J.L. Talmon, Gershom Scholem and the price of Messianism

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Abstract

Gershom Scholem wrote his famous article, “Redemption through sin”, in 1937, and J.L. Talmon gained the inspiration for his first book, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, in the years 1937–1938 at the time when the Moscow trials revealed to the world the bitter reality of what was happening in the Soviet Union. Scholem and Talmon were contemporaries and witnesses of the transformation of communism in the Soviet Union from a vision of egalitarian and universal redemption into a bureaucratic and nationalistic despotism. The major scholar of the history of religious Messianism and the major scholar of the history of secular Messianism both widened the scope of their investigations—the first extending them into the history of Sabbataianism and the second into the French Revolution—and both reached a similar conclusion: both recognized, as Scholem put it, “the profound truth relating to the dialectics of history ... of the historical process whereby the fulfilment of one political process leads to the manifestation of its opposite. In the realization of one thing its opposite is revealed”. The two great Israeli historians of ideas plumbed the depths of one of the most fascinating and at the same time tragic manifestations of la condition humaine: the human challenge of bringing the heavenly city down to the vale of tears, and the price that men have to pay for their Messianic passion.

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Keywords: Gershom Scholem; Jacob Talmon; Political messianism; Sabbataianism; Totalitarianism; Zionism

Introduction

The leading scholar of the history of religious Messianism and the leading scholar of the history of secular Messianism both broadened the scope of their investigations—the first, Gershom Scholem, extending them into the history of Sabbataianism and the second, J.L. Talmon, into the French Revolution. Both reached a similar conclusion: they recognized, as Scholem put it, “the profound truth relating to the dialectics of history [...] whereby the fulfilment of one historical process leads to the manifestation of its opposite. In the realization of one thing its opposite is revealed”.

The two great Israeli historians of ideas plumbed the depths of one of the most fascinating and at the same time tragic manifestations of la condition humaine: the human challenge of bringing the heavenly city down to the vale of tears, and the price that men have to pay for their Messianic passion.
Messianism is essentially a belief in the perfection of man at the end of days, in a decisive and radical improvement that will take place in the condition of humanity, society and the world, and in a final and complete resolution of history. Unlike the cyclical conceptions of time in classical and eastern cultures, the Messianic conception of time envisaged a revolutionary change of order leading all at once to the Messianic future, or a linear progress of time from the imperfect present to a better state. This was an entirely new and utopian scheme, though it was sometimes viewed as a return to a golden age in the past (a “restorative utopia”, to use Scholem’s expression, as in “restore our days as of old”). The idea of the perfection of man at the end of days lies at the heart of the Messianic conception.

Judaism was not originally a Messianic religion. Only gradually did the Messianic faith cease to be a marginal concern and gain a central position during the darker phases of Jewish history in Israel and the diaspora. The Messianic hope became a refuge from exile, from religious persecution, from destruction and oppression. The Messianic faith represented a hope of national or universal redemption that appeared in particular historical situations. Judaism and Christianity had different approaches to Messianism and consequently to the idea of redemption. The various currents in historical Judaism saw redemption as a manifestation that takes place in the public sphere and in the arena of history, while Christian theology with its stress on sin and atonement saw it as the personal salvation of the individual. Christianity, in Talmon’s opinion, was essentially hostile to all movements of political Messianism because they declared that they had come to replace it. Their preaching of national or universal redemption and their vision of history moving towards a redemptive climax in which all social contradictions would be resolved in one revolutionary act was in contradiction to the Christian conception of history as a process of decline.

Scholem and Talmon were also contemporaries and witnesses of the transformation of communism in the Soviet Union from a vision of egalitarian and universal redemption into a bureaucratic and nationalistic despotism. 1937 was a key year for the two historians, for the formation of their outlook and their historiographical understanding. Scholem wrote his famous article, “Redemption Through Sin”, in 1937, and Talmon gained the inspiration for his first book in the years 1937-1938 at the time when the Moscow trials revealed to the world the bitter reality of what was happening in the Soviet Union:

In 1937–1938 when the minds of so many, and especially the young, were being deeply exercised by the terrible enigma of the Moscow trials, I happened to be working on an undergraduate seminar paper on the ultra-democratic French constitution of 1793 as seen against the background of the Jacobin terrorist dictatorship. The analogy between year II [of the French revolution] and what was happening in 1937–1938 struck one most forcibly. [...] the parallel seemed to suggest the existence of some unfathomable and inescapable law which causes revolutionary Salvationist schemes to evolve into regimes of terror[...].

The inspiration and the model for “Talmon’s law” came from the Sabbataian dialectics developed by Scholem. In a letter addressed to Isaiah Berlin, describing the reactions of the Israeli leftist party, Mapam, to the Prague Trials in 1952, Talmon wrote: “They are like the followers of Shabbai Zvi when the prophet put on...

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3 Zvi Werblowsky described Jewish Messianism as a multi-eyed building to which many spiritual, universal, cosmic, philosophical and mystical levels have been added, and each floor changed the character of the previous floors. The tension between Jewish existence and Jewish Messianism resulted in moments of historical movement towards Messianism and movement away from Messianism: Zvi Werblowsky, “Introduction”, Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays. Ed. Zvi Baras. Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel and The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1983) 21–26 [Hebrew].


a tarbush and became a Moslem.” 7 Talmon saw Scholem’s field of expertise, Sabbataianism, as a historical precedent which contained a warning for the future of the state of Israel. He said he feared being “swept into illusions and a longing for deadening narcotics”. Talmon declared: “I am very afraid of the time when we sober up and experience Sabbataian disillusionment with all that involves”. 8 Exactly ten years later, in 1980, two years after the signature of the peace treaty with Egypt and two years before the Lebanon war, Talmon repeated this warning in his final article, addressed as an open letter, to the Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin: “Is it an escape into a world of mythological thought patterns and emotions whose classical example may be found in Sabbataianism”? 

In the history of Sabbataianism, Scholem showed what could happen to the comforting Messianic idea when put to the test of reality. Speaking about this, Talmon, according to Yehoshua Arieli, remarked on the confrontation and opposition which arises in any attempt to impose a conceptual framework on a given reality: “This dialectical discrepancy between an outlook […] and reality constantly increased in the age of ideology and became even worse with the advent of comprehensive schemes for a total change of the human reality in accordance with a Messianic vision”. 10 Karl Popper’s observation that attempts to create a heaven on earth inevitably create a hell, captures his meaning perfectly. 11 Hedva Ben Israel adds: “Messianic beliefs come into being with lofty intentions, but they are under a curse and always degenerate into tyrannies. Like all exclusive religions, they cannot take opposition, and hence the terror with which they are inevitably accompanied”.

When Scholem was asked about Talmon’s letter to Begin, and if he “agreed with Talmon that professors of history have something to teach politicians”, he replied: “I am very skeptical about that, although I know that Jacob Talmon thinks otherwise. Politics requires a sense of Moderation I’m not sure that you can learn from history. […] I doubt whether professors of history can teach such things to anyone. I have been a professor of history too long to believe it”. Scholem was asked again on another occasion about Talmon’s letter, and “about his [Talmon’s] fears that a spirit of religio-national messianism has taken over parts of the Israeli population”. Scholem answered: “Well, I agree with Talmon on this. I am less optimistic than Talmon about the power of professors to influence events. But as an analysis of the facts, I think he is quite right that the use of religious ideas is a most harmful and senseless thing in politics”. 14

In this article I wish to discuss Talmon and Scholem not just as historians who analyzed the abstract Messianic idea but also as intellectuals who examine Messianism as paradigm through which one can decipher modern and current politics, Israeli and worldwide. My aim also, is to explore Talmon’s and Scholem’s predictions about the price of Messianism in theory and practice through the Messianic dialectics and dynamics.

