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Messianism in the Early Work of Gershom Scholem

Michael Löwy

Gershom Scholem is a shining example of the modern Jewish intellectual. He is neither a Talmudist nor a Rabbi, much less a prophet. More modestly: he is a historian, a man of science, of the university – gifted, however, with what spiritual energy! A – critical – son of the Haskala and a thinker who, to be sure, gave up traditional orthodox belief with its rituals and taboos, and yet, in his own way, remained religious. He is therefore also a modern Jewish intellectual because he is assimilated – stamped by German culture, despite his revolt against assimilation and his struggle for *dissimilation* (to use the term coined by Franz Rosenzweig) and despite his Zionism, which in 1923 led him to emigrate to Jerusalem.

Still Scholem also belongs to that category of the modern intellectual – Jewish or non-Jewish – who painfully experiences *the disenchantment of the world*, that, according to Max Weber, is characteristic of modernity. For this reason he is strongly attracted to the *Romantic critique of modernity*, to the Romantic protest – practiced in the name of cultural or religious values of the past – against (Weberian) *instrumental rationality* and against the quantification and reification that stem from bourgeois-industrial modernity. He participates in this broad current of a modern critique of modernity that is inspired by German Romanticism and that sees, in myth, in history, or in religion, a way to combat this loss of meaning.

Like other Romantics, Scholem is also too modern to simply fall back

on the past: he can no longer believe in the Kabbala — or in the imminent return of the Messiah — in the way his ancestors did. His strategy for the reenchantment of the world is world-immanent: he becomes the historian of the Kabbala and of Messianism, and through this mediation allows the fascinating spiritual magic of the Jewish mysticism of bygone centuries to rise again.

Gershom Scholem's work is not only a singular monument of the modernist writing of history, it also opens a new perspective on the Jewish religious tradition, since it restores to it the messianic and apocalyptic dimension that was ignored by the rationalist-liberal view of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and German sociology. Max Weber and Werner Sombart saw the spirit of Judaism merely as calculating rationality: Scholem pointed to the subterranean, mystical, heretical, messianic, and utopian currents in the history of Judaism.¹

Background and Influences

Born into a petit-bourgeois, assimilated Berlin family, Scholem at first soaked up German culture; in his youth he favored the Romantic and neo-Romantic writers: Jean Paul, Novalis, Mörike, Stefan George, Paul Scheerbart.² It is highly indicative that the first book about the Kabbala that he studied and that would have a considerable influence on him is the work of the Christian Theosoph and German Romantic Franz Joseph Molitor: *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (published between 1827 and 1853). In various autobiographical texts he refers to the “deep insights” of this author and to the “fascinating effect” that Molitor's book had on him. Although he rejected the christological speculations of this “follower of the Romantic philosophers Schelling and Baader,” he nonetheless pronounced that Molitor had “understood

1. It would be incorrect to use the concept of “millennialism” here, since it corresponds to a Christian terminology – chiasmus or the “millenium” of which the new testament speaks.

2. In his dissertation *The Demonic in History*, David Biale argues that Buber and Scholem found in a specific sort of Romanticism a unique *Weltanschauung* that influenced their whole way of thinking. In his opinion Scholem's sympathy for a particular tendency inside German Romanticism played a decisive role in his intellectual development, both in the field of philosophy and of historiography. David Biale, *The Demonic in History. Gershom Scholem and the Revision of Jewish Historiography*, Doctoral Dissertation. (Los Angeles: U of California, 1977) 17.

In a conversation with me Scholem confirmed his interest in Romanticism in his early years, but explicitly forbade any interpretation of his work that would put the accent on German instead of the Jewish-Hebrew sources.

the Kabbala better than the highest religious Jewish authorities [*Gedolei Hochmat Israel*] of his time.”³

Soon the young Scholem would rebel against the assimilation-friendly ideology of his family – his father threw him out of their house because of his “antipatriotic” stance during the war! – in that he turned to the sources of Judaism, “in search of the tradition lost to my social circle, that attracted me with its great magic.”⁴ This search led him, on the one hand – first under the influence of Martin Buber – to a study of Jewish mysticism, and on the other, to Zionism. His not-orthodox religious attitude brings him close to Buber, yet his Zionism is more radical: he passionately repudiates the Jewish-German cultural symbiosis, and this refusal would ultimately distance him as much from Martin Buber as from Franz Rosenzweig.

