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THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN JUDAISM

And Other Essays
on Jewish Spirituality

GERSHOM SCHOLEM



THE MESSIANIC
IDEA IN JUDAISM

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Foreword by ARTHUR HERTZBERG



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FOREWORD

Gershom Scholem was the master builder of historical studies of the Kabbalah. When he began to work on this neglected field, the few who studied these texts were either amateurs who were looking for occult wisdom or old-style Kabbalists who were seeking guidance on their spiritual journeys. His work broke with the outlook of the scholars of the previous century in Judaica—die Wissenschaft des Judentums, the Science of Judaism—who had an orientation he rejected, calling their “disregard for the most vital aspects of the Jewish people as a collective entity” a form of “censorship of the Jewish past.” The major founder of modern Jewish historical studies in the nineteenth century, Leopold Zunz and Abraham Geiger, had ignored the Kabbalah; it did not fit into their account of the Jewish religion as rational and worthy of respect by “enlightened” minds. The only exception was the historian Heinrich Graetz. He had paid substantial attention to its texts and to their most explosive exponent, the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi, but Graetz had depicted the Kabbalah and all that flowed from it as an unworthy revolt from the underground of Jewish life against its reasonable, law-abiding, and learned mainstream. Scholem conducted a continuing polemic with Zunz, Geiger, and Graetz by bringing into view a Jewish past more varied, more vital, and more interesting than any idealized portrait could reveal.

Some of his contemporaries muttered on occasion that Scholem overvalued the Kabbalah by making it the equal of the Halakhah, the Biblical-Talmudic legal tradition that defined Jewish practice, but no one challenged his insistence that mysticism and the Kabbalah had been a major, and undervalued, force in Jewish history. The overt disagreements with Scholem were about some of the results of his studies. Almost all of the scholars in the field were his students or, in his later years, students of his students. They revered Scholem for his genius, were in awe of his enormous learning, and feared the fierceness with which he defended his views. The wide-ranging debate with Scholem’s views has flourished, in innumerable articles and many books, only in the years since his death in 1982. Toward the end of his life, speaking to his friends with a mixture of ruefulness and objectivity, Scholem predicted that this revisionism would happen. There was enough pain in such conversation when he was facing his own mortality, that I, for one, did not dare remind him that he himself had begun as an historical revisionist, challenging the very foundations of the work of the Jewish historians of the preceding century, and that once, in an earlier conversation when his spirit was more buoyant, he had quoted Nietzsche’s remark that the truest homage that the disciple pays the master is to betray him.

Even so, despite Scholem’s overwhelming authority, there were two issues on which lances were broken with him in his own lifetime. One subject of contention was Hasidism. Scholem contended that the turn to Jewish modernity began with the Sabbatians, who dared to change the Halakhah and even to overthrow it, and not with the Hasidim, who obeyed the inherited Jewish law. Scholem had insisted (the essay appears in this collection under the title “The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism”) that the Hasidim systematically moved away from the Messianic impulse in the Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria. He argued that the early Hasidim did not seek to hurry the redemption of the Jewish people and of all the

world; their central concern was personal communion with God, and such communion was available in Poland as in the Holy Land. Why had the early Hasidism abandoned Messianism? Scholem answered that they were distancing themselves from Sabbatai Zevi. The sect of his followers had remained much more powerful and troubling than anyone before Scholem understood. The Jewish community felt threatened by the persistence of such Messianic activism. Therefore, the early Hasidim became quietists. Scholem's insistence that Hasidism had broken with the Messianic impulse in the Lurianic Kabbalah was directly opposed to the view of the historian Ben Zion Dinur, a colleague at the Hebrew University. Dinur was convinced that Messianism was a central element in the thinking of the Baal Shem Tov and his immediate disciples, who had founded Hasidism in the second half of the eighteenth century. But Dinur was an ideologue who saw all of Jewish history as pointing to the Zionistic return to the land of the ancestors. Scholem took more seriously the dissent of Isaiah Tishby, his first major disciple, whom he had trained to become a specialist in the texts of the Kabbalah and of Hasidism. Tishby's views were more nuanced than Dinur's, but they were more upsetting, because they were based on an independent reading of the very literature that Scholem himself had used. Tishby concluded that the early Hasidim had softened the overt expressions of Messianism but had not abandoned this Lurianic teaching. Tishby insisted, contrary to Scholem, that the Messianic remarks in the early Hasidic texts were not routine formulas; they reflected the continuing, living force of activist Messianism. Some of the early Hasidic writers had even predicted dates, very soon, for the coming of the Messiah.

Another significant debate with Scholem in his own lifetime was over the origins of modernity. In Scholem's view, the modern era in Jewish history began with two revolutions against the accepted, prevailing norms of Jewish life in earlier centuries—that Jews must obey the prescribed Halakhah, and that they dare take no action to force the hand of God to bring the Messiah. In several of the essays in this volume he asserted that the modern era in Jewish history began with the breaking of the barriers of conventional faith and practice by Sabbatai Zevi and his prophet, Nathan of Gaza. Their followers went underground within the Jewish community or followed Sabbatai Zevi and converted to Islam, keeping secret their identity as Jewish followers of this Messiah. Whether wrapped in a tallit in the synagogue or wearing a fez in the mosque, the adherents of Sabbatai Zevi kept alive a Jewish teaching of rebellion against the law, and even of “the holiness of sin.” The Sabbatians took these actions because they insisted that the law of the Bible and the Talmud were intended for pre-Messianic times. By living beyond the law, they were actively inaugurating the new age of redemption. Thus the Sabbatians justified, on Kabbalistic grounds, a new Judaism, one which defied the law and was contemptuous of passivity. In Scholem's account, even modern Zionism itself harks back to the activist Messianic impulse of Sabbatai Zevi. Jewish modernity in all its major parts thus began in the aftermath of a false Messianism that appeared late in the seventeenth century.