Talmon and the dialectics of secular messianism

From the beginning of his historical work, Talmon raised a series of question that troubled him throughout his academic and intellectual career: why have revolutionary movements that sought to recreate man led to his enslavement? Why has the hope of total liberation and the attempt to realize these lofty expectations resulted

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8“Israel’s Image in the World,” address by Talmon at the Mārīb symposium, 9.1. 1970 [Hebrew].
12Hedva Ben Israel. “Ya’akov Talmon—Learning History as the Solution to the Troubles of the Time.” In Memory of Ya’akov Talmon. (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1981) 15.
in their reversal? Why did youthful dreams of the equality of man end with the shameful reality of gulags and labor-camps? Why did aspects of the eighteenth-century philosophy of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century political ideologies pass from the zenith of theory to the nadir of reality in the twentieth century? How does one explain a noble ideal realized through an evil action?

The underlying theme of Talmont’s historical investigations, which were a continuous attempt to solve these conundrums, was the secular Messianic urge of modern man who presumed to mold with his own hands both this world and the world-to-come within this world. The modern revolutionary ideologies translated the old religious yearnings into secular, political concepts. Religion was laicized and became history, the kingdom of heaven exchanged for the kingdom of man, and transcendental salvation was transmuted into Promethean passion.

Talmont’s work was basically concerned with one essential question which he formulated in his first book, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, the first of a trilogy: namely, why did the Messianic vision, which was the active motivating force of the revolutionary ideologies, move in a short time into “unmitigated tyranny and serfdom”? It seems, he said, that there is a “curse on Salvationist creeds: to be born out of the noblest impulses of man, and to degenerate into weapons of tyranny”. The Messianic dialectic continued to trouble Talmont in the second book in the trilogy, Political Messianism; “Why does it [political Messianism] somehow always turn from a vision of release into a snare and yoke?” In the third and last part of the trilogy, The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution, Talmont once again enunciated the dialectical “code” of Messianism from its “promise of a perfect direct democracy to assume in practice the form of totalitarian dictatorship.”

Talmont devoted his life to solving the riddle of secular Messianism. Political Messianism, which he saw as a secular religion from the eighteenth century onwards, sought to efface the contradictions and tensions in modern secular life between the individual and the community, between freedom and equality and between unity and particularity. It sought to achieve this by political means through the creation of a harmonious utopia in history. The secular Messianic conception was based on a certain idea of the nature of man. It wished to create men not “as they are but as they were meant to be, and would be, given the proper conditions”. The political and pedagogical shaping of modern man has been the common aim of ideologies of both left and right from the time of the French Revolution.

What differences did Talmont find between ancient Messianism and modern Messianism? The religious Messianic movements and manifestations of ancient times ended with the abandonment of society and the creation of exclusive sects; the Messianism of our time seeks to bring about a revolution in society. The Christian revolutionaries owed allegiance to the Lord of the Universe and refused to recognize the rule of man; modern Messianism recognizes only human reason and seeks to achieve universal happiness within history in the here and now. The Christian revolutionaries, apart from the Calvinists and Anabaptists, recoiled from the use of force; secular Messianism tries to reach the absolute by all possible means. The dichotomy of the heavenly kingdom and the worldly kingdom facilitated the spread of religious Messianism; the monism of secular Messianism is free from this religious dichotomy and from spiritual inhibitions and demands an immediate on-the-spot settling of accounts.

Talmont sought to emphasize, elucidate and illustrate the Jewish presence in general history, revealing the Messianic principle in Judaism and its contribution to universal history. He saw the Jewish idea of Providence overseeing history and moving it towards a redemptive solution as nurturing the revolutionary potential of the radical end-time movements that sought to achieve the kingdom of God within history.

Jean-Paul Sartre who, like Talmont, passed away in 1980, acknowledged in his final interview that Judaism’s special contribution to the world was Messianism:

What intrigues me is the objective which every Jew adheres to consciously or unconsciously, and which ought finally to unite mankind. It is an end in the social and religious sense, which is only to be found in the

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Jewish people. For me, Messianism is something important which only the Jews conceived of, which can also be used by non-Jews for additional moral purposes. What do we expect from a revolution? The disappearance of the present society and its replacement by a juster society … This idea of the final end of a revolution is Messianism, so to speak.20

Although major Jewish thinkers were not prominent in the philosophy of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it prepared the way for the Jewish Haskalah, for the Emancipation and for a renewed interest in ancient Jewish prophecy, with its universal content. Talmon said he could not imagine European socialism “without the prophetic and Messianic elements represented by the Jewish Saint-Simonists, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle and so many other Jews”.21 Marxism’s point of departure was not, according to Talmon, formal socioeconomic analysis but a faith that moves mountains in the mission of history as a message of redemption. What motivated Marx was “the compulsive hold of a vision of an ultimate denouement of the drama of history in a vindication of a providential justice”.22 In Marx, Lassalle, Rosa Luxembourg and the other Jewish revolutionaries, the ancient Jewish dream of a general redemption which would happen all at once took the form of a classless society based on absolute justice which would come about in a single apocalyptic reversal.

Jewish Messianism, Talmon concluded, provided the Western world with a very powerful underlying element that was one of the special characteristics, which distinguished it from the other great cultures. The vision of Jesus’s return to the world at the end of days was derived from it. It formed the inspiration of apocalyptic and millenarian movements throughout history, and in a different sphere paved the way for the idea of an infinite progress towards socialism and the expectation of revolution as the final redemptive stage of history. Shortly before his death, Talmon was chosen by the Committee of Scholars as one of the twenty greatest historians of the twentieth century. As an appreciation of Talmon’s work, they wrote: “One cannot read his books without being deeply impressed by the true and frightening picture. He paints for us a picture of secular messianic religions”.23 The writer of the essay ascribes this to Talmon’s Judaism and his biography as a child on one of the shtetls that were wiped out during the Holocaust.

In a memorable though neglected personal confession, Talmon described the biographical origins of his intellectual attraction to studying the Messianic idea:

I began as a member of “Hashomer Hatza’ir” in a small shtetl, in an atmosphere full of longings, caught in a cross-fire from two sides: the Messianic fire from eastern Europe and the fire of Zionism from Eretz-Israel. When I reached bar-mitzva age I had an attack of religion, or, if you will, I began a search for God. I finally left “Hashomer Hatzair”, and unfortunately, after a time I broke off my relationship with the Ruler of the Universe because, when I read the prayer of the Eighteen Benedictions I felt that I did not believe it and could not endorse it. This caused me to adopt a certain position that perhaps has been responsible for my interests, my spiritual image and my outlook.

[...] On the one hand one has a desire to be indispensable and unique, and on the other hand feelings of guilt and shame that one is different from others, that one is proud and rebellious.

From that time onwards I felt I had to combine the two, the urge to break away and the desire to carry on. I was seized by the Messianic “bug”: the obsession, the “dybbuk” of the Messianic idea of redemption which I hoped would one day resolve these contradictions.24

Talmon now began to investigate whether the “dybbuk” of the Messianic idea, which took hold of nice boys and was emasculated at the Moscow trials was something immanent, beyond a specific historical explanation:

24Talmon. “Socialism and Liberalism”. “From the Foundations” (1962) 32–33 [Hebrew].
I have never been a communist, but I always felt that I had to justify the fact that I was not a communist, because in my shtetl I saw boys—some of the best-rotting away in prison and destroying their lives. They endangered themselves more than we Zionists. The challenge was very strong. But then the Moscow trials of 1937–1938 took place, and everyone who thought a little said to himself: how can this be? If these people are guilty, then the whole revolution was something which had to be completely obliterated, and if they are innocent, it was those that did this to them who were the criminals. This thought led me to a structural investigation. Perhaps this did not reflect a particular historical situation, a specific combination of circumstances; perhaps it was something inherent. Perhaps it reflected a retribution, a nemesis, to use classical terminology.  