Time of Bildung

Scholem’s diaries from 1913-1917 (published in 1995) allow us to reconstruct the development of his ideas and the extraordinary intellectual vitality that characterizes this phase of *Bildung* [education].

This document transplants us right in the middle of a *Bildung*-laboratory, in which religion and revolution, Zionist dream and anarchist utopia, German Romanticism and Jewish mysticism, Kierkegaard and Martin Buber, mix and react with each other. These diaries contain not only the raw material from his two well-known autobiographical works, *Walter Benjamin. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* and *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, but also an astonishing chronicle of encounters and readings, enriched with philosophical, political, and religious trains of thought.

In these pages one witnesses the formation of a *rebellious Jewish consciousness*, that revolts against the world war, against a solidly middle-class Jewish-German society, and even against the ruling Zionist conformism. Despite his precocious and enthusiastic turn towards Zionism, which he comprehends as a revolutionary movement, Scholem does not

3. The first citation stems from a 1937 letter to Salman Schocken, cited by David Biale in *Gershom Scholem: Kabbala and Counter-History*. Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbala and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 216. (This book is a revised and improved version of his dissertation, *The Demonic in History*.) The second quote comes from the Hebrew version of Scholem’s autobiography, *Mi-Berlin Le-Yerushalayim* — which is more complete than the various European translations. Gershom Scholem, *Mi-Berlin Le-Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982) 127.

4. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 68.

conceal his hostile stance towards its founding father:

We reject Herzl. He is *to blame* for the Zionism of today [...] which is an organization of grocers, who grovel before everyone powerful! [...] His only thought was the Jewish State. And this we reject. Because we preach anarchy. That is: we do not want a state, but rather a free society (with which Herzl's *Altneuland* has nothing to do!). We as Jews know enough about the horrendous idol-state, as that to which we are supposed to submit in order to worship it and bring it our offspring as welcome sacrifice to its greed and lust for power.⁵

It is remarkable how very similar this critique of Herzl is to that of another "libertarian Zionist" Bernard Lazare, whom Scholem undoubtedly did not know at this time.

All of these pages are stamped by the reading of the Bible and of the German Romantics⁶ – as well as by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. After a reading of an Eichendorff novel Scholem exclaims:

This shows how deeply we belong to Romanticism: that we can take in all the oscillations and movements of Romanticism so fully and completely, with all their variety and the great halo of joy that is over it.⁷

As a strict opponent of the war, Scholem shares, along with his brother Werner (who would later become a communist representative) and with Walter Benjamin (whom he meets in 1915), tremendous sympathy for the antimilitaristic standpoint of Karl Liebknecht. We must, he writes despairingly in his journal, run against the wall until it collapses. . .

Very early on, the young rebel becomes interested in mysticism, but not yet in the Kabbala: In a note from 1916 he evokes a history of mysticism from Lao-Tse, Plotinus, and Meister Eckhart to the German Romantics, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Martin Buber (the only Jewish author in this list!). During the years of 1914 and 1915 he primarily understands himself as a student of Buber, whose rediscovery of Hassidism and Jewish Mysticism he praises. "In Judaism – up to that point the classical religion of rationalism, of rational calculation – he discovered the irrational, emotion, and longing, which is the mother

5. Scholem, entry from 20 Jan. 1915, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 1. Halbband 1913-1917*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner, with Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink (Frankfurt / Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995) 81f.

6. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 157.

7. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 215.

of renewal.”⁸ Still, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, he continued to distance himself from this first master, whom he reproaches for his unclear stance towards World War I⁹ and, striking more deeply, his hazy ideology of “experience” [*Erlebnis*].¹⁰

Around 1917 he begins to discover the Kabbala. One of the last entries in this diary already hints at what is to come: “The theory of language of the Kabbala has to this day found no worthy interpreter. Oh Gerhard Scholem, what all would you have to do?”

