

# The Legitimacy of Jewish Modernity: Gershom Scholem's Critique and Reconstruction of Jewish Enlightenment and Science of Judaism from the Spirit of Mystical Gnosticism

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## I Introduction

"It is in fact a new Bible [...] That's what it is. To write a Jewish Zarathustra [...] whoever could do such a thing." (Scholem 1995: 54)<sup>1</sup> Thus the diary entry of the young Scholem on November 16, 1914 in reference to his Nietzsche lecture, intoning a motif central to his later engagement with Jewish mysticism: the motif of life. "But that someone experiences life – that is the rarest and most unheard of phenomenon [...] that life might appear to us in our sleep or in broad daylight in a vision: that would indeed be a mystical experience." (ibid: 227)

In fact, in his diaries Scholem formulates the first approaches to a history of Jewish mysticism, which he initially depicts as a combination of general philosophy and Jewish mysticism but is already anticipating as a transition from Nietzsche to Buber – i.e. from philosophy to mysticism – which he will develop into an inner-Jewish history of mysticism. "I would choose Buber because through him the albeit unrepresented Jewish mysticism would be addressed and he is [= compared to Nietzsche] the specifically mystical manifestation." (ibid: 228)

Not only will Scholem go on to correct his position on Martin Buber in the course of formulating this history, but the basic motifs – from the idea of life to

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1 The following considerations are an elaboration of my essay: "Sein eigenes Gesetz sein... – Politisch – theologische Voraussetzungen und Konsequenzen der Theorie der Kabbala der symbolischen Formen bei Gershom Scholem" (Schmidt 2009; cf. Schmidt 2000). All translations of quotations in the text are my own.

the reconstruction of Jewish mysticism as an answer to the modern philosophy of life – are already manifest in these drafts.

This essay will first demonstrate how Scholem, in the crisis situation of modern Jewish culture, reformulates the conception of life encapsulated in post-Nietzschean philosophy (cf. Simmel 1918, 2003a; Bergson 1916)<sup>2</sup> into the messianic conception of life in Jewish mysticism. Secondly, it will describe the significance of the messianic mystical life for a comprehensive critique of modern Jewish philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Science of Judaism. Thirdly, it then shows how Scholem later revises this critique by integrating the conception of life into a theory of mystical symbolism. Fourthly, if the post-Nietzschean philosophy of life stands as the model for Scholem's messianic mysticism of Jewish life in Sabbatianism, which motivates the political-theological critique of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Science of Judaism, then the theory of Kabbalistic symbolism appears as a rehabilitation of the (neo-Kantian) philosophy of the Enlightenment, whose affinity to Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer 1925)<sup>3</sup> is unmistakable. We are talking about a return to the idea of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Science of Judaism in the sense of an alternative, ethical messianism of pluralistic forms of life based on the theory of the mystical symbol. Fifthly, in this manner Scholem is actually seeking to reestablish the legitimacy of the Jewish modern era from the spirit of Gnosticism, which opposes any political-theological claim to sovereignty over tradition. Sixthly, in contrast to Hans Blumenberg's well-known construction of the *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Blumenberg 1996)<sup>4</sup> as an overcoming of Gnosticism, Scholem shapes his implicit justification of Jewish modernity as an implicit dialogue between philosophy and mysticism, drawing on the essence of Gnosticism.

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2 Note Scholem's sharp criticism of Simmel: "This man has succeeded in dissolving himself entirely into a terminological system" (Scholem 1995: 385).

3 In the diaries, Scholem's statements about Cassirer are, of course, negative: "All these colloquia on the history of philosophy, all this business about the history of philosophy is completely unnecessary and pointless to me" (ibid: 424).

4 As far as I can see, Scholem does not make any explicit statements about Blumenberg and his thesis of modernity as a successful second overcoming of Gnosis. However, Scholem's reestablishment of modernity from the spirit of Gnosticism seems like a critical response to Blumenberg, especially in the context of the debate the latter initiated on secularization and political theology.

## II Life as a Mystical-Messianic State of Emergency

At the heart of Scholem's studies on Jewish mysticism we always find the extreme, borderline, and exceptional case of the suspension or destruction of the symbolic-halachic order through the messianic theology of Sabbatianism. This destruction reveals itself above all in the most radical forms of its antinomian messianism, which – as in the case of the Frankists – reveals the vitalist core of this theology in the “longing of its adherents for a renewal of the life of the nation” (Scholem 1963a: 90). “This way of life [...] is the way of nihilism, which means to free oneself from all laws, rules and religions, to discard any guise and to despise everything.” (ibid: 94)