Echoes of these autobiographical reflections may be found in his analysis of the Jewish Messianic heritage, which in the case of many Jews was expressed in a special sensitivity to social problems. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Jews’ option of choosing between left and right reached eastern Europe. In contrast to the situation in the west of the continent, the millions of Jews who lived there experienced economic hardship, national and social discrimination and the oppressive régime of the Russian czars. This atmosphere, said Talmon, gave rise to Messianic longings and a readiness for revolution, a desire to overthrow the whole existing structure, and belief in the possibility of moving all at once from a world that was entirely bad to one that was entirely good. In no class or people was the response to the Messianic revolutionary message as fervent and enthusiastic as among the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Talmon was an incorrigible disbeliever in the Messianic meta-narrative, whether nationalist-romantic or Marxist-Bolshevistic. The conclusion he came to was that the events in the Soviet Union revealed the true character of the communist régime. If these events cast doubt on the view common among believers that the Soviet Union was the vanguard of the world revolutionary camp, Talmon did not see this as a historical accident but as the outcome of a development whose seeds had been sown from the beginning. The main reason for the degeneration of the communist-Messianic idea was Promethean hubris:

When men combine limitless power with a sense of their unique mission of universal regeneration, it is all too easy for them to mistake the promptings of their ambition for the voice of History, to rationalize their hatred and envy into Truth. Moreover, the very nature of unlimited power attracts to the regime self-seeking, power-hungry, sadistic men. The inevitable response of the masses to the unmistakable deterioration of the élite, the caretakers of their destiny, is disappointment and contempt. With every possibility of revolt cut off by a regime that possesses all the instruments of military and political coercion and controls all the means of production and distribution, the resultant mood of the people can only be apathetic and, in the end, nihilistic.

Talmon disliked Communism for the same reason he disliked Messianism: dialectics legitimate and rationalize the destructive and unmoral characteristics in human beings. An outlook in which the end justifies the means permits the relativism of values underlying all dictatorships. Dialectics are always used to prove that evil practical means are necessary and appropriate tools from the perspective of a general a priori scheme and are therefore objectively good. These observations, said Talmon, are occasioned by reflections on the tragic phenomenon of the degeneration and defilement of great human ideals in the course of their realization—a phenomenon of which history is full. This may explain why Talmon felt such deep empathy towards “anti-Messianic” skeptic liberals such as Raymond Aron in France, Isaiah Berlin in England, and Lionel Trilling in the United States. “Were they, as Jews frightened by modern political Messianism?”

It is not surprising that Talmon was also among the thinkers and historians of anti-Messianic liberalism that sought to understand the inner logic and the explanation of the totalitarian mentality on the right and left. These two types of totalitarianism were based on the idea that there is a single truth and that it finds expression in politics. The left decreed the deterministic supremacy of matter and saw class as the motive-force of revolution; the right believed in the decisive importance of blood and race and saw the nation as the motive-force of history. Both ideologies were rooted in philosophies of history that were explained in terms of

25Ibid. 33–43.

26Talmon. “Jews Between ‘Right’ and ‘Left’.” (see note 21) 85.

27Ibid. 89.
class-warfare or the warfare of races and peoples. Both ideologies were rooted in a Manichaean conception of history: because both of them claimed to possess the sole truth, both believed that anything that brought that goal nearer was acceptable and good and anything that hindered it was evil and corrupt. And the Jews, for their part, were ground to dust between the two camps.

Talmon saw the obsession with a “satanic” Jewish presence everywhere as reflecting a view of the Jews as an anti-race. The Messianic idea nourished by a belief in the unity and brotherhood of the human race was the focus of the attacks of the nationalist and racist right. All arrows were aimed at Messianic Judaism, which created the revolutionary universalist idea of the singleness of the human race. If one continues Talmon’s line of thought one can go further and say that the people that brought the Messianic idea into history was now spewed out by history. Jewry, which sought to promote the Messianic phenomenon that meant the triumph of absolute good—the perfection of the world—was now reviled as the embodiment of absolute evil.

Christian anti-Semitism permitted the Jew to exist for generations as a degraded witness, but the anti-Messianic anti-Semitism insisted on murdering the bringer of good tidings, the people identified with the Messianic idea. Talmon saw the Holocaust as the murderous crossroads of the historical encounter between Jewish Messianism and the “bastard” Messianism embodied in Hitler. The Jews, the eternal people, represented for the Nazis the idea of the unity of all races and universal brotherhood. To kill them meant killing those who gave the world the universalistic commandment: “Thou shalt not kill”. “Judaism was an ideal and at the same time a disturbing nightmare, both a source of inspiration and a stimulus to aggressive impulses.” The Jewish uniqueness that embodied the gospel of the unity of mankind was attacked by those who inscribed on their banner war against the unity of mankind and saw the Jews as the enemy—as well as the yardstick—of their deterministic-racist gospel. Hence, the apocalypse of the Holocaust was an attempt to murder the Messianic idea and its representatives.

This was the tragic paradox of the Jews in modern times. The existence and success of many of them was in Talmon’s view associated with the ideology of unity, although historically they found it difficult or were unwilling to abandon their uniqueness. In the Soviet Union as well, the Jews embodied the original Messianic spirit of the Bolshevik Revolution (the disproportionate numbers of Jewish communists and revolutionaries is evidence of this), and for that reason there too they were the first victims of the revolution which went astray and became a bureaucratic dictatorship in one country. The dialectical distortion of Marxist Messianism found its full expression in the Soviet Union. Its first devotees, the Jewish revolutionaries, recalled by their presence the original Messianic Marxist-communist spark that had been distorted beyond recognition. For better or for worse, they were the litmus-paper of the revolution; they were its vanguard and also its victim.

In the nineteenth century there was a tendency among some national movements to find their special quality in the universal Messianic idea, or, that is to say, in the special mission of each nation in the plan of world history. The “Messianic peoples”, to use Talmon’s expression, developed general visions: Mazzini’s vision of the “Third Rome”, Fichte’s doctrine of the nation, Mickiewicz’s concept of “Poland as the Christ among the nations”, and, among the Jews, Moses Hess’s theory of Jerusalem as the vanguard of the nations. Herzl, however, the prophet of modern Jewish nationalism, avoided making a metaphysical or meta-historical connection between the national revival and the workings of universal history.

It is perhaps against this background that one should see Talmon’s long drawn-out debate with Arnold Toynbee, which lasted from 1956 until the Six-Day War. Toynbee attempted to discover the laws whereby the great structures he called civilizations rose and fell. Because he saw the combination of peoplehood and religion in Judaism as an expression of contempt for other peoples, Toynbee opposed anything which strengthened the existence of a Jewish nation. The West, in his view, had always been

30Talmon. The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution. 551.
33Talmon. Political Messianism. 229-292.
aggressive and had drawn its Messianic inspiration from the Jewish concept of a chosen people. The paradox of his position is that he condemned the idea of a chosen people, yet expected the Jews to behave as only a chosen people could! Talmon never tired of refuting Toynbee's "Messianic errors" one by one. The first time he did so was in a lecture he gave in Beit Hillel in London at a meeting on the three hundredth anniversary of the resettlement of the Jews in England at which the chairman was Lord Herbert Samuel and whose subject was "Jewish History and its Universal Significance".

Talmon, like Scholem, was careful in all his writings to refrain from attaching any metaphorical or Messianic significance to Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel:

Israel has been seen as the fulfillment and ultimate dénouement of Jewish history, but it has also been seen as the greatest deviation from the course of that history. It may be altogether too metaphysical as pursuit for the scholarly historian to try to define the "true essence", the "authentic spirit", or the "preordained direction" of millennial history spun over such diverse epochs, civilizations, and regions, and to describe developments which do not conform to that "authentic core" as deviations, false starts, perversions, heresies, or culs de sac.34

The politicization of Jewish Messianism, added Talmon, was the result of foreign influences, as is clearly shown by the fact that all the historical declarations of Zionist philosophy were made following the triumphs of national movements.35 One therefore cannot understand the roots of Zionism without understanding the mutual relationship between the Messianic self-perception of many Zionist circles, which wished to establish a "restorative utopia" in their historic homeland, and the political-Messianic intellectual climate of the national movements in Europe. According to Talmon, even if one does find in Zionism a vision of redemption or a revolutionary quality, this was not a product of old Jewish Messianism but on the contrary, a product of secularization.

