

Şabbetay Şewi and the Messianic Temptations of Ottoman Jews in the Seventeenth Century According to Christian Armenian Sources

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Introduction

The existence of Armenian documents based on and contemporaneous with the Şabbetay Şewi affair was made known to Hebraists by the Jewish scholar Abraham Galanté. It was a certain B. Nishanean, an Armenian antiquarian bookseller in Istanbul, who brought these documents to Galanté's attention, showing him a poem by Eremia K'ēomiwrčean and a chapter (namely the fifty-seventh) of Arak'el Davrižec'i's *History* in which the story of Şabbetay Şewi was told. The former text, a poem composed of 127 four-line stanzas, was entitled *Yałags dera K'ristosin or kēlti kēlti asi, arareal ew şaradreal Eremiayi dpri Kostandinupōlsewoy, or ēr žamanakakic ew te-sōł iranc*, 1115 t'woj [“On the Pseudo-Messiah called *Geldi-geldi*, [a poem] written and composed by Eremia from Constantinople, contemporaneous and witness to the events, in the year 1115 (1666)"].¹ The latter, an anonymous reworking in prose of Eremia's poem included in the *History* of Arak'el, was titled *Patmut'iwan anc'ic Hrēic azgin ew Sapēt'ay anun jħtin, or asēr t'ē es em k'ristos p'rkič Hrēic azgin ew ard eki ew yaytnečay zi p'rkečic znosa, ew ayloc irakut'eanc, ork' soc'unc hetewec'an* [Story of the events of the nation of the Jews and of the jħut called Sabet'ay who said: “I am the Messiah, savior of the nation of the Jews. Behold, I have come and I have revealed myself to save them”, and [story] of other subsequent events].² Galanté, who did not know Armenian, asked his friend Hamparsum Haladjan (at the time headmaster of the Armenian school “Kinali Ala” in Istanbul) to translate these sources into Turkish and, in 1934-1935, published a French version (based on

¹ Hasmik Sahakyan, *Uš mjnadari hay banastečut'yunč* [Late Medieval Armenian Poetry] 1-2, Erevan 1986-87, vol. 2, pp. 455-76.

² *Patmut'iwan Arak'el vardapeti Dařrižec'woy* [The History of the Vardapet Arak'el of Tabriz], Valaršapat 1884, pp. 651-65. Russian translation: *Istorija stratei evrejsnago naroda i džixuta po imeni Sabeta, kotoryi govorit čto on Xristos, spasitel' evreev, javivšijsja dlja izbažlenija ix, i drugix cobytii posledovavšix za simi*, in X. Kučuk-Ioannesov, “Armjanskaja letopis' o evrejax v Persii XVII veka i o messii Sabbatae-Cevi” [An Armenian Chronicle on Jews in XVIIth Century Persia and on the Messiah Şabbetay Şewi], *Evreiskaja starina* 10 (1918), pp. 76-86. Eastern Armenian translation: *Hrea azgi het teči uneč'ac anc'keri ev Sabet'a anunov breayi, orn asum ēr, t'ē inkē breakan azgi k'ristos p'rkič'n ē ev ard ekel ē ev haytnvel, or prki nranc' ev ayl iroħut'yunneri patmut'yun, or hajordec' sranc'*, in Davrižec'i Arak'el, *Patmut'yun* [History], introduction, translation and comment by Arak'elyan V., Erevan 1988, pp. 510-23. English translation: George A. Bournoutian, *The History of Vardapet Arak'el of Tabriz: Patmut'iwan Arak'el vardapeti Dařrižec'woy*, Costa Mesa, CA 2005, Chp. 57.