Jewish historians accepted much, but not all, of Scholem's account of the origins of Jewish modernity. They agreed that the Messianic explosion around Sabbatai Zevi—his apostasy and the persistence of the faith in him for more than a century—did weaken obedience to the Halakhah among Jews, but that influences from the outside, from the majority culture, were at least as important. Many historians still continue to date the beginning of the modern era for Jews, with the French and American revolutions, which gave Jews political equality for

the first time since the late days of the Roman Empire. An earlier version of the beginning of Jewish modernity had been offered by the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the nineteenth-century scholars whom Scholem attacked. They had dated the onset of Jewish modernity with Moses Mendelssohn, a Jew who had lived in Berlin in the decade immediately before the two great political revolutions. Although he never held equal political rights, Mendelssohn was the paradigm of the Jew who had taught himself wide learning of Western culture. While remaining a faithful Jew, Mendelssohn had become a distinguished writer and philosopher in German; he was the first important example of a Jew in recent centuries who found some balance between secular culture and Jewish commitment. Scholem found in Mendelssohn the ancestor of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and not one of the forefathers of rebellion against the past in the name of vibrant new life.

In my own first encounters with Scholem, in 1971, when I spent most of the year teaching in Jerusalem, I argued for a third view, that Baruch Spinoza, an exact contemporary of Sabbatai Zevi, was the turning point into the modern era of Jewish history. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza had undermined the theology of the Bible on philosophical grounds. He had denied the doctrine of a personal God who had revealed his commandments to mankind. Spinoza had put in the place of the Biblical God the concept of universal morality. Any person at any time could rise, through thought, to these principles, which were embedded, like the laws of physics, in the nature of the world. According to Spinoza, the moral philosophy was superior to all the religions, which contained only partial visions of morality expressed in imperfect stories.

Scholem had, of course, proved that the influences of Sabbatai Zevi and Nathan of Gaza had persisted for generations. They had persuaded many Jews that the true meaning of the Torah was not in its plain text, and that the hidden meaning even taught that the path to holiness was through sin. This doctrine, as Scholem establishes in several of the essays in this volume, justified the apostasy to Islam by Sabbatai Zevi and to Christianity by Jacob Frank. But, so I argued with Scholem, that was the path of an elite that thought of itself as a heroic vanguard. It dominated the Jewish people for a brief moment in the 1660s, but when the redemption did not appear, the rebellious doctrine was kept only by a secretive minority. This Messianic theme was certainly strengthened among Jews by the convulsions brought on by Sabbatai Zevi, but the dominant aim of Jewish modernity, so I argued, was not to bring the Messiah but to find ways to enter the wider culture. Spinoza, I maintained, offered a more sober path away from the rigors of obedience to the Halakhah. He could be followed by people who did not imagine themselves to be actors in the high drama of redeeming sparks and fighting cosmic obstacles to the advent of the Messiah. Spinoza offered Biblical believers, Jews and Christians alike, a way of abandoning their inherited religions in the quiet assurance that they were moving toward a philosophically secure universalist morality. He held out peace, quiet, and acceptance in a world that promised to become a society not of Christians or Jews but of men and women who had found the universal moral principles and had joined together to live in harmony according to basic human nature, which was the same for all. He was, after all, the prime father of the Enlightenment, which taught that man, and not God, is the measure of all things, and that it is within his power to perfect himself and reorder society. Spinoza and the leaders of the Enlightenment had even suggested a redemptive purpose to the modern era: their thought would free mankind to create heaven.

on this earth.

Of course, Scholem reacted to this challenge by disagreeing. I had expected him to be annoyed at my daring, but he was not. He said that he had so much still to do in his work on the Kabbalah that he would probably not be able to find the time and the energy (he was already seventy-four in 1971) to give a large account of the links between Jewish Messianism and the varieties of Jewish modernity. I spent much time with him that year in Jerusalem and I saw him often during the next decade, when I came to visit in Jerusalem three or four times a year. We never returned to this discussion about the origins of Jewish modernity. I raised this question again only obliquely, when I suggested to Scholem that we were really arguing about his deepest convictions as a Jew. He agreed, and he added that he thought he did because he looked at Jewish history not from Berlin, and not from New York, but from Jerusalem.

The foundation of Scholem's vision of Jewish history was the premise that the power that shaped and moved Jewish experience from age to age came from within. The Jews created the Halakhah, in which religious experience was externalized in commandments and ritual observances, but they also created the Aggadah and the Kabbalah, in which the Jewish soul turned toward its inner feelings and to the quest for intimate union with God. The Halakhah was inherently conservative; it kept Jews obedient to God and united with each other, while they waited patiently for a miraculous end of days. The Aggadah, though it contained wondrous tales of direct connection between man and God, essentially taught quiescence. Heavenly voices could be heard, and they could even produce signs to prove their authenticity, but the dominant opinion in the Aggadah was that men could not follow their utterances against the written law or even against the will of the rabbis as interpreted by accepted authority. The Kabbalah, too, could be understood to teach inwardness. The Hasidim could interpret it to mean that trying to force the Messiah to come was a sin, and Scholem insisted in his essay in this collection, "*Devekut*, or Communion with God." Nonetheless, the Kabbalah, especially in its important restatement in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Issac Luria, was the source of the active effort to bring redemption. The activist approach of Lurianic Kabbalah could lead to the false messianism of Sabbatai Zevi, and the revolt against passivity has appeared in the modern age in the secular this-worldly Messianism of modern Zionism. The founders of the movement had followed after Sabbatai Zevi in refusing to wait any longer for the redemption of the Jews, but they acted as moderate men. They had no thought of bringing the supernatural Messiah through Kabbalistic exercise; they wanted to usher in a Messianic era in this world through their own hands. The modern Zionists went to work to bring redemption by building a new Jewish settlement in the ancient land of the Jews. They would end the exile by establishing a free, contemporary Jewish nation.