This is not to say that Zionism lacked faith in God's promises, and in the hope of redemption, or that it did not derive sustenance from prayers that speak of the return to the land of our fathers, but these were not the sparks that lit the great fires of political Zionism. On the contrary, it was the Jewish people's religious life that received new sustenance through these Zionist, and political, developments. It is quite reasonable to claim that the Jewish religion actually prevented the vision of redemption from being turned into a historical and political concept. The Jewish religion served as a substitute for redemption, the reliance on Providence, on the Messiah, and on miracles, exempted Jews from acting in the here and now.36

Talmon was skeptical concerning the possibility of translating the vision of political Messianism into reality, and he was drawn to the thinker Reinhold Niebuhr who had put forward a dialectic of political power in which its realization was in the final analysis bound up with the tragic destiny of the human race.37 In the period succeeding the metanaratives of Modernity (nationalism, fascism and communism, whose decline Talmon and lived long enough to foresee), a skeptical attitude to Messianic politics became common and Talmon explained it as being among other things a reaction toward Hegelian political theory. In comparison to Communism and Fascism Talmon found the case of Israel encouraging, for even if it was not ideal or a full realization of the vision, it was not so distorted as to be beyond repair. Talmon explained this by saying that Zionism is a unique phenomenon, a movement of a special kind with regard to its reality, its place and its significance.

In the intellectual debate which took place in the nineteen-thirties in Israel on the nature of Zionism, the State of Israel and the Messianic version, David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the Israeli State and Talmon had a special place because of their personal interest in the subject and because of the complex discussion which took place between them on this matter. Ben-Gurion never tired of sermonizing on the Messianic vision of the people of Israel. For him the Messianic motif, which was a kind of mobilizing myth in the building of the

35Ibid. 134.
young nation had no religious content or transcendental significance but was thought to exemplify a suitable moral chaos: the call for settlement, the enlistment of youth the comradeship of the different sectors of society, the development of the arts and sciences and the strengthening of the army. In the nineteen-fifties, Talmon already had a reputation in the country and abroad as a historian of the secular Messianic phenomenon and as one of the outstanding intellectuals in Israel. The encounter between the representative and spokesman of political Messianism in Israel and the trenchant intellectual critic of that phenomenon was fascinating yet at the same time impossible.

In 1960, the year in which the “Lavon affair” caused Israeli intellectuals for the first time to unite in opposition to Ben-Gurion, Talmon wrote to the Israeli leader:

I am glad that the time has finally come, with the publication of my new book Political Messianism, when I am available for the task which your colleagues Nehemiah Argov of blessed memory, and Shimon Peres—may he be granted long life—asked me to perform three years ago, and that is to prepare a comprehensive work which will give a thorough account of all existing first-hand sources for the story of your life against the background of our action and turmoil-filled period, and for your role in the drama of the revival of Israel and the renewal of its political independence.

Ironically, Talmon thought seriously of becoming Ben-Gurion’s biographer, and considered him a political Messiah. The irony goes even further, when on another occasion Talmon, insufficiently cautious, drew an analogy between Zionism and Messianism:

Great importance must be attached to the fact that although Zionism was a Messianic ideology because it developed before we had means of political coercion and as a result of voluntary effort, it had a pluralistic tradition whose main expression was the coalition-structure which was passed on as an inheritance from Zionism to the State, with all its qualities and defects.

About a month later, Talmon expressed his fears more directly in an article in which he warned against “a totalitarian state in which the Head of State is also the head of government and also the leader of the party”. He said he was worried that a dangerous duality might develop between the formal government apparatus open to public scrutiny and a quasi-clandestine source of covert activities and intrigues. Yet, despite these harsh criticisms, he added: “The historical greatness of Ben-Gurion has been shown in the power of decision he has revealed in fateful and critical moments [...]” In Talmon’s opinion, Ben-Gurion was “not only a politician and a statesman but a visionary able to see things in a historical perspective of generations”. However, he called upon the Prime Minister to resign, just as twenty years later he called on Menachem Begin to step down.

Ben-Gurion responded in his own way. In his article “In Defence of Messianism” published some five years later in reply to Shlomo Avineri, he wrote:

Mr. Avineri is a strong opponent of the messianic concept. He seems to have learned it from J.L Talmon, Professor of Modern History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who was publishing three volumes condemning the “political messianism” of the leaders of the French revolution; he sees in the Messianic doctrine the origin of the political totalitarian outlook.

Ben-Gurion ended the article with the following words:

The fears of Professor Talmon and his students or friends that a messianic faith leads to despotism and dictatorship are the result of a mistaken and misleading reading of history. The French Revolution was a

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38 For further discussion, see: David Ohana, Messianism and Mamlachtitut: Ben-Gurion and the Intellectuals Between Political Vision and Political Theology, (Sede Boker: The Ben-Gurion Research Institute Press, 2003), 337–342 [Hebrew]; Michael Keren, Ben-Gurion and the Intellectuals—Power, Knowledge and Charisma (Dekel: Northern Illinois UP, 1983).


40 Interview of the Week With Professor Ya’akov Talmon—The Dangers for the Development of Democracy in Israel” (interviewer Joseph Etzion), Ha’aretz, 6.1.1961 [Hebrew].


42 David Ben-Gurion, “In Defence of Messianism,” Midstream XII (March 1966) 64.
blessing for humanity. And without the Messianic faith, the last three generations of our people would not have done what they did.\textsuperscript{43}

What was the difference between Ben-Gurion’s Messianic outlook and the Messianic vision of Gush Emunim, the religious-political movement which was founded after the 1973 war?\textsuperscript{44} Talmon, of course, was opposed to both of them, but in contrast to Ben-Gurion’s secular Messianism in which he discerned elements of pragmatism such as the emphasis on the return to history, he saw Gush Emunim as a political theology and an escape from history in which politics was subordinated to a religious group. The membership of Gush Emunim, in the words of Talmon, “were much relieved, for now this could argue that the Holocaust had been the ‘birth pangs of the Messiah’, that the Six-Day War victory was the beginning of redemption and the conquest of the territories the finger of God at work—all proof that the vision of renewal and God’s promises were being fulfilled”.\textsuperscript{45} In the “restorative utopia” of Gush Emunim, religious Messianism and political Messianism came together.

In the “deterministic Messianism” of Gush Emunim there was a radicalization, which was expressed in the change from the “historical necessity” of Rabbi Abraham Kook, the first chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine, to the activation of history and “anticipation of the end” of his son Zvi Yehudah Kook, the mentor of Gush Emunim. This radicalization represented a shift-and also a decline and falling-off-from the universal metaphysical-cosmic dimension of Messianism to the particular national-Israeli dimension.\textsuperscript{46} The national-religious outlook saw the founding of the State as “the beginning of redemption” and the conquest of the territories in the Six-Day War as the redemption-process in full spate. Talmon interpreted Gush Emunim’s Messianic “anticipation of the end” as an obsessive desire to see the end of history within history.\textsuperscript{47}

In Talmon’s historical work and intellectual investigations, the Messianic mechanism was laid bare with a searching critical gaze, with irony and with a deep awareness of its price. He subverted the Messianic meta-narrative but at the same time showed a certain empathy for the phenomenon and its actors, in the absence of which it would have been difficult for him to reveal the secret of the Messianic spell. Scholem already perceived that “all radical Messianism, if taken seriously, opens up a chasm in which through an inner necessity antimonian outlooks and anarchic moral attitudes accumulate”.\textsuperscript{48} Talmon revealed destruction as the other side of redemption, the apocalyptic ruin from which a cleansed and reformed world was supposed to spring forth.