Haladjan's Turkish one) of the two texts.³ Some years later, in 1949, still helped by Haladjan, Galanté published a French version of the fifty-seventh chapter of the *Chronicle of Zak'aria K'anak'eric'i*, considering this piece of writing (titled *Anzgamut'iwen Hrēic'* [On the shamelessness of the Jews] and in which is described a Jewish revolt attempt in Thessalonica crushed in bloodshed by the Ottoman authority) inspired by the story of Šabbetay Şewi.⁴ Afterwards, in his monograph on Šabbetay Şewi, Gershom Scholem set forth the few novel elements (if compared to other Jewish and European contemporaneous sources on Sabbatianism) presented by the texts of Eremia and Arak'el, avoiding mentioning the chapter of Zak'aria's *Chronicle* probably because Šabbetay Şewi is never named expressly in it.⁵ To these three texts may be added another short poem of Eremia, titled *Vasn verstin xayatarakut'ean Hrēic'* [Again on the Jewish ignominy, or Another Jewish ignominy] and, as far as I know, not yet translated from classical Armenian.⁶ This poem, a real indictment against Šabbetay Şewi and his messianic pretensions, deals with the consequences of Šabbetay Şewi's failure for the Jewish population, described by Eremia as embittered, frustrated and scorned.

It is not the aim of this article to analyze these texts for the purpose of tracing new elements and information helpful in the study of Sabbatian movement. What appears more interesting is to try to comprehend how these Armenian authors read and understood social and historical events which turned out so tragic for the Judaism of that time, laying emphasis on the different attitudes towards the Jewish people shown by Eremia and Zak'aria. The former, condemning Šabbetay Şewi as a deceiver dispatched by Satan, shows himself to share the pains of the Jews and to sympathize with their plight, even if he declares the superiority of Christianity, whereas the latter seems to feel a slight sense of complacency in describing the harsh suppression of the attempted Jewish revolt in Thessalonica.

Biographical notes

Before offering a comparison between their texts, it would be useful to provide some basic biographical notes on the two Armenian authors, in order better to

³ *Histoire de la nation juive et du nommé tchifout Sabbetai qui disait: «Je suis le sauveur, le Christ des Juifs; me voici, je suis venu et je suis apparu, car je les sauverai (les Juifs)», et d'autres faits qui les suivent (qui suivent ces faits)* in Abraham Galanté, *Nouveaux documents sur Sabbetai Şevi: organisation et us et coutumes de ses adeptes*, Istanbul 1935, pp. 82-107.

⁴ Zak'aria K'anak'eric'i, *Zak'areay sarkawagi Patmagruf'iwn* [Chronicle of Deacon Zak'aria] 1-3, Valaisapat 1870, vol. 2, pp. 113-7. French translation: *L'insolence des Juifs*, in Abraham Galanté, *Recueil de nouveaux documents inédits concernant l'histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, Istanbul 1949, pp. 44-47. Russian translation: *O besydydstbe evreev*, in M.O. Darbinjan-Melikjan, *Zakarii Kanakeri Xronika* [Chronicle of Zak'aria K'anak'eric'i], Moscow 1969, Chp. 57. English translation: *On the Shamelessness of the Jews*, in George A. Bournoutian, *The Chronicle of Deacon Zak'aria of K'anak'er*, Costa Mesa, CA 2004, pp. 229-31.

⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi: The Mystical Messiah*. 1626-1676, Princeton 1973, *passim*.

⁶ Sahakyan, *Uš m̄nudari hay banastekut'yuně*, vol. 2, pp. 476-7.

understand some of the reasons for their completely different positions towards the Jews and Jewish Messianism.

Eremia, who was born in Istanbul in 1637 and died in the same city in 1695, enjoyed from his early youth the patronage of Ambakum Eginli, a leading figure in the Istanbul Armenian community at the time. Besides his profound knowledge of internal Armenian religious and theological subjects, Eremia had a deep proficiency in both Ottoman and Armenian history, in natural and calendrical sciences and in many languages as well (he knew Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Latin and other European languages), although he was not a member of the clergy. His extensive travels throughout the Ottoman Empire and in the Caucasus and his contacts with Europeans and European cultural traditions persuaded Eremia of the importance of a cultural and humanistic revival in Armenian intellectual life inspired by the Enlightenment principles. Eremia, the most prolific Armenian author of this era, wrote poems, histories, chronicles, religious treatises and sermons. He also translated into Armeno-Turkish some of his own works, besides producing translations from Armenian religious and historical literature.⁷