To construct this thesis Scholem could have conceded to Tishby that an activist Messianic element was present in the thought of the founders of Hasidim. He could simply have maintained that Messianic activism was transmitted into the nineteenth century not only by the remaining followers of Sabbatai Zevi but also by the more numerous disciples of the Ba Shem Tov. Scholem seems to have dug in his heels against Tishby because Scholem was defending scholarly truth as he saw it, and perhaps also because of his obvious fascination with Sabbatai Zevi and his followers. Scholem did not want to ascribe any partners to the

Sabbatians, as the sources of Jewish modernity. On the larger issues—whether Jewish modernity originates in internal or external forces—Scholem had to be intransigent. He insisted on the autonomy of Jewish history. If that were denied, his own life would make little sense. Scholem had made an almost unprecedented journey, as a teenager, from the home of his assimilated, and vehemently assimilating, parents to study Hebrew and immerse himself in the rabbinic and, soon, in the Kabbalistic texts. Very early in his life Scholem emphatically denied that there had ever been a symbiosis between Germans and Jews. The young Gerhardt Scholem changed his first name back to the Hebrew Gershom. He was becoming convinced of the depth and the richness of Jewish religion, literature, and culture and he was particularly attracted to the Kabbalah because it proved to him, when he first encountered some of its texts, that Judaism was not simple or one-dimensional. Deep traditions of mysticism, Gnostic teachings, and revolt against the existing norms had long existed in tension with Halakhic conformity. The young Scholem was dazzled by this depth and intensity, especially since he found a home, after the break with his parents, among a group of contemporaries that included S.Y. Agnon, a Hebrew writer who would eventually win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Zalman Rubashov, the Zionist leader and journalist who, under the name Shazar, was to become the third president of the State of Israel. This encounter with intellectuals who had been raised in Eastern Europe, within traditional Jewish life and culture, helped persuade Scholem that the sap of life, the energy both to belong to Jewish tradition and to revolt against it, ran strong in these authentic Jews. He had no doubt that their definitions of themselves derived not from outside influences but from their own Jewish learning and experiences.

The people in this circle differed in their religious practice and theory (Scholem himself became religiously observant for a few years) but they all shared a commitment to Zionism. Unlike their Western European counterparts, these East Europeans were not Russians or Poles who belonged to the “Jewish religious persuasion.” They were Jews; their languages were Hebrew and Yiddish, both the older language of Biblical and rabbinic Judaism and the modern tongue that was then being reborn. These men and women had decided that they could be themselves only by moving to Palestine and taking part in the building of the Zionist society that would express their identity. In their company, the young Gershom Scholem became a Zionist. Having rejected a hyphenated, German-Jewish identity for himself, he knew that he had to be part of the Jewish national community the Zionists were building. It was not Scholem’s nature to do anything by halves. He became a doctrinaire Zionist. He broke a friendship with Franz Rosenzweig because that theologian, a non-Zionist, believed that Judaism could be defined and lived authentically in Germany or anywhere else. Before and after 1922, when Scholem moved to Palestine, he continued to urge his close friend Walter Benjamin to give up his career as philosopher and critic and join the new Jewish community in Palestine. Scholem always knew that his Zionism was the foundation of his scholarly outlook. He said this very clearly in his essay “Reflections on the Scientific Study of Judaism”:

Then came the fundamental shift in perspective. It came with the rise of the national movement. We found a firm place in which to stand, a new center from which there appeared utterly different, new horizons.... The new slogan was: to view our history from within ... to rebuild the entire edifice of Jewish learning by the light of a Jew who lives within his people and has no other purpose but to view problems, events and ideas, in their true light, within the framework of their significant

Scholem's instance on seeing Jewish history "from within" made him deny the importance of outside influences, past or present. In ancient times, so Scholem insisted, the Jewish Gnostics had learnt nothing from the Neoplatonic philosophers; Jewish Gnosticism had developed on its own. In the vast corpus of his work, Scholem said little about the Jewish philosophers of medieval times, because these figures, including Maimonides, the greatest among them, had written their works under the undoubted influence of Aristotle. Scholem's schema of Jewish history put such creations offstage. These works had come into being at a moment when the Jewish spirit was being pulled out of its own orbit by outside sources, and Judaism had not gained strength or added energy for its continuity in these encounters. On the contrary, Judaism had survived only by the power of its own ideas. Jewish history was an account of their interaction and, especially, of the profound and lasting tensions between Halakhah and Kabbalah.

The Sabbatian movement was centrally important to Scholem's account of Jewish history. It was the boldest demand within Judaism to set aside the Halakhah and put pure faith in its place. This might seem to be a reenactment of the origin of Christianity, but the Sabbatians were not directly influenced by Christianity. They were not reenacting, in any conscious way, the drama of Jesus. The most that could be said, as Scholem observed in one of his masterpieces, *Sabbatai Zevi, the Mystical Messiah*, was that on both occasions, "early Sabbatianism and the early church went similar ways in accordance with the same psychological laws." The important fact, so Scholem continued, was "that at the very beginning of the movement, pure faith, independent of the observance of the Law, was proclaimed as the supreme religious value which secured salvation and eternal life for the believers." The Sabbatian displacement of the law by faith, Scholem went on to observe, was not denounced immediately on the ground that it was contrary to the essence of Judaism. That the faith in the God of Sabbatai Zevi swept the Jewish world in the 1660s, and that some learned rabbis continued to believe in the false Messiah even into the next century, proved to Scholem that there is no preexisting standard "of what beliefs are possible or impossible within the framework of Judaism." The only standard in any age is "what since Jews do, in fact, believe, or—at least—consider to be legitimate possibilities."