Attraction of the Kabbala

Scholem’s great originality as a historian consisted in discovering, or rather, rediscovering, a nearly completely forgotten area of the religious tradition of Judaism – the mystical teachings from the Kabbala up to the heretical Messianism of the Sabbatai Zwi. In his first article on the Kabbala from 1921 he praises the magical, “unbourgeois, explosive” character of the Jewish tradition.¹¹ In contrast to Buber, he takes a decidedly *historicist* approach: in history he finds an adequate cultural answer to the cold and abstract rationalism of the bourgeois world. It is indicative of his stance that he defines history in the etymological sense of *Bindung* (to the past, “*Bindung nach rückwärts*”) as *religio*.¹²

What attracts him above all to the old mystical texts is the escatalogical vision that runs through them. In his 1921 essay on the Kabbala he is interested in the prophetic concepts according to which, “messianic humanity will speak in hymns.”¹³ (a theme that is reencountered in Benjamin’s writings on the theory of language). And he implicitly contrasts messianic and historical time, in that he emphasizes that “not world history but the Last Judgement” will be responsible for the positive or negative valuation of tradition;¹⁴ – a formulation aimed directly against Hegelian historicism, which “telescopes” both into each other.

8. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 112.

9. See Scholem, entry from Aug. 1916, *Tagebücher* 1: 361f.

10. Scholem, entry from Aug. 1916, *Tagebücher* 1: 386.

11. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” *Der Jude* VI (1921–22), *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2. Halbband 1917–1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Friedrich Niewöhner with assistance from Karl. E. Grözinger (Frankfurt/Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000) 657.

12. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* 210.

13. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” 668.

14. Scholem, “Lyrik der Kabbala?” 684.

Unknown Writings from his Youth

During the time of his education, as he began to edit his first historical essays, Scholem followed, in a standing dialogue with Walter Benjamin, a secret thought that is recorded in a series of private volumes. The totality of these only partially published papers from 1917-1933 can be found in the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They show us an author very different from the historian whom one knows: a historian who is certainly creative, but still subjugated to the objectivity of historiography. What one discovers in these messianically inspired writings on Judaism, Zionism, justice or revolution, is a young Scholem, a philosopher, theologian, metaphysicist, who gives his speculative imagination free rein. These unbelievably rich, recently published papers (up to 1923) show a spirit very close to that of Walter Benjamin in *Denkstil* and difficulty: their affinity and mutual influence are impressive.

A new author appears here, a Jewish-German philosopher – because of the language but also of the Romantically-colored religious temper – who is as interesting in this field as the later Scholem is in the field of the history of mysticism. To be sure, one also finds aspects of Scholem's own philosophy of Judaism in his autobiographical writings, in his exchange of letters with Benjamin, and in conversations from his later years; but these unknown papers from his youth, despite their fragmentary character, allow Scholem to appear as one of the great “heretical” Jewish central European thinkers before 1933.

Most of this material appears in the Suhrkamp Jewish Verlag in the second volume of the diaries with the title, Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufzätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2. Halbband 1917-23.*, The most important files in the Jerusalem archive, probably classified by Scholem himself, are the following:

“Esoterica Metaphysica. Über Judentum und die esoterische Seite des Zionismus 1917–193 . Inklus. einige Briefe, die zur Sache gehören.” unnumbered, approx. 191pp.

“Über Metaphysik, Logik und einige nicht dazugehörende Gebiete phänomenologischer Besinnung. Mir gewidmet. 5. Oktober 1917–30. Dezember 1917,” 61pp.

“Kleine Anmerkungen über Judentum. Jena, Winter 1917/18,” 89pp.

“Tagebuchaufzeichnungen. 1. August 1918–1. August 1919. Adelsboden – Bern,” 89 pp.¹⁵

I should add that these titles are to a certain extent deceptive: the diaries contain many philosophical fragments as well as personal notes, and the file on metaphysics also concerns itself with Judaism – and vice-versa.

