

The Modern Intellectual and His Heretical Ancestor: Gershom Scholem and Nathan of Gaza

Michael Löwy

Gershom Scholem was without question a brilliant example of the modern Jewish intellectual: neither Talmudic, rabbinical, nor kabbalistic and still less a prophet.¹ More modestly – but with remarkable spiritual energy – he was a historian, a man of learning, a university graduate, a (critical) son of the Haskalah or Hebrew Enlightenment, and a thinker who – without ever ceasing to believe after his own fashion – abandoned the traditional orthodox faith, with its rituals and prohibitions. He was also a modern Jewish intellectual because he was assimilated, shaped by German culture – despite his revolt against assimilation, his fight on behalf of ‘dissimilation’ (to use the term invented by Franz Rosenzweig), and his adherence to Zionism, which caused him to leave for Jerusalem in 1923. In reality he belonged to the first generation of Jewish university intellectuals in Central Europe who burst massively into the institutions of higher education at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries – in contrast to the isolated individuals, generally cut off from the Jewish community, who had had access to academic study in the earlier period.

But Gershom Scholem also belonged to the category of modern intellectuals – both Jews and non-Jews – who bitterly resented the ‘disenchantment of the world’, the *Entzauberung der Welt*, which according to Max Weber characterized modernity. For that reason he was deeply attracted to the ‘romantic critique of modernity’, the criticism – in the name of the cultural or religious values of the past – of instrumental rationality (the *Zweckrationalität* that Weber speaks of), of the quantification and the reification produced by modern bourgeois–industrial civilization. He formed part of that great movement of modern criticism of modernity which drew its inspiration from the German Romantic tradition, and which sought an antidote to the loss of meaning in myth, history, or religion.

Like other romantics, Scholem was too modern to wish for a return to the past pure and simple: he could no longer believe in the Kabbalah, or in the imminent coming of the Messiah, like his ancestors. His strategy of *re-enchanting the world* was located *within modernity*: he became a historian of the Kabbalah and of heretical messianism, and it was through the mediation of historiography that he was able to revive the fascinating Jewish mysticism of centuries past.

Scholem owed a great deal to German Romanticism. In an article on Jewish historiography in 1949, he wrote that German Romanticism was characterized by ‘emotional attachment to living people’ and by ‘the active understanding on the part of the organism of its own history’.² These are characteristics which perfectly define Scholem’s own historiographical undertaking.

His biographer, David Biale, observed in his doctoral thesis: 'In philosophy and in history, Scholem's liking for a particular trend in German romanticism played a crucial role in his intellectual formation.'³ Scholem himself tended to relativize his German inheritance; he did not like this aspect of his thought to be foregrounded and it was probably for this reason that this passage (and others on the same theme) disappeared from David Biale's work (in other respects outstanding). In an interview with me in 1979, Scholem insisted on the determining role of Hebrew sources, not German, in his thought. He was no doubt right, but it is none the less true that it was romantic culture which was, to a great extent, to inspire the way he read his Hebrew sources and his choice of aspects worthy of interest in that immense reservoir of texts that comprises the Jewish religious tradition.

An example illustrates this idea: it is to a large extent thanks to the work of a German romantic on Jewish mysticism, the *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Über die Tradition* (1927–1857) by the Christian theosophist Frantz Joseph Molitor, who was to 'rediscover' the Kabbalah. In his autobiography, Scholem recalled reading this book in 1916, at the period when he first became interested in the Kabbalah; while denying the Christian speculations of this 'disciple of the romantic philosophers, Schelling and Baader', he stressed that Molitor 'understood the Kabbalah better than all the great Jewish religious authorities (*Gedolei Hochmat Israel*) of his day'.⁴ Again in 1937, in a letter to a friend (the publisher Zalman Schocken), Scholem paid homage to Molitor's 'deep' insights (*Tiefblick*) and acknowledged that this work had had a 'fascinating effect' (*faszinierender Wirkung*) upon him, because he had been able to demonstrate (despite his historiographical errors) 'the place where the secret life of Judaism was once located'.⁵

Scholem's historiography – what David Biale calls his 'counter-history' – is a revolt against the unduly rationalist interpretation of Judaism, common to rabbinic orthodoxy inspired by Maimonideanism, (assimilated) bourgeois Jewish liberalism, German sociologists studying the Jewish religion (Weber, Sombert), and the Jewish-German scholarly study of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) (Graetz, Zunz, Steinschneider). This was the dominant interpretation at this period, which skirted round the mystical, heretical, messianic, and anarchical (in a word, 'romantic') aspects of the Jewish tradition.