Anyone who knows something about the ideological debates within Zionism in the early decades of this century, when Scholem turned to Zionism and then emigrated to Jerusalem, hears in these comments an echo of the passionate debate between Ahad Ha'am, the conservative leader of "cultural Zionism," and his principal critics, Micah Josef Berdichevsky and Joseph Hayyim Brenner. Ahad Ha'am was a religious agnostic; he insisted that it was not faith but people that had been the force for continuity. Nonetheless, Ahad Ha'am had maintained that Jewish culture contained limits that forever put some ideas and practices beyond the pale. For example, sexual license was forbidden, despite the argument that men and women needed to recover their authenticity by breaking the religious and cultural restraints on their bodies. Against Ahad Ha'am, his critics argued that Jews should be free of the weight of their past. Whatever they might do and create today was a valid expression of Judaism, and it belonged, as of right, together with all the Judaisms of the past. This proclamation of Jewish freedom was not primarily about the right of the individual, who happened to be born Jewish, to do what he wanted, wherever he was. Ahad Ha'am and his

critics were arguing about the nature of the Zionist enterprise that was then being born in Palestine. Ahad Ha'am demanded that the "cultural center" be built according to the main outlines of the Jewish tradition as he defined it. Berdichevsky and Brenner countered that Jews now had the opportunity to create a new culture unfettered by the past. They denied that any standards from the past could be used to judge whether this new culture was authentic.

Scholem first published his book on Sabbatai Zevi in Hebrew in 1957. Then, in the early years of the State of Israel, he still believed that the new Hebraic Jewish culture of Israel could and should develop in freedom without constraint from the past. But Scholem was not really prepared for a culture of boring normalcy. He had not become a Zionist just to provide Jews with a refuge from anti-Semitism, a place where it would not matter what the culture of Israel might become. On the contrary, in Scholem's version of it, secular Zionism was the heir to the Messianic impulse in Judaism. He expected this renewed life to be of special importance to Jews, and to all mankind. Writing in 1964, in an essay entitled "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Day," Scholem faced squarely the question he himself had raised in 1937 in the essay "Redemption Through Sin" (which appears in this book): Does mysticism lead inevitably to anarchic individualism? Scholem answered the question very flatly: "Jewish continuity has depended upon the belief in revealed religion, since that belief is no longer held by many Jews, what can ensure both continuity and community? Ongoing secularization has posed a new question: Can secular life in any sense be regarded as sacred? There are those who see in the secularism of our lives and in the building of the Zionist state the expression of the mystical meaning of the secret of the Universe."

Nine years later, in a lecture he gave in Santa Barbara entitled "Reflections on Jewish Theology," Scholem offered perhaps the most astonishing hints about his own views as they evolved during the years. At the very end of the lecture, Scholem, the lifelong exponent of the significance of the Kabbalah, subordinated it to the Halakhah: "I am convinced that ... Zionism contains within it religious content and a religious potential that is far more fundamental than anything that is expressed by the existing 'religious parties of the State of Israel.' In the dialectic of Jewish life, the religious tradition continues to be the challenge and the fundamental element in that tradition is the Halakhah." The circle that began in his youth was thus closed in his later years. Halakhah is no longer, as he sometimes said in his earlier years, a fossil; it is now the central element of religious continuity. Mysticism is the refresher and corrective, but one can detect a progression in Scholem's later years of growing worry about its anarchic tendencies. The combat of law and mysticism will take place in the new secular Zionist community, within which a new Jewish culture is arising. Despite Scholem's past emphasis on the secularity of the Zionist culture, he remained convinced that the religious elements in Judaism were so powerful that "so long as the belief in God is a fundamental phenomenon among all beings created in His image, a faith which cannot be destroyed by any ideology, it appears to me that the absolute secularization of Israel is inconceivable. The continued wrestling with this process of secularization, with both its positives and its limitations, seems to me to be creative and determining."

This last sentence expresses the vision of life that Scholem held from the beginning of his career to the very end of his days. Life was struggle and conflict; it was not quiet and

serenity. This was true not only of human life, but of the cosmos itself. The study of the Kabbalah was not merely the subject of his career as historian. The Kabbalah brought to center stage the image of life as creative turbulence in the heavens and on the earth. Scholem never really answered the question that he sometimes raised about the survival of the Jewish people. He insisted that it was a mystery that defied any rational explanation, but he did not offer an answer. Between the lines in a number of places in the vast corpus of his work, and especially in the essays that are collected in this volume, there is more than a hint of what he thought about the blazing, unique intensity of the Jewish spirit, in all of its warring elements, has generated the energy for survival and creativity. Toward the end of his life, as I noted above, he saw these passions expressing themselves in a community that shared the faith in God, which continues in subterranean ways even in this secular age. Scholem added that the Halakha, the very law from which the rebels broke, had to continue to exist even for those who disobeyed it.

Even those who did not know Scholem cannot read him just for his learning and the brilliance of his insights. On every page, and almost on every line, one hears the voice of a great man. Often the reader comes near to the paradoxes and even the conflicts within Scholem's own soul. I heard one such paradox in my very last conversation with him, over coffee in his apartment one Sabbath morning in 1980. I had come to him from the nearby Yeshurun Synagogue, after the end of the morning service. By chance, I had sat on a seat on which there was a small metal plaque with his name. I asked Scholem whether his name was on the seat as a holdover from the time, many years before, when he still lived as an Orthodox Jew. He answered that this was still his seat. When I raised an eyebrow, he added, "A Jew might choose not to go to synagogue but he must retain his place there." I suspect that the synagogue that Scholem attended was not in a building on some street corner. It was an edifice of spirit and passion that existed in his mind and imagination.

Arthur Hertzberg
New York University
January 1995

PREFACE

THE ESSAYS COLLECTED in this volume represent some aspects of my attempts at synthesis over the last thirty-five years. They grew out of my deep involvement with the study of Jewish mysticism in its many ramifications, to which I have devoted my life's work. Starting from attempts to understand the primary sources of Kabbalistic literature, to which hardly any serious attention had been given by Jewish scholarship, I gradually widened my horizon especially when I came to see the complex relations between Jewish mysticism and Messianism. About half the papers in this book are concerned with this relationship, which I consider of primary importance for an understanding of Jewish history in general and of Jewish mysticism in particular.