Alongside these large manuscripts there are various papers, untyped and not included in these four collections, including a highly significant text, “Theses on the Concept of Justice” (the title obviously inspired Benjamin), that spans six handwritten pages. This document, bearing the date “1919 and 1925”, was not incorporated into the published diaries, probably because the editor considered it to be from 1925. (In the Diaries 1917–1923 a similar yet quite different essay, “Twelve Theses on the Organization of Justice,” appears)

An interpretation of these early writings is not easy, even for a reader familiar with the (published) thought of Scholem and Benjamin. The concept *Esoterica*, which serves as the title for the first collection, applies to the greater part of the material. In the framework of this essay, I will restrict myself to calling attention to just a few aspects of these writings.

1. *Jewish-German Thought*

The writings contain a deeply *Jewish-German* thought, even if Scholem completely disliked the thesis of German-Jewish cultural symbiosis (his arguments are not to be dismissed out of hand) and insisted that his work had exclusively Hebraic origins. Jewish-German for one because of the language: it is astonishing that all of these texts – even those that originated in Palestine, when Scholem had already mastered the Hebrew language – were written in German. Jewish-German, however, above all because of the content of these writings, which stem completely from the world of Central European Jews and their culture – through everything that differentiates them from the Jewish culture of the East (Poland, Russia) as well as the Jewish culture of Western Europe (France, England). They stem, more precisely, from the *Romantic* currents of this culture.

The connection between Judaism and Romanticism is a question that surfaces in several of the texts, from an admiring as well as a critical perspective. For example, two of the “95 Theses on Judaism

15. The texts in the volumes are chronologically ordered in the two volumes of the Diaries: the metaphysica are only reproduced up to 1923; see “Editorische Vorbemerkung,” *Tagebücher* 1:19f.

and Zionism”¹⁶ from 1918 claim rather elliptically:

41 Jewish Romanticism signifies an unauthorized border crossing.

42 Romanticism is the only spiritual historical movement, that has limited Judaism. That it is unaware of this makes it demonic.¹⁷

Hölderlin merits unlimited admiration – yet another passion that he shares with Benjamin – and Scholem does not balk at comparing him with the Bible itself in diary entries from August 1918-August 1919:

Of the German people, Friedrich Hölderlin lived *the* Zionist life. Hölderlin’s existence [*Dasein*] is the canon of any kind of historical life. Hölderlin’s absolute authority is based on this ... his rank alongside the Bible. The Bible is the canon of *writing*, Hölderlin, the canon that is *existence*. Hölderlin and the Bible are the only two things in the world that can never contradict themselves. The canonical can be defined as pure interpretability.¹⁸

It is possible that this excerpt refers to Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*, whose exuberant, lyrical description of Greek national revival could have inspired Scholem to make this surprising parallel to Zionism.

A few pages further down the following claim appears, a claim formulated in the same way in similar words by Benjamin in his dissertation on art criticism in Romanticism: “Romanticism is a deductable constellation of the Messianic.”

Romantic Critique of the Idea of Progress

Despite his distance from “Jewish Romanticism,” Scholem shares – like Benjamin – the Romantic critique of the idea of *progress*. This critique finds its expression in the diaries in the form of wild attacks on the liberalism of the Jewish bourgeoisie and on their intellectual organ, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: “The ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’ and Jewish capitalism are essentially connected.”¹⁹ With implicit reference to the positivism of Comte, Scholem continues with this astonishing vituperation spiced with sarcastic images:

16. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 300-06

17. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 303.

18. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 347.

19. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 330.