In Messianism there is a discrepancy between the absolute and the complete and the attempt to achieve it which involves the destruction of all that is not part of it; the hope of redemption is fulfilled at the cost of the elimination of all incompatibilities in human existence. Talmon discerned three such incompatibilities: that of liberty with equality that of private property with the organization of the collective, and that of the freedom of the individual with historical determinism. The Messianic ideologies wished to reconcile these differences. Talmon, however, reached the conclusion that the differences still remained as they were:

My opinion and belief is that the Messianic expectation of a resolution of these contradictions, the belief in a critical period in which redemption is at hand, has been the common denominator of Marxism and the other movements of the revolutionary camp from the days of the French Revolution. Thus, any supporting superstructure of references to Hegelian philosophy or economical, historical or other proofs are only a rationalization of this lofty and profound expectation.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid. 68.
\textsuperscript{45}Talmon, “The Motherland Is in Danger: An Open Letter to Menahem Begin” (see note 9).
\textsuperscript{47}For further reading, see Uriel Tal, “Totalitarian Democratic Hermenutics and Politics in Modern Jewish Religious Nationalism.” In \textit{Totalitarian Democracy and After}. (see note 10) 137-157.
\textsuperscript{49}Talmon. “Socialism and Liberalism” (see note 24).
The radical solution to human divergences, generally bound up with an existential crisis, is to carry out a political experiment in unification at a suitable historical moment when all prohibitions would be lifted and all contradictions resolved in a single revolutionary act. The subordination of a variety of narratives to a single narrative is only possible through coercion and rape, through violence expressed in revolutions and wars. The attempt to put a secular Messianism into practice, far from resolving the disharmonies, increases them, creates new dissensions and leads to an automatic chain-reaction of the imposition of force, counter-violence and so on. Talmon hoped that the historian or the social analyst may be able to attack the human urge which calls totalitarian democracy into existence, namely the longing for a final resolution of all contradiction and conflicts into a state of total harmony.50

Secular Messianism provides an opportunity to exit from history, but it does so within history itself. The transcendence which until modern times was embodied in religious redemption and personal salvation was secularized into Messianic political ideologies which hoped to bring about the end of history within history. In many ways, Talmon anticipated the post-modernist intellectual climate that subverted the great Messianic meta-narratives.

What in fact is the mutual relationship between the historian and the intellectual? The historian looks at the past from the perspective of the owl of Minerva the goddess of wisdom, which descends from its flight only in the evening, at the end of the historical process. The intellectual, for his part, operates in daylight, in the course of the historical process.51 As an intellectual, Talmon could only point to the dissensions and contradictions in his own time; as a historian, he saw the comprehensive dialectical process of secular Messianism. The intellectual in Talmon drew upon his understanding as a historian to illustrate how universal history could provide good and bad exemplars for Jewish life. The exposure of the dialectics of secular Messianism in European history provides insights and critical perceptions that can illuminate the tensions of Jewish history in the present. Talmon was an intellectual and historian who in his essays and studies sought to decipher the enigma of the present together with the cunning of history.

**Scholom and the Sabbataian dynamic**

The Israeli historians and the intellectuals of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Ben-Zion Dinur, Yitzhak Baer, Joseph Klausner and Gershom Scholem, investigated the development of the Messianic idea in Jewish thought and history. The academic interest in the subject and its secular nature bestowed a certain legitimacy on the Messianic discourse. Among the scholars, Scholem’s comprehensive academic achievement stands out: he created a new research discipline with his investigation of Jewish mysticism and kabbala.52 This historical and philological examination of the Messianic idea cast a critical eye on Messianic thought in the history of the Jewish people.

Scholem’s radical historiography offered a new and refreshing perspective, and, to use Walter Benjamin’s expression, his “brushing history against the grain” gave legitimization to the subversive narratives in Judaism such as Sabbataianism and Frankism and was a revolt against the hegemony that orthodox rabbinic Judaism wished to possess over the course of Jewish history. Scholem’s revolutionary project sought to reinstate what the historian David Biale called a “counter-history”.53 If Benjamin wished to remember the oppressed and provide the narrative of “the others”, Scholem sought to recover the memory of denied Jewish individuals and movements.

Scholem’s discussion of the Messianic language owes a debt to Benjamin in the historical context of the period during and after the First World War. The theory of language developed by Benjamin from 1915 onwards is a lament over the devaluation of language, which degenerated from a divine tongue that expressed the essence of things to a functional human language of signs. From being the Word of God, it

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became a mere nomenclature. These insights were expressed about a year later in a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem and were published after Benjamin's death under the title "On Language in General and On the Language Of Man". Ten years later, Scholem sent a letter to Franz Rosenzweig for his fortieth birthday, entitling it "On Our Language: A Confession". These were the years of "Brit Shalom", during which the young Kabbala scholar expressed his fears of "mixing up religious and political concepts. I categorically deny that Zionism is a messianic movement and that it is entitled to use religious terminology to advance its political aims". It was in this intellectual climate that Martin Buber, like Benjamin and Scholem, expressed his dislike of the nationalization of religion and its language. The copying of Messianic language by secular language, he wrote, is "unlikely to be particularly faithful. One cannot transfer the characteristics of Messianic language to nationalist language. Every mixture creates a confusion which is disastrous [...]".

This is what Scholem wrote to Rosenzweig on the secularization of the Hebrew language, warning of the danger of transforming Zionism from a historical movement into a secular messianic phenomenon in Palestine:

This country is a volcano, and language is lodged within it. [...] That sacred language on which we nurture our children, is it not an abyss that must open up one day? The people certainly don't know what they are doing. They think they have secularized the Hebrew language, have done away with its apocalyptic point. But that, of course, is not true: the secularization of the language is no more than a manner of speaking, a ready-made expression. It is impossible to empty the words so bursting with meaning, unless one sacrifices the language itself [...].

But if we transmit the language to our children as it was transmitted to us, if we, a generation of transition, revive the language of the ancient books for them, that it may reveal itself anew through them, shall not the religious power of that language explode one day? When the day finally comes and the force shored up in the Hebrew language is unleashed, when the 'spoken,' the content of language, takes form once again, our people will find itself confronted anew with that sacred tradition, signifying the choice before them: either to submit or to persevere. Because at the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke God in a thousand ways, thus calling Him back into the reality of our life, He cannot keep silent. This inevitable revolution of language, in which the Voice will again become audible, is the only subject never discussed in this country. Because those who endeavor to revive the Hebrew language did not truly believe in the judgment to which their acts are summoning us. May the levity that has accompanied us on this apocalyptic path not lead us to our destruction.

Was the secular Messianism—"that apocalyptic path", as Scholem called it—a manifestation of political theology? These shifting interrelationships between the theological and the religious that worried German and French thinkers who studied political theology in the twentieth century, also troubled Jewish humanist scholars of religion like Scholem, Buber and Akiva Ernst Simon who were close to the theological-political tradition. They were concerned that modern society in its secularism had lost all sense of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, between morality, religion and practical life. Benjamin, for his part,

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57Martin Buber. People and Universe. (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1961) 244 [Hebrew].
58Gershom Scholem. "On Our Language; A Confession" (see note 55).
considered the dialectical affinity between the secular, political hope of liberation and the religious and Messianic hope of redemption. This ambiguity of a fascination with the sacred and at the same time awareness of the danger of the religious language characterized their intellectual thought and political practice.

It is interesting to see that the same discourse of Messianic language and political theology was relevant in Zionist context of Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. These were not abstract questions but issues, which addressed the practice of Zionism and the future of the Israeli state. This framework provided the possibility of seeing Zionism as a form of Messianism, whether in its religious version or secular one. Ben-Gurion on the one hand and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook on the other are good examples of different varieties of political theology. In some ways, they were on opposite sides of the fence. The former, a political leader, did not hesitate to appropriate the sacred, to mobilize hallowed myths and to harness them to the task of building the state; the latter, a religious mentor, did not hesitate to appropriate the profane, to mobilize Zionist pioneers and to harness them to mystical speculations concerning the coming of the Messiah. Each had an essentially different starting-point from the other, but the common denominator between them was the raising of the profane to the level of the sacred: the ploughman became a sacred vessel of Judaism and a central element in the process of redemption. For a short while there was a kind of meeting between these two opposite outlooks, but from that time onwards their paths again divided. Rabbi Kook turned towards transcendental Messianism, which relied on the Ruler of the Universe, and Ben-Gurion turned towards Prometheus Messianism which relied on the sovereignty of man. In both cases there was a definite fusion between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane, and both men had a clear political theology, but Ben-Gurion was the most extreme expression of secular Messianism and worked for a politicization of the theological, while Rabbi Kook was the most extreme expression of religious Messianism and worked for a theo-legisation of politics. Only in his final years did Scholem clearly say that he objected to the positions of both the rabbi and the statesman.