This, of course, is not to say that I approached this neglected field without any general ideas—or you may say intuitions—about the subject that attracted me most. For many years immersed myself in philological studies, not because I had no such general ideas, but rather because I had too many. As a young man, I was intrigued to find out what precisely it was that made Judaism a living thing. I felt challenged by a welter of conflicting ideas, and wanted to sort out the truth from the figments of my own rather lively imagination. For a long time, this made me reluctant to summarize the results of my studies, before they would be supported by a meticulous probing of detail. It was not until my fortieth year that I found the courage to speak out about topics which, at least for me, had held a strong attraction and fascination. I have discussed some of the larger issues in my major works. The present volume takes up certain of these themes, sometimes enlarging upon them and sometimes trying to distill their essence. This way, the central issues taken up here will, I hope, be brought into sharper focus and, to some extent, be clarified.

The ideas expressed in some of these papers have sometimes been vehemently attacked and the author has been accused of promoting all kinds of destructive, nihilistic, and what-not tendencies. There is no point in answering such polemics or trying to distinguish between the nonsense attributed to me and those theses I in fact defend. The work has to stand on its own, and its theses will be proved and confirmed by the fruits these new insights into the meaning of Jewish history are likely to produce.

It is often said that this generation is not interested in history and tradition. I find it hard to believe this. At any rate, this book (in which repetitions of certain concepts and issues have intentionally been retained), is addressed to people who have not merely some moderate and far-away interest in the questions of Judaism and its past, but a passionate one. The connection between the renaissance of the Jewish people and its historical consciousness is obvious, and has resulted in a new awareness of the dynamics and dialectics of Jewish history. The papers collected in this book are, I venture to hope, living witness to this.

Jewish history has many aspects—paths and bypaths—which were forgotten, lost sight of, and sometimes consciously played down by a galaxy of great scholars who had a one-sided and rather dogmatic idea of what Judaism was and should be. This book is written by a man who believes Judaism to be a living phenomenon, which, although developing under the impact of a great idea, has changed considerably over the long periods of its history and has

not yet exhausted its potentialities. As long as it is alive, it will cast off forms and take on new ones, and who are we to predict in what guise they will present themselves? A new period of Jewish history has begun with the holocaust and the foundation of the State of Israel. But by whatever new forms the living consciousness of the Jews will be expressed, the old ones will always be of relevance to those who find in Judaism both a challenge and an answer.

I wish to express my debt of gratitude to my friend and colleague Nahum N. Glatzer, who was instrumental in bringing about this collection, and equally to the translators who have faced no easy task in putting these essays, written originally in Hebrew and German, into English.

GERSHOM SCHOLEM

Jerusalem
November 1970

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MESSIANIC IDEA IN JUDAISM

I

ANY DISCUSSION OF the problems relating to Messianism is a delicate matter, for it is here that the essential conflict between Judaism and Christianity has developed and continues to exist. Although our discussion will not be concerned with this conflict, but rather with internal Jewish perspectives on Messianism, it will be of value to recall the central issue of the conflict. A totally different concept of redemption determines the attitude to Messianism in Judaism and in Christianity; what appears to the one as a proud indication of its understanding and a positive achievement of its message is most unequivocally belittled and disputed by the other. Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside. Even the *civitas dei* of Augustine, which within the confines of Christian dogmatics and in the interest of the Church has made the most far-reaching attempt both to retain and to reinterpret the Jewish categories of redemption, is a community of the mysteriously redeemed within an unredeemed world. What for the one stood unconditionally at the end of history as its most distant aim was for the other the true center of the historical process, even if that process was henceforth peculiarly decked out as *Heilsgeschichte*. The Church was convinced that by perceiving redemption in this way it had overcome an external conception that was bound to the material world, and it had counterpoised a new conception that possessed higher dignity. But it was just this conviction that always seemed to Judaism to be anything but progress. The reinterpretation of the prophetic promises of the Bible to refer to a realm of inwardness which seemed as remote as possible from any contents of these prophecies, always seemed to the religious thinkers of Judaism to be an illegitimate anticipation of something which could at best be seen as the interior side of an event basically taking place in the external world but could never be cut off from the event itself. What appeared to the Christians as a deep apprehension of the external realm appeared to the Jew as its liquidation and as a flight which sought to escape verification of the Messianic claim within its most empiric categories by means of a non-existent pure inwardness.

The history of the Messianic idea in Judaism has run its course within the framework of this idea's never-relinquished demand for fulfillment of its original vision. The considerations I would like to set forth in what follows concern the special tensions in the Messianic idea and their understanding in rabbinic Judaism. These tensions manifest themselves within the fixed tradition which we shall try to understand. But even where it is not stated explicitly, w

shall often enough find as well a polemical side-glance, or an allusion, albeit concealed, to the claims of Christian Messianism. A number of the things which I would here like to sum up briefly are obvious and hardly constitute an object of learned controversy; of other things, however, this can hardly be said, and much as the history of Messianism has been discussed, there is room for a sharper analysis of what it is that makes up the specific vitality of the phenomenon in the history of the Jewish religion. I shall not try to compete with historical and mythological analyses of the origins of Messianic belief in biblical texts or in the history of religion in general; such studies have been undertaken by outstanding scholars like Joseph Klausner, Willi Staerk, Hugo Gressmann, Sigmund Mowinckel, and many others.¹ The object of these remarks is not the initial development of the Messianic idea but the varying perspectives by which it became an effective force after its crystallization in historical Judaism. In this connection it must be emphasized that in the history of Judaism its influence has been exercised almost exclusively under the conditions of the exile as a primary reality of Jewish life and Jewish history. This reality lends its special coloring to each of the various conceptions with which we shall be dealing here.