It began a metaphysical revolution and competition in order to complete the needed identification: order/progress. Since then Judaism has been reinterpreted into a stronghold of liberalism, a reinterpretation performed on the doctrine by Jewish science and theology through hideous acts of incest: the Messianic became never-ending progress in time.²⁰

The doctrines of progress are, for Scholem, a miserable falsification of the Jewish Messianic tradition, for which the philosophy of the Enlightenment is responsible. He attacks the neo-Kantian Marburg school, whose primary representative was Hermann Cohen, with a particular vehemence:

The messianic realm and mechanical time have planted the dastardly bastard idea of 'progress' in the heads of the Enlighteners. Because once one is an Enlightener [. . .] the perspective of messianic time must be distorted into progress. [. . .] These are the fundamental mistakes of the Marburg school: the lawful, deductible reduction of all things into the neverending task in the spirit of progress. This is the most pitiful interpretation that Prophetism has had to put up with.²¹

One can wonder if Benjamin did not have this text in front of him when he was writing his "Theses" in 1940 — unless Scholem himself was inspired by discussions with his friend in 1916 to 1919.

The Significance of Messianism

Messianism is central to the thinking of the young Scholem — as one can see with the passages cited below — not as an object of research, but rather as a philosophy of history, as the key to an interpretation of reality, as prophetic vision.

Strangely, although he considers himself in Jewish things to be the teacher of his friend, with respect to the theme of "Messianism," Scholem often refers to Benjamin as an — almost canonical — source:

The largest image of history was found in the concept of the messianic realm, an image on which it builds its infinitely deep connection to religion and ethics. Walter [Benjamin] once said: the messianic realm is always there. This insight has the *greatest* truth — but primarily in a sphere that, as far as I know, no one has reached since the prophets.²²

20. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 330f.

21. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 339.

22. Scholem, Sammelmappe "Über Metaphysik, Logik . . ." (1917), *Tagebücher* 2: 70.

Even when Benjamin is not mentioned, their mutual affinity is obvious. It is not always easy to relate these thoughts to each other, since they function so much as “communicating vessels.” That holds above all for the astonishing manuscript with the title, “Theses on the Concept of Justice.” It must be stressed here that these writings on Messianism – despite the numerous references to Maimonides and other *halachic* sources – go far beyond the frame of a religious exegesis in the spirit of the orthodox tradition, and stress the *ethical, social, and historical* aspect of the messianic prophecy. One could even speak of a “politicization” of Messianism if Scholem, true to his libertarian apoliticism – did not categorically reject the concept of politics.²³ Hence his predilection for the relationship between *justice* and the messianic realm:

Messianic time as the eternal present and justics as *Daseiendes*, the substantial correspond to each other. Were justice not to exist, the messianic realm would not only not exist, but would be completely impossible. Justice, like all Jewish concepts, is not a limiting concept, [...] not [...] a ‘regulative idea.’²⁴

Scholem contrasts justice, which experiences its fulfillment in the messianic realm, simultaneously with *myth* and the quite mythic category of *fate*:

Almost all areas of human action are subordinate to mythic categories, first of all fate, which bestows meaning. Justice is the elimination of fate from actions . . . The injustice of our lives manifests itself in the fullness of life’s singular and fateful actions.

The apocalyptic extinguishing of the messianic realm has the value and the “truth” of revolutionary propaganda – it seeks to rip out the last conflict of violence, into which myth submerges. The catastrophic, because redeeming, power of fateless life is represented in the person of the messiah . . .²⁵

The curious dating of this essay (“Theses on the Concept of Justice”) – “1919 and 1925” – makes it impossible to know if it was written before

23. For a more thorough investigation of the connection between Jewish Messianism and the libertarian utopia in Scholem, Benjamin and other Jewish thinkers, see my book, *Redemption and Utopia. Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990).

24. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 1: 529.

25. Scholem, unpublished “Theses on the Concept of Justice.”

or after Benjamin's essay, "Towards a Critique of Violence," with which it shows obvious affinities (but undoubtedly differences as well).

Scholem seems to waver between two concepts of Messianism, the one primarily historical, the other primarily "esoteric." In the diary entries from 1919 he attempts to define them through the following concepts:

Two currents of Messianism can be differentiated theoretically as well as historically: a revolutionary current and a transformative current. The first one represents itself thus: the Messiah at the end of days, tremendous wars of Edom against Moab, Last Judgment = End of the World, return of souls in that world, equation of 'atid la-vo' [the future that is coming, messianic time] and 'olam ha-ba' [the future world, new creation]. Basis: a literal understanding of the future as empirical time.