In his daring avant-garde essay "Redemption through Sin" (1937) Scholem wished to offer an explanation of the historical dynamics of Sabbataianism in the seventeenth century and of Frankism of the eighteenth century. In both of these, a Jewish Messiah was converted to another religion: Islam in the case of Shabbetai Zevi and Christianity in the case of Jacob Frank. Sabbetaianism and Frankism, as religio-anarchic manifestations which were characterized as anti-nomian movements with Gnostic roots, were described by Scholem as paving the way for infidelity and secularism, and by so doing, leading many Jews to the Enlightenment and to Zionism.

In his research, Scholem described what I call "The Frankist Syndrome". In Judaism there was a nihilistic current, marginal but of great significance, involving quite a number of religious Jews in eighteenth-century Europe. Frankism was characterized by a nihilistic dialectical vortex and at the same time by an organized structural system. Scholem analyzed the circumstances which made possible this eruption of "mystical nihilism within so firmly organized and authoritarian a community as Rabbinical Judaism. Messianism and mysticism played equal parts in crystallizing these ideas, which sprang from the radical wing of the Sabbatian movements". In his court, Jacob Frank created a semi-military order with uniforms which followed the ideology of "performing righteous acts through transgressions" advocated by his charismatic leader. Scholem's fascinating essay revealed the duality of the void and the absolute in Frank: on the one hand, "the anarchic quality of freedom from all obligations and the confounding of everything", and on the other, "his enthusiasm for militarism making the Sabbetaian faith into a militaristic religion in both a mystical and a concrete sense". Under Frank's Messianic leadership and charismatic inspiration, the new mythological reality was


associated with omnipotence and eternal life, liberty and redemption, new Messianic and other expressions of the new world as revealed to Frank. In this respect, there was a modernist dimension in Sabbataianism and Frankism because they were a liberating element from the cables of tradition. This type of consciousness, which I have termed “the nihilistic-totalitarian syndrome”, is a synthesis of both concepts: the nihilist mentality, whether from inner compulsion or immanent logic, is driven to acceptance of totalitarian patterns and behavior, which are characterized by their extreme dynamism. This syndrome reflects the totalitarian European ideologies and movements of the first three decades of the 20th century.

“Redemption through Sin” was not a study of a unique and marginal phenomenon, but may be placed, as S.M. Wasserstrom suggested, within the intellectual climate of Europe in the nineteen-thirties. In Palestine, Scholem linked Jacob Frank, the “liberator”, with the French Revolution, and at the end of his life he published a book entitled Du Frankisme au Jacobisme (From Frankism to Jacobism). Major French thinkers and philosophers such as Pierre Klossowsky, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Denis de Rougemont, Henri Corbin, Maurice Blanchot and Jean Paulhan saw the Marquis de Sade as a model of total liberty. They were preceded by Guillaume Apollinaire, who described the French marquis as “the freest spirit that ever lived”. Klossowsky called his lecture in 1939, at which his friend Walter Benjamin was present, “The Marquis de Sade and the French Revolution”, claiming, in this lecture, that de Sade celebrated “a utopia of evil”. In the same spirit, Scholem declared that Frank promulgated “a religious myth of nihilism” or “a mythology of nihilism”. Klossowsky and Scholem, and, one may add, Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin, thought in concepts of modern gnosticism.

The translation of “Redemption through Sin” into English triggered many comments which drew an analogy between Sabbataianism and Communism, or, more specifically, between Sabbataianism and Stalinism. At the time when the essay was written, the antinomistic reasoning, the false Messianism and the “Frankist syndrome” of totalitarian nihilism were depicted as a common denominator between the two movements. Norman Podhoretz gave a good description of this in his journal Commentary in 1971:

In the 1930’s, when “The Holiness of Sin” was first published, Scholem produced the most illuminating analysis anyone had yet done of the Stalinist mentality, and was responding to such shocks as the massacre of the kulaks, the Moscow trials, the purges, and the Hitler-Stalin pact. Scholem, of course, made no explicit comparisons himself and was almost certainly not thinking consciously of Stalinism at all. Nevertheless, a reader of “The Holiness of Sin” in 1937 would have had to be very narrowly focused indeed in his thinking to miss the breathtaking similarities between the two movements. The Sabbataians used in denying that the conversion of Sabbatai Zevi to Islam proved that he was not after all the messiah of the Jews, and the arguments employed by the Stalinists in trying to persuade themselves against all the evidence of the senses that a socialist revolution was in fact being fulfilled in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Irving Howe, the cultural critic, joined Podhoretz’s American conservative camp when in an interview with Scholem in 1980 he admitted that he could not avoid making the contemporary analogy when reading “Redemption through Sin”. He asked Scholem about “some similarities here to certain totalitarian movements”, and specifically, “in the Stalinist view of ethics, is there not a parallel to the Sabbatian

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outlook." Despite Howe's skepticism towards the use of analogies between religious Messianism and political radicalism, he said "I cannot totally reject them. Certainly, one can learn from your Sabbatian studies how dangerous, indeed, fatal, it is to mix apocalyptic visions with political energies". Scholem replied:

When I wrote this essay, which was the first that got me a reputation beyond scholarship, I was not aware of what you say. But I was made aware by later developments. Remember I wrote it in 1936. It was published early in 1937 in Palestine. Later I was made aware of it when it appeared in Commentaries with a preface saying we have seen this in Stalinism—which was true. But I was only made aware of this through what happened in the forties and fifties. It is obvious that there is a strong parallel between the dangers of apocalyptic Messianism and the dangers of apocalypse in secularist disguise.  

On another occasion, Scholem was asked explicitly: "do you see Communism as an Messianic movement?". The metaphysician Scholem, a theologian in the eyes of many, who believed in the ability of ideas to change history, maintained that Marxist economical analysis was alien to him, and that his spiritual world-view clashed with those of his Communist brother, Werner, and his best friend Benjamin who was a Marxist, and thought that Socialism has a messianic pretension and is a kind of secular Messianism. Scholem answered:

Many young people took Communism as a substitute for messianism. There have been times, places, and circumstances in which many people—not only Jewish youth, to whom this certainly applies—saw messianic dimension in communism. The zeal with which they threw themselves into it had some of the enthusiasm of the messianists to it. And this is where the whole thing collapsed. Messianism is really a very big and complex matter, not at all simple.

I've written about this twice in my books. I've defined what I thought was the price the Jewish people has paid for Messianism. A very high price. Some people have wrongly taken this to mean that I am an anti-messianist. I have a strong inclination toward it. I have not given up on it. But it may be that my writings have spurred people to say that I am a Jew who rejects the messianic idea because the price was too high.

Scholem claimed that the failure to distinguish between Messianism and secular movements becomes a destructive phenomenon, and, like Talmon, he saw the Messianic idea as the source of the destructiveness. He told his friend Walter Benjamin of his attraction to "the positive and noble force of destruction", and declared that "destruction is a form of redemption". This was not very different from the "nihilist-totalitarian syndrome" marked by the ambivalence of the desire to destroy together with the desire for construction. On two occasions, Scholem dwelt on this price of Messianism: in his introduction to his monumental work _Sabbatai Sevi_ (1957) and in the programmatic essay, "The Messianic Idea in Judaism" (1971). In the introduction to his biography of the seventeenth-century Jewish Messiah, Scholem wrote:

This book, however, was not written as a treatise on theology but as a contribution to an understanding of the history of the Jewish people. Insofar as theology is discussed—and a great deal of theology, for that matter—it is done in pursuit of historical insight. A movement which shook the House of Israel to its very foundations and has revealed not only the vitality of the Jewish people but also the deep, dangerous, and destructive dialectics inherent in the messianic idea cannot be understood without considering questions that reach down to fundamentals. I admit that in such discussions much depends on the basic outlook of the historian with regard to what he considers the constitutive elements of the historical process. Perhaps it is permissible at this point to say, with all due caution, that Jewish historiography has generally chosen to ignore the fact that the Jewish people have paid a very high price for the messianic idea. If this book may be regarded as a small contribution to considering a big question: What price messianism?—a question which touches upon the very essence of our being and survival—then I hope that any reader who studies it from

