MENASSEH BEN ISRAEL AND THE DUTCH SEPHARDIC COLONIZATION MOVEMENT OF THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY (1645-1657)*

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Gershom Scholem attributed a fundamental role to political and social upheavals in the shaping of Jewish mysticism and spirituality. In particular, Scholem saw the expulsion from Spain, in 1492, as the impelling force behind the new forms of mystical messianism which swept the Jewish world in the late sixteenth and in the seventeenth century. This is not to say that he regarded the changes in Jewish messianic expectations as merely sublimated responses to political, social and economic turmoil. But awareness of a complex interaction between political events on the one hand and Jewish messianic conceptions on the other permeates his entire work. And this, we may tentatively suggest, has its implications for us in our effort to grasp the essential nature of Menasseh ben Israel's perceptions of, and responses to, the major political and economic problems confronting the western Sephardic world of his day.

The expulsion from Spain, Scholem held, produced first a wave of acute expectation based on traditional messianic notions and, then, after this evaporated in disappointment, frustration, and new setbacks, in the mid-sixteenth century, a further phase of spiritual development in which final redemption came to be seen as the future outcome of a complex sequence of preparatory processes. The creative phase in the evolution of this new mystical messianism, at Safed, in the Holy Land, were the decades from 1540 to 1580. In the next decades, the messianic mysticism of Isaac Luria and his school, and related kabbalistic influences, spread inexorably through the Jewish communities first of the Ottoman Empire, then Italy and later most of the rest of the Jewish world. Then, in the middle years of

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1 See Gershom Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish Spirituality (New York, 1971): "after the expulsion from Spain, the kaballah sought to provide an answer for questions which arose from an event which had uprooted one of the principal branches of Judaism"; see also Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York, 1961), pp. 244-250.
the seventeenth century, came a dramatic intensification of these earlier tendencies, an acute messianic outburst which eventually culminated in the movement of Sabbatai Ševi.

But what precipitated this sudden rapid accumulation of messianic expectation specifically in the 1640s and 1650s? Scholem speaks of forces "‘impelling a Messianic outburst which, as it turned out, came approximately one generation after the reception of this kabbalah by the Judaism of the time. The movement that went forth from Safed required about three generations to gain general acceptance. But after that, one generation, fully imbued with these Messianic conceptions, was enough to create a situation in which a Messiah who seemed to fit these ideas could find a wide-ranging echo’". In fact, Scholem seems to account for the messianic eruption of the mid-seventeenth century purely in terms of tendencies inherent in Lurianic mysticism itself. He proposes no worldly event, or events, as a frame for this new phase in the evolution of Jewish messianism.

Among Jewish messianic speculations of the mid-seventeenth century, those entered into by Menasseh ben Israel in his *Spes Israelis*, of 1650, and some subsequent writings, arguably do suggest close links between the intensifying spiritual ferment of the years around 1650 and specific political and social difficulties pressing on the Jewish people at that time. In a letter written to John Dury, in December 1649, in the midst of writing his *Spes Israelis* – or *Mikveh Israel* as he entitled the Spanish version of his tract – Menasseh explains that his purpose is to show that the "‘day of the promised Messiah unto us doth draw nigh’" by elucidating certain contemporary phenomena which he interprets as signs of pending redemption. He tells Dury that he wants to bring out the meaning of the cruelties perpetrated by the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, the significance of the perseverence of modern Jewry in the face of endless oppression and that of the "‘great honors’ with which some Jews had recently been favored by a number of Christian princes. In his *Mikveh Israel*, Menasseh does indeed take up these themes, interpreting them as proofs of the imminence of redemption, of the ingathering of the Jews, and the bringing of peace to all mankind. In addition, he points also to another manifestation which, being a recent major shift, he sees as a particularly precious indication of the imminence of universal salvation. He considers it a matter of great moment that the dispersion of the Jews had recently been completed, or almost completed: "‘y esto se ha agora cumplido, despues que en America

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