For Scholem, this recourse to Sabbatian theology always leads to a diagnosis of a radical crisis in the Jewish way of life in modern secularized culture, which he interprets as a direct consequence of this messianic and destructive state of emergency. The idea of an unbound freedom of life forms the core of the messianic strategies of the radical Sabbatians, who actually discredit the law of Jewish tradition – in remarkable kinship with the apostle Paul – as the law of death. “The place to which we are going suffers no law, for all this comes from the side of death, but we are going to life.” (ibid: 98) In these words Jacob Frank proclaims his messianic politics to his fellow messianic comrades-in-arms, while Scholem sums up the teaching thus: “Frank taught the necessity of dispelling all ‘guises’ and repudiating everyone in order to find the anarchic life in the depths of the destruction of all laws [...]” (Scholem 1936: 11)

The Sabbatian messianism and the mystical nihilism that developed from this messianism not only describe the historical expression of an absolute state of emergency and a radical crisis of the traditionally Jewish – i.e. religious-national way of life – but also “disclose” a fundamental structural problem of religious tradition in general, which Scholem repeatedly defines as “the formlessness of the original experience” or as the “mystical form of the formless.” (Scholem 1973a: 20–21)

Insofar as the messianic destruction of the halachic order is directed against the God of the legal order deemed obsolete as the God of the extant global era of exile, and invokes the genuine – still hidden – “completely other” God beyond this global era, the destruction highlights this fundamentally structural problem. This destruction is actually a dialectic consequence of the intrinsically “formless” absolute, its “excessive transcendence,” so to speak, insofar as the hidden, unknown, nameless, and unrepresentable – i.e. formless – God reveals himself as a Being beyond thought and language. The completely

other God presents Himself then as the “Nothing” that is unattainable by language and thought, which in Sabbatian-messianic practice strikes outwards as a destructive and negativistic power. In other words, the Sabbatian state of emergency proves to be the revelation of the genuine – i.e. unknowable – God before the traditionally positive representations of the God of the law. It thus reveals the fundamentally Gnostic structure of the deity at the moment when the symbolic order collapses.

“The formlessness of the original experience can also lead to the dissolution of all form in interpretation. It is this perspective, destructive yet not unrelated to the mystic’s original impulse, that allows us to recognize the borderline case of the nihilistic mystic as that of an all-too-legitimate legacy of mystical after-shocks” (ibid).

### III Life between the Philosophy of Life and Heretical Mysticism

Before Scholem went on to develop this symbolic state of emergency into an expression of the crisis of modernity with its theological prerequisites for a comprehensive theory of kabbalistic symbolism, he referred this basic structure back to the then current historical context of the crisis of culture in the philosophy of life:

(1) At first glance, the radical-messianic Kabbalah seems like a transposition of the prevailing philosophy of life after Nietzsche, which for its part – as in the case of Georg Simmel, for instance – understands itself as a reflex to the crisis of the Enlightenment and the so-called “tragedy of culture” (cf. Simmel 1918, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). The forms of culture created by life – according to Simmel – would ultimately always have to solidify in such a way that life would have to turn against these forms rendered stable by reason and law and blow them apart. In fact, the famous Nietzschean dualism of Dionysian life and Apollonian form adopted by Simmel appears in Scholem as a template for the theological dualism of the two Gnostic deities, which in this case aims to destroy Jewish enlightened culture and its expressions in the Science of Judaism.

(2) Drawing on the categories of this metaphysical constellation of Jewish Gnosis, Scholem undertakes his radical critique of modern Jewish philosophy and Enlightenment, the Science of Judaism, and the Jewish Reform movement of his time as one-sided constellations of the rationalization, formalization, and spiritualization of Jewish life.

(3) The Science of Judaism as an epochal event of a fundamental repression of the (national-religious) life thus serves Scholem at the same time as a reconstruction of the genesis of the Jewish Enlightenment in the 18th century from the spirit of nihilistic messianism. In this sense, the Jewish Enlightenment of the 18th century appears like a mirror of the neo-Kantian Enlightenment at the beginning of 20th century: while the first emerged from the crisis of Sabbatian mysticism of life and its destruction, the latter will face a destruction through the philosophy of life and radical mysticism of life.

The immanent crisis of messianic theology is thus not only an expression of the crisis of the messianic idea of freedom as it is supposed to be represented in the symbol of life, but can hardly hide its simultaneous origin in the philosophy of modern life.

The messianic freedom in salvation and the substance of Enlightenment, which concerns the essence of this freedom, crystallize around the symbol of life. The mystic encounters life in the mystical experience. This life [...] is that which grows and changes freely and is not shackled by any law or authority, the unrestrained outpouring and the incessant annihilation of all forms that emerge from it, which determine this concept of life. (Scholem 1973a: 451)

This depiction of the immanent relationships of radical mysticism actually appears like a transposition of the then prevalent life philosophy, which tried to portray Nietzsche's dualism of Dionysian life and Apollonian form as a cultural philosophy and sociology – i.e. as an existential ontology. Scholem not only transposes the mystical category of life from Nietzsche's antithesis of the two mythical deities Dionysus and Apollo into the language of Jewish Gnosis as a dualism of the two deities, the gods of life and of law. As in the philosophy of life, where the discovery of life as the ultimate reason for being becomes the goal of an eschatological liberation of life from the rational shackles of culture, so the heretical life of Jewish mysticism characterizes the core of messianic practice and therewith the beginning and end of the messianic politics of the redemption from captivity in exile.