74 Irving Howe Interviews Gershom Scholem, (see note 14).
75 Ibid.
76 Mukti Tzur, "With Gershom Scholem: An Interview" 26 (see note 56).
77 Ibid. 33.
this point of view will obtain some reward. Anyone who can appreciate the gravity of this problem will also understand why I have refrained from expressing opinions or drawing conclusions with respect to any contemporary issues bound to arise out of the subject matter with which this book deals.79

As well as praise, Sabbatai Sevi drew criticism from various quarters. The most famous example was that of the Orthodox literary critic Baruch Kurzweil, who discerned in Scholem “a tendency to a positive view of mythical and irrational factors”, and thought that he showed “a certain sympathy for phenomena which are in fact a highly dangerous resurrection of nihilist myths and irrational, meta-ethical principles”.80 The historian of religions Zvi Werblowsky also said about Scholem that “the accusation of ‘dogmatism is a two-edged sword. If it is relatively easy to show that the orthodox or rationalist view distorted history, it is just as easy to show—or at any rate, to wonder—whether there is not some distortion in the new, revolutionary view”.81 In both his reaction to these criticisms and in the development of his ideas on the subject, in 1972 Scholem continued to speak of the price of Messianism:

What I have in mind is the price demanded by Messianism, the price which the Jewish people has to pay out of its own substance for this idea which it handed over to the world. The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, when it was unprepared to come forward onto the plane of world history. There’s something preliminary, something provisional about Jewish history; hence its inability to give of itself entirely. For the Messianic idea is not only consolation and hope. Every attempt to realize it tears open the chasms that lead each of its manifestations ad absurdum. There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. It diminishes the singular worth of the individual, and he can never fulfill himself, because the incompleteness of his endeavors eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value. Thus in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished. One may say, perhaps, the Messianic idea is the real anti-existentialist idea. Precisely understood, there is nothing concrete which can be accomplished by the unredeemed. This makes for the greatness of Messianism, but also for its constitutional weakness. Jewish so-called Existenz possesses a tension that never finds true release; it never burns itself out. And when in our history it does discharge, then it is foolishly decried (or, one might say, unmasked) as “pseudo-Messianism”.

The blazing landscape of redemption (as if it were a point of focus) has concentrated in itself the historical outlook of Judaism. Little wonder that overtones of Messianism have accompanied the modern Jewish readiness for irrevocable action in the concrete realm, when it set out on the utopian return to Zion. It is a readiness which no longer allows itself to be fed on hopes. Born out of the horror and destruction that was Jewish history in our generation, it is bound to history itself and not to meta-history; it has not given itself up totally to Messianism. Whether or not Jewish history will be able to endure this entry into the concrete realm without perishing in the crisis of the Messianic claim which has virtually been conjured up—that is the question which out of his great and dangerous past the Jew of this age poses to his present and to his future.82

Scholem thought that the Zionist enterprise did not aim to solve the Jewish question on the Messianic or meta-historical level. Zionism, unlike Messianism, did not claim that we live at the end of history. Ahad Ha-Am and Herzl, who were non-Messianic, did not operate on the metaphysical plane but sought to act within the historical process. Scholem considered “the beginning of redemption”—a phrase coined by a leading figure of the generation, Rabbi Abraham Kook—to be a “dangerous formula”.83 Scholem said that

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79 Gershom Scholem. Sabbatai Zevi—The Mystical Messiah. 1626–1676. (see note 5) XII.
80 Baruch Kurzweil. In the Struggle for Jewish Values. (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1969) III. [Hebrew].
83 Zeev Galil interviews Gershom Scholem. “Messianism, Zionism and Anarchy in the Language“. Continuity and Rebellion. 57 (see note 1).
Rabbi Kook, whom he saw as “the example and model of a great Jewish mystic”, wrote “an obscure and strange book”, Orut Ha-kodesh (Lights for Holiness), in whose three volumes, rather than “thoughts, there was a poetic effusion […] and, behind all this, a deep mystical turbulence.” 84 Rabbi Kook expressed mystical experience in human language, and understood the secularity of the Jews in Eretz-Israel as part of the process of setting up a modern nation. The hakutzim (pioneers) transgressed the prohibitions of the Torah, but as the agents of Jewish nationhood they preserved Jewish continuity.

In the introduction that he wrote to Scholem’s Explications and Implications, (vol. 2, in Hebrew) the editor Abraham Shapiro described a lecture Scholem gave to the intellectual circle at Kibbutz Oranim in 1975. In this lecture, Scholem said that the greatness of Rabbi Kook lay in his perception of the holiness of the profane, and his weakness was his “mixture of the Messianic element with Zionism … He created a confusion of concepts by authorizing a mixture of the ideal of building a society and state with contemporary Messianism”. However, “the person mainly responsible” for this “was, of course, Ben-Gurion”. 85

Yet, at the same time, although Scholem recoiled from connecting the Messianic idea with actual history, his comprehensive investigation of the subject, the discussion it gave rise to and his dominant personality provoked a Messianic discourse. Only from this point of view were Scholem and Ben-Gurion on the same side of the barricade: despite their warnings against mixing theology and politics, the thorough investigation of the Messianic vision, its language and accomplishments had consequences for the public and academic discourse on the subject. In founding the state, Ben-Gurion had made the most significant attempt at nationalizing the Jewish Messianic concept. Zionism was a historical experiment in nationalizing religious concepts and metamorphosing them into the secular sphere. Ben-Gurion brought the matter to its ultimate conclusion in his attempt to nationalize the Bible and Messianism. 86

Scholem was frightened precisely of this nationalization of concepts:

Messianism exists here only as a figure of speech. It was used a great deal by Ben-Gurion, who was responsible for this figurative use of Messianism. He made endless use of this figure of speech, which he understood in a totally secular way, as if he were a true believer […] He used the term “Messianism” no less than the people of the religious camp, who perhaps really believed in “the beginning of redemption.”

In Scholem’s opinion, the failure of Messianism in the seventeenth century invalidated the idea of a figure of flesh and blood. Ben-Gurion’s Messianism was directed towards the State of Israel, whereas the Messianism of Gush Emunim focused on the Land of Israel. In 1980, in a rare political statement, Scholem replied to the question of whether he saw Gush Emunim as a modern version of the Sabbatian movement as follows:

Yes, they are like the Sabbatians. Like the Sabbatians, their Messianic programme can only lead to disaster. In the seventeenth century, of course, the failure of Sabbatianism had only spiritual consequences; it led to a breakdown of Jewish belief. Today, the consequences of such Messianism are also political, and that is the great danger. 88

After the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, Scholem began to take an interest in Messianism and researched the personal and collective history of Sabbatianism. He made a distinction between historical time and mythical time. Zionism operated in historical time, restoring Jewish sovereignty and hence the total responsibility of the modern Jews for their fate, while Messianism operated in mythical, a historical time. Scholem rejected the universalistic approach of the school of Hermann Cohen, who gave Messianism a moral-universalist mission, but he also rejected the apocalyptic approach, which he

86David Ohana. “Gershom Scholem: Neither Canaanites, Nor Crusaders. (Jerusalem: The Shalom Hartman Institute, The Faculty of Law—Bar-Ilan University, Keter Publishers, 2008) [Hebrew], 258–266.
87Ze’ev Galili interviews Gershom Scholem (see note 83) 58.
88David Biale interviews Gershom Scholem (see note 13).
feared. Instead, he favoured a third approach, the national approach to Messianism. According to him, the Messianic myth is the expression of a desire for national independence, for liberation from the yoke of the exile and political servitude. Messianism is thus a vitalistic Lebensphilosophie (philosophy of life) that is in contradiction to rationalist thought or a historical approach. It was the tension between mystical-Messianic time and historical-pragmatic time that actuated Jewish history.

