

The doctrine of retraction is based on a simple if somewhat crudely naturalistic assumption. How is it possible for the world to exist at all if there is nothing besides En-Sof, the infinite Deity that is all and fills all? If En-Sof or “the light of En-Sof” is all in all, how can there be anything that is not En-Sof? Luria’s answer is deceptively simple and significantly different from that which earlier kabbalists would have given. Others would have replied to the question by a statement of their doctrine of emanation: God projects His creative power outside Himself. From His hidden essence, namely, from the brilliance radiating from His essence, He emanates the sefirot, or divine lights. These sefirot are the stages in which God manifests Himself in His different attributes; they contain the archetypes of all that exists. As the stream of the divine emanation proceeds, it becomes progressively less spiritual and refined, more material and coarse; thus all the worlds come into being by the descent of the divine power from the hidden Root of Roots. Our own material world is merely the last and outermost shell of this—to use the phrase of the Zohar—“garment of the Deity.” The higher levels of being, even the divine sefirot themselves, are garments only, clothing the hidden light of En-Sof to which they are related as the body is to the soul. The sefirot are the soul of the lower orders of being, whereas En-Sof, the Creator, is their “soul of souls.” The process of creation, as seen by the early kabbalists unfolds in progressive stages of a gradually coarsening, that is, materializing, “light.” It is essentially a one-way process, from God to the world and man.

For the kabbalists of Safed things were not quite so simple and straightforward. Even before Luria the theory of emanation had become much more complicated. On every level and at every stage of emanation we find not only the “straight,” “direct light” of the primary ray of emanation, but also its reverse, the “reflected light,” which, instead of proceeding further downward, longs to return to its original supernal source. There is thus a double action in every...