Totally different from Eremia's was Zak'aria's life. Born in K'anak'er, near Erevan, in 1627, Zak'aria entered the monastery of Hovhanavank⁸ at the age of thirteen. Except for his three journeys to Qazvin, Smyrna and Üsküdar, he spent all his life in that monastery, dying in 1699 at the age of 72. Trained in a strictly clerical background, Zak'aria was very well acquainted with Armenian religious and historical writers (e.g. Xorenac'i, P'arpec'i and Eliše) but very probably ignored most of the secular subjects which, along with Armenian ones, played such a great role in Eremia's training. In his *Chronicle*, composed of three books, his goal is to illustrate the suffering Armenians endured in five hundred years of Muslim rule. The name of God appears in almost every chapter, and every event, good or bad, is interpreted as the will of God.⁸ There is no place, in Zak'aria's *Chronicle*, for Eremia's European enlightened ideals and, if Eremia could be seen as a pioneer of the modern Armenian literature, it could be stated that Zak'aria's work is still totally medieval.

The Authors and Armenian Messianism

Notwithstanding their different origin and culture, both Armenian authors were swayed by such issues as the forthcoming end of the world and the coming of the Antichrist, and the story of Şabbetay Şewi contributed to turn their interest and concern towards internal Jewish events. Furthermore, the conversions of Jews to Islam, subsequent to Şabbetay Şewi's conversion, could have strengthened their be-

⁷ See Avedis K. Sanjian and Andreas Tietze (eds.), *Eremya Chelebi Kömürjian's Armeno-Turkish Poem "The Jewish Bride"*, Wiesbaden 1981, pp. 12-21.

⁸ See Bournoutian, *The Chronicle of Deacon Zak'aria of K'anak'er*, pp. 319-21.

lief in the proximity of earth's final days. Indeed, the at the time widespread expectation of the end of the world is well testified by Zak'aria in the Memorial Record which constitutes the last chapter of the second book of his *Chronicle*, written, according to the author

in these final days, when the end of the world is near, when the Armenian people are weak and the Persian people strong, when they oppress and torture us with different excuses and various extortions. In our year of one thousand one hundred forty and twice four (1148/1699).⁹

Eremia himself was convinced that Šabbetay Şewi was the forerunner of the Antichrist, a sign of the last days:

*Zi skzbnac'arin gorcaran gteal,
Or satanayi zgorcn yawart a'real
Ew zzel' azg iwr i lezu arkeal,
Zi hamayn azgik' zHrēays canakeal

Ew hraman p'srkčin yaysmik katareal,
Zi sut margarēk' k'ristosk' yařajeal,
Apa naxēnt'ac' Nērinn haseal,
Ordwoyn korstean karapet yaytnreal*¹⁰

The origin of evil has found the worker
To accomplish devil's work;
His people has spread around his perversity
So that all the nations could mock the Jews.

Fulfilled has been the word of the Savior that
'False prophets and false christ shall rise';
And lo and behold, the precursor of the Antichrist has arrived,
The one who foreshadows the son of perdition has appeared.

However, besides the common conviction of Eremia and Zak'aria in the proximity of the end, the point that should be stressed is the difference in their respective views of and attitudes towards Jews.

Eremia's poem *On the Pseudo-Messiah* (and, consequently, the chapter of Ařak'el *History* based on it) is a very well-informed piece of writing about Šabbetay Şewi. In it, Eremia reports his stay in Ereš Israel, his encounter with Nathan of Gaza, his increasing reputation among the Jewry of Smyrna. He records the disagreement Šabbetay Şewi's deeds and declarations caused among Jews and tells with a wealth of detail about the pseudo-Messiah's imprisonment, trial and final abjuration. But what is especially interesting is the description Eremia gives of the consequences Šabbetay Şewi's messianic pretensions had for Jews' everyday life. Muslims and Christians start mocking the Jews, asking them ceaselessly if their prophet and sage has finally come:

⁹ Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁰ Sahakyan, *Uš m̄nadarı hay banastelčut'yunč*, vol. 2, p. 473, stanzas 110-111.