Gush Emunim overturned the historical basis of Zionism by combining the mythical with the historical and the metaphysical with the concrete. Scholem’s historical undertaking can also be understood as a warning to the Zionist movement of the danger of the Messianic expectation. In this connection, David Biale asked Scholem, The Jerusalem Historian of Messianism, in 1980 if Messianism was still a Zionist enterprise. Scholem answered:

Today we have the Gush Emunim, which is definitely a Messianic group. They use biblical verses for political purposes. Whenever Messianism is introduced into politics, it becomes a very dangerous business. It can only lead to disaster.

When interviewed by Irving Howe, Scholem expressed his fears of “the extremists in Gush Emunim”, who “use religious sanctions in order to justify their activities in the territories. There is nothing more contemptible or harmful than the use of religious sanctions in a conflict between nations”. Scholem shared Talmud’s fears that the phenomenon could lead to a religious war. He warned that if Zionism blurred the boundaries between the religious-Messianic plane and the political-historical plane, it would be liable to cancel out the significance of the Jews’ entry into modern history. He said that action in the political arena of secular history and action in the spiritual-religious arena are like two parallel lines that should never meet: “It would be disastrous to mix them.” At the same time, the mystical aspect of Zionism is not necessarily identical with the Messianic aspect: it represents a renewal of spirit within history and not a situation that only comes about at the end of history. In a lecture he gave in 1973 in the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, Scholem spoke of the importance of theological concepts in a secular form. He explained that although concepts like creation, revelation and redemption were legitimate, they lacked the explosive charge they formerly possessed. “Yet, the messianic idea has maintained precisely this vehemence. Despite all attenuations, it has proved itself an idea of highest effectiveness and relevance—even in its secularized forms”. This, of course, was a late echo of Scholem’s letter to Rosenzweig in 1926 in which he warned that the sacred tongue was “brimful of explosive material”.

According to Scholem, the Messianic language could only be divested of the explosive charge that threatened to blow it up if the Jewish tradition of a constant tension in which none of its elements was neglected was preserved. In this tradition, there were attractions and tensions between different trends and currents. There was the tension between apocalyptic trends and trends that worked against them, the tension between restorative trends that sought to revive an ancient glory and utopian trends, the tension between sober and realistic Messianic trends such as that of Maimonides and apocalyptic or extreme utopian trends, the tension between a movement towards redemption as a process within history and a historical trends including the redemption of nature as in the Kabbala of Isaac Luria, and, recently, the tension between secular or revolutionary Messianic trends such as those of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse and liberalism. In all these trends, the conflict was not resolved or mitigated, and this also applied to the mutual relationship of Messianism and Zionism.

The price and the lesson

The young Talmon’s “structural search”, to use Claude Lévi Strauss’s concept, was fulfilled in secular Zionism. History was not a mere accumulation of events but a structure, a non-human a priori mechanism.
that directs and controls events and their inner logic. It was a morphological form, as Oswald Spengler would have said, or, as Carl Schmitt put it in *Political Romanticism* (1919), "The idea of an arbitrary power over history is the real revolutionary idea". Unlike these two German thinkers who affirmed impersonal structures, Talmon and Scholem adopted a "structuralist explanation" but, at the same time, undermined it. They formulated the Sabbataian code of "Messianism through sin" and "redemption through destruction" but they also warned of the price of Messianism. These two contrasting approaches to the Messianic idea, empathy and criticism, remained with them throughout their lives. Although they rejected a positive Messianic yearning, as a scholarly sublimation or an explanatory obsession it never left them.

The Messianic yearning and its various metamorphoses, whether as a philosophy of history or as a "structuralist explanation", eventually needed a narrative, a detailed historical description. Jean-François Lyotard explained that all forms of legitimacy are connected with the telling of a story or a narrative presentation. The narratives that bestow this legitimacy provide significance and content. All activity or reflection claiming authenticity requires legitimacy in the form of a narrative, and the more complex and universal the activity is, the more the legitimacy is strengthened. The meta-narratives of modernity such as that of secular Messianism are philosophical statements about the meaning of history.

Talmon, unlike Scholem, did not engage in the intellectual discourse about political theology that took place in Germany in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and in which thinkers like Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Leo Strauss and others participated. At the same time, he forestalled the deconstructive discourse of postmodernism concerning the great political narratives of modernity, the attempt to set up moral political communities. It is doubtful if, in his affinities, his thoughts and his language, Talmon could have participated in either of these two forms of discourse, but in the thesis that he offered, "Political Messianism", Talmon provided an early formulation of political theology (as an explanation, of course, not as a recommendation) and a late, post-modernist formulation of "meta-narratives":

The totalitarian democratic school, on the other hand, is based upon the assumption of a sole and exclusive truth in politics. It may be called political Messianism in the sense that it postulates a preordained, harmonious and perfect scheme of things, to which men are irresistibly driven, and at which they are bound to arrive. It recognizes ultimately only one plane of existence, the political.

While the great religions offered a transcendental solution via a metaphysical explanation beyond the physical world, the secular religions offered a meta-narrative of contemporary politics via the modern ideologies. It was not the transcendental theology of the religions but a political theology of modern life. Unlike Carl Schmitt, in whom there was a correlation between the understanding of this structure, the political theology, and the will to enforce it at the beginning of the twentieth century, Talmon, as a liberal, made a distinction between them, and resolved to understand, but not to accept. His historiographical starting-point was the French Revolution, and from there he began to examine the totalitarian dynamic. For Scholem, the French Revolution was the culmination of the Sabbataian apostasy, which resulted in the overthrow of systems, the modernization of the Jews and the Zionist phenomenon.

Talmon and Scholem were committed and critical intellectuals who did not wish to throw out the Zionist baby with the bathwater. Zionists though they were critical towards the movement to which they saw themselves as belonging. Both had a complex attitude towards society, showing responsibility towards it from within because they saw themselves as part of it. The subject of Messianism was close to their hearts because it was their way of revealing conceptual and historical dialectics. Both recoiled from a Messianic determinism

imposed on history. As a result, Talmon wrote “pragmatic history” for his society, as Edmund Burke did in England and Alexis de Tocqueville did in France. In the liberal tradition of these two European thinkers, Talmon feared to deliver too strong a blow to accepted liberal and bourgeois ideas, while Scholem’s biography and academic work can only be understood as a revolt against the liberal-bourgeois ethos on which he was nurtured as a youth in Weimar Germany. The liberal outlook caused Talmon to be critical of Messianism, and Scholem’s critique of liberalism caused him to investigate Messianism.

The two historians’ fear of a fusion of Messianism and history not only existed in the Jewish context but also in a world context. They identified communism (and also fascism) not only as a Messianic political religion but also as a kind of psychological manifestation: people need myths to follow.99 In the course of their investigations, Talmon and Scholem discovered the danger inherent in the Messianic myth. In both cases, there is a connection between what they wrote as historians and the situation in their time.100 At an earlier stage (in the case of Talmon) or at a later stage (in the case of Scholem) they acknowledged this. In this respect, they were thinkers of their time who were influenced by their period: the year 1937 was highly symbolic in their lives and work.

In the attitudes of both these scholars there is a kind of closure of a circle, for, as a historian of general history, Talmon decided at the height of his maturity to investigate Jewish history, and consequently sought the blessing of the “rabbi”, Scholem. In 1972, in a letter to Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem, Jacob Talmon described his plan to write a trilogy about modern Jewish history in a universal perspective: “I have been thinking a great deal about the trilogy I mentioned to you: the history of the Jewish people from the French Revolution onwards. I am struck by the way various people, Jewish and non-Jewish, with no connection between them and quite spontaneously, try to persuade and encourage me to embark on this great subject”.101 This letter testifies to the mutual admiration of these two historians from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and shows their common scholarly interest in the Messianic phenomenon, in its historical dialectic and in the price to be paid for it.

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100M. Brenner. “From Self-Declared Messiah to Scholar of Messianism: The Recently Published Diaries of Young Gerhard Scholem in a New Light.” *Jewish Social Studies* 3:11 (Fall 1996) 177-182.

101J.L. Talmon to Gershom Scholem, 1972. I thank Talmon’s family for the permission to publish this letter.