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Review of: Gershom Scholem, Sabbatai Ševi: the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676, with a new introduction by Yaacob Dweck, translated by R. J. Zwi Weblowsky, Bollingen Series XCIII, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Gershom Scholem,
SABBATAI ŞEVI: THE MYSTICAL MESSIAH, 1626-1676,
with a new introduction by Yaacob Dweck, translated by R. J. Zwi
Weblowsky, Bollingen Series XCIII,
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 1,096 pages.

This is the new edition of a work considered a milestone in the historiography of both the messianic movements and the Jewish world, written by one of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982). The book was first published in English by Princeton University Press in 1973 as a revised and augmented translation of the Hebrew edition (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1957). It is noteworthy that in the following years, thanks to this first English edition, the book was also published in six other languages: French, German, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish and Japanese.

This monumental work is an in-depth study of the charming and now widely known – thanks to Scholem – history of the messianic movement of Sabbatai Şevi (1626-1676), which, although the largest messianic movement after that of Jesus of Nazareth, lasted for a period of little more than a year in 1665 and 1666.

Despite the movement's short life, this charismatic Jew from Smyrna had stirred the Jewish – but not only – communities of his time, stating that long-awaited redemption had finally arrived, and that the law that had governed Jewish life would soon be superseded by a new Torah and a new faith. In the end, the Ottoman authorities forced Sabbatai Şevi to convert to Islam, and the movement of the mystic messiah ended ghastly, with the formation of a small ethno-religious group, the Dönme, who have maintained their traditions up to the present.

This latest edition of the book comes with a new exceptional introduction (xxix-lxv) by Yaacob Dweck, associate professor of history and Judaic studies at Princeton. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this introduction was the piece missing from all previous editions, as Dweck intriguingly presents the versatility and

timeless significance of the book. The introduction allows the reader to place the work within the writer's research as well as contemporary and previous historiography. In other words, it helps the reader get a glimpse of the origins of the book and its reception, and to recognise the conditions under which it was written, published and translated.

In 1937, two decades before the first Hebrew edition of the work, Scholem had published an essay titled "Redemption through Sin",¹ where he investigated various answers, which, after the conversion of Sabbatai ʿSevi and over the course of nearly a century, his remaining followers had sought to the difficult theological question "what happens when prophesy fails?" Scholem would deploy for the first time the term "paradox" as a hermeneutic key and present the theory of Kabbalistic nihilism. However, it must be noted that as early as the previous decade, he considered messianism to be a subject that was derivative and thus dependent on the Kabbalah. Hence, his interest in the Sabbatean movement was, from the beginning, connected to his research plan for the identification, editing and publication of a library of Kabbalistic texts, which he would announce in 1925 to the Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934).

¹ Gershom Scholem, "Mitzvah ha-ba-ah ba-averah: le-havanat ha-shabtaut", *Keneset* 2 (1937), pp. 347-392; the essay was translated much later into English and published under the title "Redemption through Sin" in the writer's own collection of essays *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York: Schocken, 1971, pp. 78-141.

Thanks to his acquaintance with Bialik, Scholem would soon become one of the youngest members of the newly founded Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, and, a few years later, would implement his research plan under the patronage of Salman Schocken (1877-1959). Funded by Schocken, a research institute for the Kabbalah was founded in 1939, the direction of which was entrusted to Scholem, now considered the father of the academic study of Jewish mysticism. This is the period during when, as Dweck notices, "Scholem had made a decisive turn towards the study of Messianism in general and Sabbatianism in specific" (xl).

With Scholem's work, the mystical messiah was no longer considered a marginal persona of Jewish and international history: "if most Jews had followed Sabbatai ʿSevi as the Messiah, the movement was Jewish, and properly so-called, not a deviation from some purified or apologetically rational Judaism" (xlv). The wide recognition, though, of Sabbatai's importance was a long process, since Scholem's first edition was heavily criticised, initially by the Jewish press, then by academia. Harsh accusations were made against Scholem by leading Jewish intellectuals, such as Baruch Kurzweil (1907-1972), who blamed him for embracing a theology of anarchic nihilism, one that celebrated the abjuration of the Law (lii). It is worth noting that among Scholem's critics was R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1924-2015), who had provided the book's English translation. When the latter was published by Princeton University Press 16 years after the first edition,

Scholem was already a recognised historian in the English-speaking world, and his work on the mystical messiah was accepted “as a masterpiece as if the polemics over the Hebrew edition had not even occurred”, as Dweck writes characteristically (xxxi). During the decades following the first English translation, however, historiography posed questions regarding the causes for the rapid and spectacular success of the

Sabbataean movement, and formulated the hypothesis of a link between the movement and the general crisis of the seventeenth century, directly challenging Scholem’s position on the relationship between the Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbatianism. Nonetheless, *Sabbatai Şevi: the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* does not cease to be a monumental and insurmountable work.

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