Within rabbinic Judaism as a social and religious phenomenon three kinds of forces are active precisely at those points where it is the most alive: conservative, restorative, and utopian. The conservative forces are directed toward the preservation of that which exists and which, in the historical environment of Judaism, was always in danger. They are the most easily visible and immediately obvious forces that operate in this type of Judaism. They have established themselves most effectively in the world of *Halakhah*, in the construction and continuing preservation and development of religious law. This law determined the nature of the Jew's life in exile, the only frame in which a life in the light of Sinai revelation seemed possible, and it is not surprising that it drew to itself, above all, the conservative forces. The restorative forces are directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal. More precisely, they are directed to a condition pictured by the historical fantasy and the memory of the nation as circumstances of an ideal past. Here hope is turned backwards to the re-establishment of an original state of things and to a "life with the ancestors." But there are, in addition, forces which press forward and renew; they are nourished by a vision of the future and receive utopian inspiration. They aim at a state of things which has never yet existed. The problem of Messianism in historical Judaism appears within the field of influence of these forces. To be sure, the conservative tendencies, great and even crucial as their role and their significance were for the existence of the religious community of Judaism, have no part in the development of Messianism within this community. This is not true, however, of the two other tendencies which I characterize as restorative and utopian. Both tendencies are deeply intertwined and yet at the same time of a contradictory nature; the Messianic idea crystallizes only out of the two of them together. Neither is entirely absent in the historical and ideological manifestations of Messianism. Only the proportion between them is subject to the widest fluctuations. Among various groupings within Jewry entirely different points of application for such forces and tendencies are emphasized. There has never been in Judaism a measured harmony between the restorative and the utopian factor. Sometimes the one tendency appears with maximum emphasis while the other is reduced to a minimum, but we never find a "pure case" of the exclusive influence or crystallization of one of these tendencies. The reason for this is clear

even the restorative force has a utopian factor, and in utopianism restorative factors are work. The restorative tendency, per se, even when it understands itself as such—as for example in the case of Maimonides whose statements regarding the Messianic idea I shall shortly discuss in greater detail—is nourished to no small degree by a utopian impulse which now appears as projection upon the past instead of projection on the future. The reason for this, too, is clear. There is a common ground of Messianic hope. The utopianism which presents the Jew of that epoch with the vision of an ideal as he would like to see it realized itself falls naturally into two categories. It can take on the radical form of the vision of a new content which is to be realized in a future that will in fact be nothing other than the restoration of what is ancient, bringing back that which had been lost; the ideal content of the past at the same time delivers the basis for the vision of the future. However, knowingly or unknowingly, certain elements creep into such a restoratively oriented utopianism which are not in the least restorative and which derive from the vision of a completely new state of the Messianic world. The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even the old order does not consist of the actual past; rather, it is a past transformed and transfigured in a dream brightened by the rays of utopianism.² Thus the dialectically linked tension between the utopian and restorative factors provides us also with deep tensions in the form of Messianism crystallized in rabbinic Judaism, to say nothing of the interiorization of these impulses in Jewish mysticism. I shall now elaborate several principal structures of these forms and in so doing try to clarify the tensions they express.

When the Messianic idea appears as a living force in the world of Judaism—especially in the realm of medieval Judaism, which seems so totally interwoven with the realm of the *Halakhah*—it always occurs in the closest connection with apocalypticism. In these instances the Messianic idea constitutes both a content of religious faith as such and also living, acute anticipation. Apocalypticism appears as the form necessarily created by acute Messianism.

It is self-evident and needs no justification that the Messianic idea came into being not only as the revelation of an abstract proposition regarding the hope of mankind for redemption, but rather in very specific historical circumstances. The predictions and messages of the biblical prophets come to an equal degree from revelation and from the suffering and desperation of those whom they addressed; they are spoken from the context of situations and again and again have proven effective in situations where the End, perceived in the immediate future, was thought about to break in abruptly at any moment. To be sure, the predictions of the prophets do not yet give us any kind of well-defined conception of Messianism. Rather we have a variety of different motifs in which the much emphasized utopian impulse—the vision of a better humanity at the End of Days—is interpenetrated with restorative impulses like the reinstatement of an ideally conceived Davidic kingdom. The Messianic message of the prophets addresses man as a whole and sets forth images of nature and historical events through which God speaks and in which the End of Days is announced and realized. These visions never involve the individual as such, nor do these declarations claim any special “secret” knowledge gained from an inner realm not accessible to every man. By contrast, the words of the apocalyptists represent a shift in this view of the content of prophecy. These anonymous authors of writings like the biblical book of Daniel, the two books of Enoch, Fourth Ezra, the Baruch apocalypses, or the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs—to name only a few documents of this at one time seemingly over-flourishing literature—encase the words of the ancient prophets in a frame which they mold and furnish in their own way.

Here God no longer shows the seer individual instances of historical occurrence or only a vision of history’s end; rather he sees all of history from beginning to end with particular emphasis on the arrival of that new aeon which manifests itself and prevails in the Messianic events. The Pharisee Josephus had already seen Adam, the first man, as a prophet whose vision encompassed not only the flood in Noah’s day but also the flood of fire at the end of time and thus included all of history.³ The talmudic Aggadah saw things very much the same. God shows Adam—but also Abraham or Moses—the entire past and future, the current aeon and the final aeon.⁴ Likewise, the priest of the End of Days (the priestly Messiah) who appears in the Habakkuk commentary of the Dead Sea sectarians, will be able to interpret the visions of the ancient prophets regarding the total course of the history of Israel as all of their features now become fully visible. In this interpretation of the visions of the ancient prophets or even in the work of the apocalyptists themselves, motifs of current history, which refer to contemporary conditions and needs, are closely intertwined with those of an apocalyptic eschatological nature, in which not only the experiences of the present exercise an influence but often enough ancient mythical images are filled with utopian content. As students of apocalypticism have always noted correctly, in this process the new eschatology moves decisively beyond the ancient prophecies. Hosea, Amos, or Isaiah know only a single world