The second says: cleansing of souls, completely internal transformation of nature, Last Judgment neutralized, in any case no end of the world, differentiation of 'atid la-vo' and 'olam ha-ba.'

Resultant: the end of days – today. That world is this world. Messianic future is not empirical future.²⁶

This all-too analytical and somewhat stiff differentiation does not completely satisfy Scholem, and he quickly adds: "These notions are layered into infinitely many degrees."²⁷

Revolutionary Events and Messianism

Scholem assesses the *revolutionary events* of his time, in particular *Bolshevism*, in close connection with Messianism.

Although he is by no means a follower of soviet communism, Scholem remains fascinated by the religious meaning of the events in Russia. In the 1918 essay "Bolshevism" (included in the collection "Esoterica-Metaphysica") he uses the concept (perhaps borrowed from Tolstoy?) of the "dictatorship of the poor":

Bolshevism has a central idea that confers on its movement a revolutionary magic. This is: the messianic realm can only be unfolded through the dictatorship of poverty. [. . .] This says: the judgement of the poor alone has revolutionary power.²⁸

26. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 380.

27. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 38.

28. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 556.

Even when he endeavors to demarcate the messianic dimension of revolution (a sort of hubris) from that of Judaism, he still contrasts both of them with liberal and 'progressive' pseudorevolutions:

Revolution is there, where the messianic realm should be erected without doctrine. Ultimately there *can* be *no* revolution for the Jews. The Jewish revolution is solely a reconnection to doctrine. A revolution, that in any case points towards the messianic realm, like the Bolshevik or French revolution, must as a matter of principle be separated from the weak pseudorevolutions like that in Germany in 1848, that is centered by 'progress.'²⁹

For Scholem, Bolshevism is a messianic reaction to the war. Although he also contrasts it with Zionism (that is, his own view of Zionism), which does not react to the war but rather turns away from it, he gives to understand that everyone who behaves *in* the world differently than the Zionist can only become a follower of Bolshevism.

In a section of the the diaries from 1918/1919 there is a definition that seems to bring communism and Jewish Messianism closer together rather than farther apart:

... Communism, which has a religious horizon, does not at all depend on the economy, but rather solely defines itself in its way from the relationship of the age to the messianic realm. And the messianic realm can in fact be erected today *hajom im be-kolo tischma'u* [today, if you hear his voice/obey my voice; Psalms 95.7, Sanhedrin 98 a].³⁰

Strangely, Benjamin does not follow Scholem into this area. He only succumbs to a fascination with Bolshevism several years later, in 1923, thanks to the beautiful eyes of Asja Lacis . . .

Scholem's Later Publications

What concerned Scholem at the time found partial expression in the historical research that the scientist Scholem began publishing in 1923 since moving to Jerusalem. The majority of his work on the Kabbala in the 1920s and 1930s turned on the messianic-apocalyptic dimension of phenomena. These themes again also determined his first major work, which he dedicated to Walter Benjamin: *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (1941, dt. 1957). For the Kabbala, specifically in its

29. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 556.

30. Scholem, *Tagebücher* 2: 374.

reinterpretation by Isaac Luria, the great teacher of the Safed school (Zfad, 16th century), the *tikkun*, the way to the end of all things, is simultaneously the way that leads back to the beginning. It brings with it a “restitution of the ideal condition” that is called the “Restoration of the original totality.”³¹ The arrival of the messiah is the consummation of the *tikkun*, the “redemption” as “return of all things to their original contact with God.”³² The *olam ha-tikkun* is thus the world of messianic restoration, the wiping away of dirt, the disappearance of evil.