From Henry Bergson's vitalistic metaphysics (Bergson 1949) through to Georg Simmel's philosophy of life and Ludwig Klages' critique of logocentrism (Klage 1929/1932, 1930), life is elevated to a philosophical prime category that protests against the rational constitution of culture in order to free itself from its ossified forms of life. Bergson describes this uprising as a "coup d'état" of life against its symbolically rational encrustation, citing the "sudden appear-

ance of the will” (Bergson 1949: 132–133)<sup>5</sup> to indicate the possible decisionist politics of this metaphysics of life. In any case, life designates the absolute ground before any symbolic-legal order; it is the event of the “break[s] with the symbols” (Bergson 1916: 49), which reveals itself only to intuition or a kind of “intellectual intuition.”

Georg Simmel, following Nietzsche and Bergson, also elevated life to the basic principle of his cultural philosophy. Life creates from itself the forms it needs to live, but which very soon, when confronted with the dynamics of life, appear alien, as laws, limits, and contradictions. Apparently, Simmel understood above all the neo-Kantian philosophy of culture, with its orientation towards the law of reason as the principle of form, limits, and opposites, and leading on from there, life as a tragic conflict in which limits, form, and shape are finally swept aside.

To put it as briefly and generally as possible, it is this: that life at the level of the spirit, as its unmediated expression, creates objective structures in which it expresses itself, and which in turn, as its vessels and forms, want to absorb in themselves its other currents, while their ideal and historical fixity, circumscription and rigidity sooner or later come into opposition and antagonism with the eternally variable, boundary-blurring, continuous life. (Simmel 1918: 160–161)

Life as the ground and counterinstance of form, law, and symbol thus becomes first of all a metaphysical prelude to the great liberation of the intrinsically Dionysian or anarchic being, which will finally “burst” all boundaries and fetters of form, as, for example, in the contemporary avant-garde art, where the genius of life expression – think of Wassily Kandinsky, Arnold Schönberg, and Hugo Ball – dares to suspend the traditional constitution of art. Against the various constitutions that life gives itself in the shape of philosophy, art, law, and politics, the subject, genius, and mystic of life reveals itself in a teleology and eschatology of life, which breaks its way to reality in the sense of a fulfillment and unveiling of life as the “coming of the kingdom.” The messianism of life oscillating between erotic-Dionysian and political anarchy thus follows the sovereign decision of a Messiah who incarnates the originally anarchic

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5 “Das plötzliche Auftreten des Willens ist wie ein Staatsstreich, den unser Verstand vorausahnt [...]”

Dionysian reality of life of the community of believers when he suspends the legal order and constitution (cf. Benz 1964; Taubes 1947; Löwith 1983; Lubac 1979; Moeller van den Bruck 1931; Bloch 1974).

This messianic political theology that has always made itself felt in the philosophy of life and the mystical life is revealed here. Scholem used it in order to protest against rationalist Science of Judaism and its foundations in the Jewish Enlightenment and to avenge the symptoms of a fundamental “forgetting of life,” to which they have given rise. At the moment, when mysticism becomes practical and political in the messianic subject, it demands – in defiance of the strategies of self- and life-abandonment through reason, law, and morality – the opposite – i.e. the true accomplishment of the redemption of life and self and their national-religious community here and now. The Science of Judaism in its rationalist form, according to Scholem, represents the Jew who “wants to liberate himself from himself” so that “the Science of Judaism is the burial ceremony for him, something like the liberation from the yoke that weighs on him.” (Scholem 1997: 8)

In a paradoxical way, Scholem connects the mystical messianic longing of life for redemption with the longing for death in the Science of Judaism, in Reform Judaism, and in the Jewish Enlightenment as a whole, insofar as the rationalization and spiritualization of the Jewish way of life is actually nothing other than the “other side” of the longing for redemption, the completion, so to speak, of the destructive energy inherent in messianic mysticism. The Jewish Enlightenment and the modern Jewish culture of reform and secularization are supposed to represent – thanks to a retrospective projection of the life-mystical criticism of the neo-Kantian Enlightenment – the late configuration of the Sabbatian practice of salvation itself, which is no longer conscious of itself, the form of its activist theology rendered moribund, as it were, by reason and law.