*Mankunk‘ ēnd mecamecs i hamayn azgi,
Part‘amk‘ ew jamikk‘ i soyn k‘dak i,
Harc‘anen, neñen zazgn hřei:
‘Č‘fut kělti mi, xaxam kělti mi?*

*Kanayk‘ ēnd aranc‘ ew eritasardi,
Mankunk‘ ew ařkunk‘, cerk‘ ēnd tlayi,
Harc‘anen c‘Hřeays ur or handipi:
‘Nawi kělti mi, t‘ēčal kělti mi?*¹¹

Young men and notables of any nation,
The rich men and the mob of that town,
Harassed the people of the Jews asking them:
‘Č‘fut geldi mi? Haham geldi mi?’¹²

Women and men, young men,
Boys and girls, old men and children,
Asked the Jews wherever they met them:
‘Navi geldi mi? Deccal geldi mi?’¹³

After Şabbetay Şewi’s imprisonment the Jews of Istanbul find themselves forced to lock themselves inside their homes and try unsuccessfully to bribe Ottoman authorities into prohibiting people from jeering the Jewish nation:

[...]
*Ew azgn hřeic‘ yarks iwareanc‘ cacki,
Oč‘ xanut‘ nstan ew oč‘ vačari,
Inaxatanac‘ amēnayn azgi.*

*Nēnkič‘ ēr alin kašar’s twin,
Or patwēr toweal xist i hulluxin,
Ayl mi asac‘en Hřeic‘ zkěltin,
Bayc‘ azgn tačkac‘ ayl ews yawelin.*¹⁴

[...]
The people of the Jews hid because of their own misfortunes;
They left their workshops and did not go to the marketplace anymore,
Due to the insults of all the nations.

They offered gifts to the *agha* of Janissaries,
So that he rigorously ordered the *kulluk*
Not to ask the Jews *Geldi?* anymore,
But the Turkish nation started asking it even more.

The widespread display of such mocking behavior towards the Jews is recorded in another work of Eremia as well. In his poem *The Jewish Bride*, in which he tells the story of a Jewish girl who converts to Christianity and marries a Greek-orthodox

¹¹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 459, stanzas 27-28.

¹² Turkish: “Has the Jew come? Has the sage come?”

¹³ Turkish: “Has the prophet come? Has the Antichrist come?”

¹⁴ Sahakyan, *Uš m̄nadari hay banastekut‘yunč*, vol. 2, pp. 460-61, stanzas 36-37.

Albanian baker, he underlines how the news about girl's conversion makes the mob forget at once their refrains on Šabbetay Şewi:

*Bu bavadis ki izhar olunub
 Bu shebrisdanin khalki isbidub
 Chyful kavmii mezeye alub
 Unudub bu dem Geldi Geldiyi*

When this news became known
 The people of the town heard it.
 They derided the Jews,
 Forgetting at once the *Geldi-Geldi*.¹⁵

Afflicted and very much tormented, the Jews make themselves out to be Armenians, in an attempt to avoid being insulted by the mob:

*Ew zkerps Hayoc' i yert'n stac'eal,
 Zi mi ařawel lic'in bayhoyeal,
 Bayc' i xuzołac'n ēin tuganeal,
 I Tačkac' mecac', or aync' bandipeal.*¹⁶

In the street they disguise themselves as Armenians
 To save themselves from being too much insulted;
 But they were fined by the guards,
 By the Turkish authorities they met.

The Armenian author stresses how the Jews are the first victims of what he calls Šabbetay Şewi's "obsession". His criticism of the principles of Judaism notwithstanding, his view of the adversities of the Jewish nation is sympathetic and compassionate. Indeed, when mentioning the role Jewish authorities played in this event (he tells about eighty Jewish sages who disown Šabbetay Şewi), he admits they have tried to persuade the people of Šabbetay Şewi's bad faith, but at the same time, being a member of a minority, he knows full well that a despised minority can be easily carried away by a dream of redemption. Therefore, in Ere-mia's eyes, the Jews are a nation misled, and their only fault consists in the fact that they believed in an insolent deceiver, a man ready to exploit his people's weaknesses:

*Moloreahn erb eres zazgn moleal,
 Kurac'eal xmbic'n, avel yandgneal,
 Ašē: 'Em ordi Astucoy cneal,
 Jez azatut'iwen nardenis haseal!*¹⁷

When the impostor saw that the people had lost their mind
 And the mob had gone blind, he turned even more insolent.
 He said: 'I am the son of God,
 Your redemption has come!'