Beginning in the 1950s Scholem is intensely interested in “heretical” messianic movements, in particular those brought into being by the “mystical messiah” of the seventeenth century, Sabbatai Zwi. In his monumental study from 1957 (written first in Hebrew) dedicated to Sabbatianism, the new “messiah” plays less of a central role than his central prophet and theologian, Nathan of Gaza, who was named *buzina kaddisha* by his adherents – the “holy lamp.” Scholem is fascinated by this strange figure and his divergent and surprising innovations: the idea of universal redemption of all sinners – due to the Sabbatai Messiah – without exception (even Jesus of Nazareth, who is finally given back to his people); or the pronouncement that with the messianic age comes the dominion of a new Tora, the Tora of the Tree of Life, which revokes all commandments and bans.³³ This doctrine is the source of that which Scholem calls the Sabbatonic *Antinomism* and its call for “religious anarchism.”

Somehow later he studies the development of Sabbatianism in the eighteenth century under the leadership of the new Messiah Jakob Frank with the same regard. This is a movement fraught with a “nihilistic” view of redemption, which repudiates rules and laws of all sorts and strives for a sort of “anarchistic, earthly utopia.”³⁴

Around this time – end of the 1950s – Scholem systematizes his theory of Jewish Messianism as *restorative-utopian doctrine* in his famous essay, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism”

31. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihrem Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Alfred Metzner, 1957) – (Frankfurt/Main, 1980: seitenidentische TB-Edition) 294.

32. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihrem Hauptströmungen* 301.

33. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah. 1626–1676* (Bollingen Series XCIII) (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973). In German as *Sabbatai Zwi. Der mystische Messias* (Frankfurt/Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1992) p207, 284–87.

34. Scholem, “Die Metamorphose des häretischen Messianismus der Sabbatianer im religiösen Nihilismus im 18. Jahrhundert” (1963), *Judaica* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 207, 217.

(1959). According to this essay, messianism in the Jewish tradition contains two closely connected and simultaneously contradictory tendencies: a *restorative* current, that tends towards the restoration of a past ideal condition, a lost golden age, a broken paradisaical harmony, and a *utopian* current that hopes for a completely new age, a future that has never been. The weight distribution between the two currents can fluctuate, but the messianic idea assumes shape only on the basis of a combination of both. They are inseparable by virtue of a dialectical relationship that Scholem admirably presented:

[. . .] even the restorative force has a utopian factor, and in utopianism restorative factors are at work.³⁵

The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even this 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.³⁶

Scholem also accounts for the catastrophic and revolutionary essence of the messianic view of history:

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.³⁷

Between present and future, the current decline and salvation, yawns an abyss; in many talmudic texts the idea emerges that the messiah will come only in an era of complete corruption and guilt. This rift cannot be overcome by ‘progress’ or ‘evolution’ – only revolutionary catastrophe, together with complete uprooting and total destruction of the existing order makes messianic redemption possible. The secularized messianism of 19th century liberal Jewish thought, – for which the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen is a good example – with its idea of unbroken progress and incremental perfection of humanity, has nothing to do with the tradition of prophets and Aggadists, for whom the coming of the

35. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 4.

36. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” 4.

37. Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” 7.

messiah signifies an all-encompassing shock, a revolutionary storm:

The bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. [. . .] It [redemption] 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.³⁸

One must realize that themes and interests in the thought of Scholem on Messianism are astonishingly continuous from his early years to his last writings: they run through his work like a leitmotif. Yet his stance is not merely that of an erudite historian of Jewish Messianism: one need only read his work carefully in order to recognize the *sympathy* – in the etymological sense of the greek word – of the researcher with his object.

Translated by Michael Richardson

38. Scholem, "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism" 7. Scholem's critique of the elimination of the catastrophic dimension of Jewish Messianism and of its reduction to the notion of "eternal progress" of mankind is aimed explicitly at Hermann Cohen, but it seems to me that it is also polemically aimed at Joseph Klausner, his colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and nationalist historian of Messianism, for whom "the quintessence of Jewish Messianism" represents "the ideal of unending progress, of continual spiritual development." See Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel from its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishna* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).