in which even the great events at the End of Days run their course. Their eschatology is of national kind: it speaks of the re-establishment of the House of David, now in ruins, and of the future glory of an Israel returned to God; also of everlasting peace and the turning of all nations toward the one God of Israel and away from heathen cults and images. In contrast to apocalypticism produced the doctrine of the two aeons which follow one another and stand in an antithetical relationship: this world and the world to come, the reign of darkness and the reign of light. The national antithesis between Israel and the heathens is broadened into a cosmic antithesis in which the realms of the holy and of sin, of purity and impurity, of life and death, of light and darkness, God and the anti-divine powers, stand opposed. A wide cosmic background is superadded to the national content of eschatology and it is here that the final struggle between Israel and the heathens takes place. There arise the conceptions of the Resurrection of the Dead, of reward and punishment in the Last Judgment, and of Paradise and Hell, in which notions of individual retribution at the End of Days occur in conjunction with promises and threats addressed to the nation. All these are conceptions which are not closely tied to the ancient prophecies. The words of the prophets, which in their original context appear so clear and direct, henceforth become riddles, allegories, and mysteries which are interpreted—one might say, deciphered—by an apocalyptic homiletic or an original apocalyptic vision. And thus we have the framework in which the Messianic idea now begins its historical influence.

But there is an additional factor. As the meaning of the Greek word indicates, apocalypses are revelations or disclosures of God's hidden knowledge of the End. That is to say, what reached the prophets as knowledge which could hardly be proclaimed with sufficient loudness and publicity, in the apocalypses becomes secret. It is one of those enigmas of Jewish religious history that have not been satisfactorily solved by any of the many attempts at explanation just what the real reason is for this metamorphosis which makes knowledge of the Messianic End, where it oversteps the prophetic framework of the biblical texts, into an esoteric form of knowing. Why does the apocalyptist conceal himself instead of shouting his vision into the face of the enemy power as did the prophets? Why does he load the responsibility for those visions, fraught with danger, on the heroes of biblical antiquity and why does he convey them only to the select or initiated? Is it politics? Is it a change in understanding of the nature of this knowing? There is something disturbing in the transcendence of the prophetic which at the same time carries along with it a narrowing of its realm of influence. It cannot be coincidental that for nearly a millennium this character of apocalyptic knowing has also been preserved by the heirs of the ancient apocalypists within rabbinic Judaism. For them it takes its place at the side of the gnostic knowledge of the *merkabah*, the throne-world of God and its mysteries which, explosive as this knowledge of itself was, could be reported only in a whisper. Not without reason the writings of the *merkabah* mystics in Judaism always contain apocalyptic chapters.⁵ The stronger the loss of historical reality in Judaism during the turmoil surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple and of the ancient world, the more intensive became consciousness of the cryptic character and mystery of the Messianic message, which indeed always referred precisely to the re-establishment of that lost reality although it also went beyond it.

In an almost natural way Messianic apocalypticism orders the old promises and traditions along with the newly adhering motifs, interpretations, and reinterpretations, under the two

aspects which the Messianic idea henceforth takes on and keeps in Jewish consciousness. These two aspects, which in fact are based on the words of the prophets themselves and are more or less visible there, concern the catastrophic and destructive nature of the redemption on the one hand and the utopianism of the content of realized Messianism on the other. Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature—this cannot be sufficiently emphasized—a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future. This transition itself becomes a problem in that, beginning with the words of the prophets Amos and Isaiah, the really non-transitional character of it is pointed up and emphasized. Isaiah's Day of the Lord (chapters 34 and 4) is a day of catastrophe and is described in visions which stress this catastrophic nature in the extreme. But we learn nothing about how that Day of the Lord, on which previous history ends and on which the world is shaken to its foundations, is related to the "End of Days" (promised at the beginning of chapter 2 of Isaiah) on which the House of the Lord shall be established at the top of the mountains and the peoples flow unto it.

The elements of the catastrophic and the visions of doom are present in peculiar fashion in the Messianic vision. On the one hand, they are applied to the transition or destruction through which the Messianic redemption is born—hence the ascription of the Jewish concept of "birth-pangs of the Messiah" to this period. But, on the other hand, it is also applied to the terrors of the Last Judgment which in many of these descriptions concludes the Messianic period instead of accompanying its beginnings. And thus for the apocalypticist's glance the Messianic utopia may often become twofold. The new aeon and the days of the Messiah are no longer one (as they still are in some writings of this literature); rather they refer to two periods of which the one, the rule of the Messiah, really still belongs to this world; the other, however, already belongs entirely to the new aeon which begins with the Last Judgment. But the doubling of the stages of redemption is mostly the result of learned exegesis which seeks to put every saying of the Bible harmoniously into place. In an original vision catastrophe and utopia do not twice follow after each other, but it is precisely by their uniqueness that they bring to bear with full force the two sides of the Messianic event.

However, before I devote a few remarks to these two sides of the Messianic idea as they characterize Messianic apocalypticism, I must preface a word intended to correct a widespread misconception. I am referring to the distortion of historical circumstances, equally popular among both Jewish and Christian scholars, which lies in denying the continuation of the apocalyptic tradition in rabbinic Judaism. This distortion of intellectual history is quite understandable in terms of the anti-Jewish interests of Christian scholars as well as the anti-Christian interests of Jewish ones. It was in keeping with the tendencies of the former group to regard Judaism only as the antechamber of Christianity and to see it as moribund once it had brought forth Christianity. Their view led to the conception of no genuine continuation of Messianism via the apocalypticists in the new world of Christianity. But the other group, too, paid tribute to their own prejudices. They were the great Jewish scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who to a great extent determined the popular image of Judaism. In view of their concept of a purified and rational Judaism they could only applaud the attempt to eliminate or liquidate apocalypticism from the reality of Judaism. Without regrets, they left the claim of apocalyptic continuity to a Christianity which, to their minds, gained nothing on that account. Historical truth was the price paid for