¹⁵ Sanjian and Tietze, *The Jewish Bride*, p. 116, stanza 132.

¹⁶ Sahakyan, *Uš mjanadari hay banastekut'yunč*, vol. 2, p. 466, stanza 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 463, stanza 51.

This sympathetic attitude towards Jewry can also be explained in the light of Eremia's involvement in the political life of the Armenian *millet*. The author, indeed, knew very well how much inner religious quarrels could damage the welfare and interests of a community, as his agitation against the creation of an independent catholicosate for the Armenian *millet* of the Ottoman Empire clearly shows.¹⁸ He was aware of how a divided minority could draw the attention of the Ottoman authorities and thus put its own existence in jeopardy. Thus, according to Eremia, all the blame for the misfortunes of the Jews must be placed on Şabbetay Şewi, who used his qualities (he is depicted by Eremia as a learned man with a profound knowledge of the Scriptures) only to increase his fame and wealth. Hence the negative judgment the Armenian author passes on the pseudo-Messiah in the speech he has Jewish sages direct at Şabbetay Şewi's followers:

*Sut ē, xabebay, na diwabaxeal,
Č‘uni inč‘ nšan, zor duč‘ yusac‘eal,
Kam zmargarēč‘ banic‘ gušakeal,
Oč‘ tesak‘ zmi inč‘ i nma katareal.*¹⁹

He is a liar, an impostor, a possessed one;
He has not any of the signs you have trusted in;
And of the things the prophets foretold,
None of these we have seen fulfilled in him.

A different attitude altogether, compared with Eremia's, is that shown by Zak‘aria in his *The Shamelessness of the Jews*, the fifty-seventh chapter of the second book of his *Chronicle*. In this book, indeed, Zak‘aria gathers a series of imaginary and fabulous tales (which he claims to have heard from eyewitnesses) of great interest from an ethnographic point of view: cataclysms, celestial signs, dragons, enormous snakes enhance the liveliness of Zak‘aria's narration. On the other hand, the historical value of these tales is very limited, even though it may be assumed that some of them are based on real events.²⁰ Zak‘aria himself seems to admit that his information is mostly unfounded or apocryphal, as this statement would seem to prove:

We shall relate everything [just as] we heard it, both the lies and the truth.²¹

In regard to his account of an attempted Jewish revolt in Thessalonica, which, actually, never took place, Zak‘aria affirms that, even though he already knew the facts, a Greek deacon from Thessalonica named Yeni has given him a more de-

¹⁸ See Vahram T‘orgomean, *Eremia Č‘elepi -i K‘ēōmiwrčean* “Stampōloy Patmut‘iān” [The “History of Istanbul” of Eremia Č‘elepi K‘ēōmiwrčean] 1-3, Vienna 1913-38, vol. 1, pp. 161-72, and Nersēs Akinean, *Eremia Č‘elepi K‘ēōmiwrčean: keank‘n ew grakan gorcunēut‘iānē* [Eremia Č‘elepi K‘ēōmiwrčean: life and works], Vienna 1933, pp. 46-49.

¹⁹ Sahakyan, *Uš mňadari hay banastēčut‘yunč*, vol. 2, p. 465, stanza 61.

²⁰ Bournoutian, *The Chronicle of Deacon Zak‘aria of K‘anak‘er*, pp. 321-3.