In his first article on the Kabbalah in 1921, Scholem wrote that the Jewish tradition is a 'non-bourgeois (*unbürgerlich*) and explosive phenomenon'.⁶ In this context 'non-bourgeois' denotes opposition to the dull conformity of the official institutions of German Judaism and to the liberal 'assimilationism' of the Jewish middle classes in search of respectability; but, more deeply, a break with the epigoni of the Haskalah that tried to translate Judaism into the language of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) and assimilate the prophets into Kantian categories. Whence Scholem's interest in mysticism (decried 'obscurantist' by the Sages of the nineteenth century) and in heretical movements such as Shabbeteanism – from his article on Cordovero in 1928 to the monumental work on Shabbetai Zevi in the 1950s.

Reading this remarkable book, one is struck by the place occupied by Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680), far superior in Scholem's eyes in intelligence, originality, theological radicalism, and force of character to Shabbetai Zevi himself. As a pre-modern intellectual, Nathan of Gaza is difficult to classify: he is not a rabbi or a Talmudist, or a 'mistagogue', or a 'proletaroid [*sic*] intellectual'. The ideal type to which he is closest is undoubtedly *the prophet*, in Max Weber's classic sociological definition: 'by prophet we mean a bearer of

purely *personal* charisma who, by virtue of his mission, proclaims a religious doctrine or a divine commandment . . . For the prophet, life and the world, social events and cosmic events have a unitary, pre-determined 'meaning'.⁷ Every word applies to Nathan of Gaza.

Let us recall briefly the remarkable journey of this heretical theologian (as Scholem presents him). His real name was Abraham Nathan ben Elisha Hayyim Ashkenazi and he was the son of a rich merchant of Gaza. He soon became famous as 'Nathan the prophet of Gaza' and his admirers called him 'the sacred lamp' (*butzina kaddisha*).

In 1665 the young Nathan, with a passionate interest in Lurian Kabbalah, was viewed as a prophetic and charismatic figure, capable of reading secret sins in people's faces and prescribing *tikkoum* (reform) that was adequate. It was at this time that he had a vision in which a strange rabbi, Shabbetai Zevi, known in Jerusalem for his odd behaviour, appeared to him on the heavenly throne as the Messiah. When Shabbetai visited Gaza in 1665, Nathan spoke to him of his visions, and after long weeks of discussion was successful in convincing him of his mission and proclaimed him publicly as the Messiah. In reality, as Scholem demonstrates, the strong personality and inventive theologian of the movement which arose was Nathan, and it was his charismatic renown which was to render S. Zevi's messianic claim credible.

While Shabbetai left to bring the news to the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire, Nathan of Gaza composed letters and appeals which outlined a new theology, combining the Kabbalah with popular elements, Lurian mysticism with traditional messianism. His doctrine also contained some surprising heterodox innovations, such as the idea of Universal Redemption, thanks to Messiah Shabbetai, for all sinners without exception – even Jesus, who would thus be restored to his people and to sainthood.

About this time he also wrote a long text, *Derush ha Tanninim* ('Treatise on Dragons'), which proclaimed the advent of a 'New Law'. According to this document, the old Torah corresponded to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and was thus founded on the opposition between the permissible and the forbidden. With the advent of the Messiah, the reign of a new Torah began, the Torah of the Tree of Life, which abolished norms and prohibitions. This was the source of what Scholem calls 'Shabbetean antinomianism' and his calling to 'religious anarchy'.

The sequel is well known. Imprisoned by the Sultan and threatened with death, Shabbetai Zevi agreed to convert to Islam: he became Aziz Mehmed Effendi and the Sultan appointed him *Kapi Bashi* ('Guardian of the Palace Gates'). During the years that followed, until his death at the age of thirty-seven, Nathan travelled to the Jewish communities all over Europe, trying to explain the theological grounds for this conversion to the disciples who had been thrown into disarray. This was the doctrine of the apostate Messiah: to be able to extract sparks of sacred light (*nitzotzim*) from the world of impurity that imprisons them (*le kelippah*), the Messiah had to descend to the middle of this impure universe. The Messiah was in communion with the Tree of Life and was consequently beyond Good and Evil: like a soul in Paradise he was freed from all the prohibitions of this world.