the prejudices of both camps. Attempts to eliminate apocalypticism completely from the realm of rabbinic Judaism have not been lacking since the Middle Ages and in what follows we shall even deal with the most consequential of these attempts, that of Maimonides. Such attempts represent one tendency among other, entirely different ones which have also been active in the history of Judaism. By themselves these attempts can claim no value as a truthful representation of the historical reality of Judaism. For this denial of apocalypticism set out to suppress exceedingly vital elements in the realm of Judaism, elements filled with historical dynamism even if they combined destructive with constructive forces. The idea that all apocalyptic currents of the pre-Christian age flowed into Christianity and there found their real place is a fiction which cannot be maintained against more careful historical examination. Just after the origin of the known apocalypses, especially those of the first pre- and post-Christian centuries, an undiminished mighty stream of apocalypticism rushes forth within the Jewish rabbinic tradition; in part it flows into the channel of the talmudic and aggadic literature, in part it finds its expression in its own literature, preserved in Hebrew and Aramaic. There can be no talk of a discontinuity between these later apocalypses and those ancient ones whose Hebrew originals have until now remained lost and which have only been preserved in translations and in the adaptations of the Christian churches. Whom one may question to which Jewish circles these independent writings that preserve the pseudepigraphic literary form really belong—nothing in them contradicts the spiritual work of the rabbis even if it is not possible to bring them into close relationship with it—there remains no doubt about the entry of apocalyptic tradition into the House of Study and the range of ideas of the traditional scholars. Here the cover of anonymity is again thrown off, the secretive whisper turns into an open exchange of ideas, into formal instruction, and even into pointed epigrams whose authors, with their often well-known names, take responsibility for their words. The significance of these two sources of rabbinic apocalypticism for a understanding of Messianism in the world of the *Halakhah* cannot be estimated too highly.

I spoke of the catastrophic nature of redemption as a decisive characteristic of every such apocalypticism, which is then complemented by the utopian view of the content of realized redemption. Apocalyptic thinking always contains the elements of dread and consolation intertwined. The dread and peril of the End form an element of shock and of the shocking which induces extravagance. The terrors of the real historical experiences of the Jewish people are joined with images drawn from the heritage of myth or mythical fantasy. This is expressed with particular forcefulness in the concept of the birth pangs of the Messiah which in this case means the Messianic age. The paradoxical nature of this conception exists in the fact that the redemption which is born here is in no causal sense a result of previous history. It is precisely the lack of transition between history and the redemption which is always stressed by the prophets and apocalyptists. The Bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. The redemption is not the product of immanent developments such as we find it in modern Western reinterpretations of Messianism since the Enlightenment where, secularized as the belief in progress, Messianism still displayed unbroken and immense vigor. It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source. The constructions of history in which the apocalyptists (as opposed to the prophets of the Bible) revel have nothing to do with modern

conceptions of development or progress, and if there is anything which, in the view of the seers, history deserves, it can only be to perish. The apocalyptists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin, free at last and undisguised.

To be sure, the "light of the Messiah" which is to shine wondrously into the world, is not always seen as breaking in with complete suddenness; it may become visible by gradations and stages, but these gradations and stages have nothing to do with the history that has gone before. "It is told of Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Simeon that they walked in the valley of Arbel early in the morning and saw the dawn breaking on the horizon. Thereupon Rabbi Hiyya said: 'So too is Israel's redemption; at first it will be only very slightly visible, then it will shine forth more brightly, and only afterwards will it break forth in all of its glory.'"⁶ Such a belief was very common among apocalyptic calculators in all ages whenever they sought schemes according to which the different stages of the redemption would occur within the frame of the Last Days. But the apocalyptic calculation which relied upon numbers and constellations expresses only one side of this point of view and many teachers repudiated it again and again not without reason, though with little success. In opposition to it stands the no less powerful sentiment that the Messianic age cannot be calculated. This was most pointedly expressed in the words of a talmudic teacher of the third century: "Three things come unawares: the Messiah, a found article, and a scorpion."⁷ And with sharper stress on the always possible End, the immediacy to God of each day, we find: "If Israel would repent even for a single day, they would be instantly redeemed and the Son of David would instantly come, for it says (Ps. 95:7): *Today* if you will listen to His voice."⁸

Such words add to the concept of the spontaneity of the redemption the idea, expressed in numerous moral dicta of the talmudic literature, that there are deeds which, as it were, help to bring about the redemption, somewhat like a midwife at a birth. Whoever does one thing or another (whoever, for example, cites what he has heard, stating the name of his source) "he brings redemption into the world." But here it is not a matter of real causality, only of an already established frame for pointed, sententious formulations which are directed less at the Messianic redemption than at the moral value of the suggested conduct. Indeed, statements of this kind stand totally outside the realm of apocalyptic thought. They present a moralism which must have been welcomed by later reinterpretations of Messianism in the sense of a rational and sensible utopianism. But in fact there can be no preparation for the Messiah. He comes suddenly, unannounced, and precisely when he is least expected or when hope has long been abandoned.

This deep feeling of the impossibility of calculating the Messianic age has produced in the Messianic Aggadah the idea of the occultation of the Messiah, who is always already present somewhere and whom a profound legend, not without cause, allows to have been born on the day of the destruction of the Temple. Beginning at the moment of the deepest catastrophe there exists the chance for redemption. "Israel speaks to God: When will You redeem us? He answers: When you have sunk to the lowest level, at that time will I redeem you." Corresponding to this continually present possibility is the concept of the Messiah who continually waits in hiding. It has taken many forms, though admittedly none more grand than that which, with extravagant anticipation, has transplanted the Messiah to the gates of Rome, where he dwells among the lepers and beggars of the Eternal City.¹⁰ This true

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