²¹ Ibid., p. 26.

tailed version of the events. Zakaria tells how the Jews of Thessalonica, fallen on hard times, decide to appoint a king among themselves, in the hope of regaining lost welfare and wealth. They decide in favor of a certain Solon, a good-looking, wise and learned man, well-versed in Scripture. Clothed in a white tunic, crowned with a three-peaked crown and with a golden sceptre in his hand, Solon is worshipped and revered by the Jews of Thessalonica. Then the Jews appoint judges and prefects, set up a regular army and send the following letter to all the Jews of the land:

Listen, all you Jewish people. Live according to the laws of Moses, for by the grace of God we have begun to rule here and plan to destroy all the Muslims. The Christians shall pay us tribute: the Armenians ten and the Greeks eight gold pieces. Be ready. [...] Fall on them, kill them, and make slaves of their women and children. The moment you accomplish this, we shall be one body and soul. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. The Messiah will then come and shall settle among us.²²

The dream of redemption is shattered as a consequence of an issue that arises between Solon and a certain Ovsē while the Jewish king is dividing all the Ottoman cities among Jewish authorities. Ovsē, who receives the city of Bursa, refuses it asking for Adrianople, his home town instead. Sołon does not want to hear complaints and orders his followers to club Ovsē before chasing him away. Ovsē, however, goes to the *pasha* and reveals the conspiracy to him. The suppression of the revolt is cruel and harsh: Sołon is tortured and condemned to death and the *pasha* issues an edict in which he orders Muslims and Christians to slaughter the Jews, to make slaves of their children, to rape their women and to seize their belongings. The Jews, annihilated, convert to Islam and mix with the Christians, hiding in their homes after having given the Christians their own possessions.

According to Galanté, this Armenian text could be proof of the impressive influence the Šabbetay Şewi affair had on the unlearned classes.²³ Actually, the story presents features typical of a folk tale, but I suppose not only Šabbetay Şewi could have inspired it. During the seventeenth century the Jewish community of Thessalonica, once very well off, endured many adversities and misfortunes, a strong economic recession and several tax increases.²⁴ These factors, combined with the fact that the town, at the end of the seventeenth century, became one of the main Sabbatian centers following the mass conversion of about 300 Jewish families to Islam, could have contributed to originate a story such as Zakaria's. Indeed, the malicious delight about Pseudo-Messiah's defeat, the satisfaction for the Jews' economic misfortunes and a widespread sense of revenge against them could have generated among Christians such a tale inspired by seventeenth-century events

²² Ibid., pp. 229-30.

²³ Galanté, *Recueil de nouveaux documents inédits*, p. 44.

²⁴ Joseph Nehama, *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique. Tome V. Période de stagnation – La tourmente sabbatéenne (1593-1669)*, Thessaloniki 1959, pp. 73-76, and id., *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique. Tomes VI et VII*, Thessaloniki 1978, p. 135.

with the Jewish communities of Smyrna and Thessalonica, one (or some) of which tales Zak'aria recorded and probably reworked. Furthermore, some Sabbatian elements featured in the story could result from Zak'aria's travel to Smyrna. Unlike Eremia in his poem, Zak'aria in his narration refrains from any kind of explicit judgment of the Jews or from Christian apologetics, but his attitude towards the Jews comes out clearly from the title. All the Jews are shameful: their insolence and their shamelessness caused the curses that befall them. Their desire for supremacy, which drove them to appoint a king among themselves in order to rule the world, generated the misfortunes Zak'aria seems to record with complacency:

[The *pasha*] ordered them [the Muslims] to cut the tongue, nose, lips, ears, fingers, hands, legs, and the testicles of the *habam*. [...] They [the Muslims] killed a third of the Jewish population that day. [...] They [the Jews] thus suffered a pitiful death. The twelve maidens that they guarded for their messiah, were taken to the *pasha* and were publicly dishonored. The *khondkar* also ordered his subordinates to heavily tax the Jews in every part of his domain, so that they would become poor and cease being insolent.²⁵

This is, indeed, the main difference between Eremia's and Zak'aria's views of Jewish Messianism. According to the former, the scorn for the Jews and the Jews' despised condition made them blind to Şabbetay Şewi's messianic pretensions. Eremia, actually, does not consider them shameful, but rather deceived. Zak'aria, on the other hand, who did not experience personally the reality of the Ottoman *millet* and records folk-tales without caring about their truthfulness, seems to state that Messianism is for the Jews nothing but an excuse to disguise their own desire for dominance.

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²⁵ Bournoutian, *The Chronicle of Deacon Zak'aria of K'anak'er*, p. 231.

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