Gershom Scholem the graduate, the modern intellectual, could not – it goes without saying – identify with Nathan of Gaza and his mystical and esoteric doctrine. But in rescuing this astonishing figure from oblivion, he rediscovered another Judaism, very distant from the reassuring image presented by the historians of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

or by the orthodox rabbis: an 'explosive', eschatological, heretical, and 'non-bourgeois' Judaism. This explains the tribute he paid to the forgotten prophet of the seventeenth century:

Nathan of Gaza deserves a place in the history of religions. By virtue of his visionary power, his intellectual abilities, and his inexhaustible energies, he became the precursor and the standard-bearer of the Messiah . . . To borrow a metaphor from an earlier messianic movement, Nathan was at once the John the Baptist and the Paul of the new Messiah.⁸

But the romantic view brought to bear on the Jewish past, research into its mystical heterodox and hidden dimension, was not the only reason for Gershom Scholem's interest in Shabbeteanism and the theology of Nathan of Gaza. Undoubtedly, there was no direct spiritual filiation between the two; a colossal fault-line, an immeasurable gulf, lay between them: modernity. There was nevertheless a specific religious tie between the heretical prophet of the seventeenth century and the heterodox historian of the twentieth.

In most of his writings, Scholem operates as a historian and never explicitly reveals his own religious views. To meet his fairly iconoclastic and non-conformist ideas on the subject we have to turn to his conversations and interviews, in particular those from the last ten years of his life.

In the course of a dialogue with Israeli educators in 1971, Scholem spoke of his relation to the Jewish religion, without being afraid of shocking his interlocutors:

Take as an example the Thirteen Articles of the Maimonidean faith: it is a rational definition of the reality of Judaism. Personally, I don't believe them, or only two or three of them. According to Maimonides, then, am I not a renegade? . . . Personally, I believe in God. But I am a religious anarchist, I do not believe in the Revelation of the Law on Sinai.

This religious anarchism led him to believe that in the State of Israel the prophet Jeremiah "would have ended by being imprisoned" because "'statism' and 'prophecy' make poor bedfellows".⁹ In another interview, in about 1975, he explained why, despite his hostility to the pseudo-Messiah, he was attracted to Shabbeteanism:

In the last chapters of my *Sabbatai Sevi*, I tried to demonstrate, by means of precise examples, that the Shabbeteans always saw the positive in the negative. It is clear that, as far as traditional values were concerned, this was negative. But I never ceased to believe that the destructive factor, even taking account of its nihilist potential, has always been the basis of a positive, utopist hope. Evidently, from the point of view of the values of traditional and official Judaism, this concept is negative.¹⁰

In other words – and as a provisional conclusion: Gershom Scholem found in the figure of Nathan of Gaza not only the expression of an 'explosive' and apocalyptic form of Judaism poles away from the rationalized and codified doctrine of a Maimonides, but also a type of precursor or ancestor of his own religious anarchism.

Michael Löwy
CNRS, Paris

(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. See, by Gershom Scholem (1956), The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism (I). *Diogenes*, 14; The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism (II). *Diogenes*, 15; (1967), Mysticism and Society. *Diogenes*, 58; (1972), The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala (I). *Diogenes*, 79; The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala (II). *Diogenes*, 80; (1979), Colours and their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism (I). *Diogenes*, 108; (1980), Colours and their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism (II). *Diogenes*, 109.
2. Gershom Scholem (1963). *Wissenschaft von Judentum einst und jetzt. Judaica*, 1, 147–50.
3. David Joseph Biale (1977). *The Demonic in History: Gershom Scholem and the Revision of Jewish Historiography*. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, p. 171.
4. Gershom Scholem (1982). *MiBerlin LeYerushalaïm*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. [English translation: Gershom Scholem (1980). *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memoirs of My Youth*. New York: Schocken Books.
5. This letter is in an appendix to David Biale (1979), *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 216.
6. Gershom Scholem (1921–2). *Lyrik der Kabbala? Der Jude*, 6, 55.
7. Max Weber (1970). *Economy and Society*. Paris: Plon, pp. 464, 473. [English edition: (1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Ed. Günther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
8. Gershom Scholem (1973). *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*. Revised and augmented edition. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization Series, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
9. Gershom Scholem (1971). Une éducation à judaïsme. *Dispersion et unité*, 11, pp. 153–4, 159.
10. Gershom Scholem (1978). *Fidélité et utopie*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, pp. 53–4.