With his recourse to the mysticism of life, Scholem, like life philosophy in the 1920s, aims at a comprehensive destruction of (Jewish) philosophy and Enlightenment in its current form as the forgetting and repression of life, in order to use this destruction as a starting point to trace the historical genesis of the Enlightenment out of the crisis of Jewish theology in the era of its mystical messianic revelation. Herein belongs Scholem’s fascinating reconstruction of the biography of the Frankist Moses Dobruschka and his connections to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (cf. Scholem 1974b), which, as it turns out, cannot really hide the fact that there is little historical evidence

per se for the comprehensive inner connection between Sabbatianism and Enlightenment that he suggests.

In any case, the two tendencies – the rationalization of Jewish theology on the one hand and the mystical foundation in theology of life on the other – are combined in Scholem's addition of the heretical theology of Abraham Miguel Cardoso (Scholem 1963b).<sup>6</sup> By means of this theology, the Kabbalah researcher actually performs a kind of seamless transposition of the philosophy of life into the Gnostic dualism of the two deities, in order henceforth to disregard the life-philosophical presupposition of his own historical diagnosis in the sense of an entirely immanent Jewish intellectual history constructed on its mystical foundation alone.

Scholem, in order to destroy the rational destruction of life by Jewish Science and Enlightenment via this immanent historical construction of Jewish mysticism, puts on the mask of the “anarchist heretic” himself, so to speak, which means: he reduces the philosophical Enlightenment to the life denied by it as the true original principle of religion and nation. Like the Sabbatian, he descends into the depths of the “Sitra Achra” of Enlightenment culture in order to unveil, behind the rational way of life of Kantian law and reason, the active anarchic principle of the lawlessness of true life. This life always reveals itself as the true inner side of its alienated outer form – that is, it is the hidden aspect of the true God of life, that has been suppressed by the God of law and reason. Cardoso's distinction between the exilic God of reason, which derives the world and history from the *prima causa*, and the true God of life, as revealed in the Torah, codifies Scholem's transposition of Nietzsche's aesthetic dualism (Dionysus and Apollo) in the Gnostic dualism of these two deities, in order to undertake from here the methodical destruction of the modern philosophical culture of Judaism as Enlightenment, Science and Reform, described now from the perspective of a *Secessio Judaica* and only immanent Jewish historiography as phenomena of a catastrophic loss of self. This change of perspective results in a new dialectic constellation of the crisis:

(1) When Scholem interprets the Enlightenment, Reform and Science of Judaism as the final articulations of Jewish mysticism, as its heretical emptying, then these phenomena, with their political-cultural effects of emancipation and assimilation, demonstrate a complex system of crisis phenomena that develop as a result of this mysticism.

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6 First published in: “Der Jude”, Sonderheft zu Martin Bubers 50. Geburtstag, Berlin 1928, pp. 123–139. Cf. Scholem 1974a, with original texts from Cardoso.



(2) In this way, the crisis of modern Jewish culture is in fact “enlightened” from an inner-Jewish context (= of Sabbatian messianism), but the phenomenon of the crisis is at the same time shifted back into the immanent Jewish history – i.e. the crisis as such is an inner-Jewish crisis and thus requires a more precise analysis of the crisis of mysticism in order to understand “the saving element” alongside “the growing danger.”

(3) Here Scholem uses the elaboration of the mystical context of the crisis in the mysticism of life to develop a theory of the Kabbalah from the spirit of the problem of its symbolism as revealed by the crisis, which enables a comprehensive restoration of Jewish culture and its history. The most interesting point of this Kabbalah of symbolic forms is, of course, that it actually presents itself as a reconstruction of the neo-Kantian Enlightenment, specifically of Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Thus, it is already revising the sharp division between philosophy and mystical theology of the first phase again in the sense of a new relationship – however implicit – between the two.

#### **IV From Mystic Experience to a Theory of the Mystical Symbol: Authority and Mystical Interpretation**

As we have seen, the messianic destruction of the halachic order of symbols and the ineffable way of being of God initially form the extreme poles and correlates of Scholem’s diagnosis of the mystical crisis as it emerges from a post-Sabbatian perspective translated from a post-Nietzschean philosophy of life. But the original “formlessness” of the mystical experience, which becomes evident in Sabbatian messianism, is itself always a historically mediated constellation, whose possibility itself remains to be explained from within the logic of the history of mysticism. The messianic break with the history of the exilic life order is itself mediated historically and thus as a historical phenomenon within the history of mysticism – i.e. it is to be reconstructed from the dialectic of the tradition of revelation founded by Moses and practiced in the tradition of commentary and interpretation.

Scholem now develops a model of tradition that starts from Moses’ revelation and confirms it in tradition through mystical experience – i.e. formulates it “in a language, in images and concepts that were created before him and for him” (Scholem 1973a: 16). But this situation begins to change when the mystic feels inclined to modify this language in terms of an emergent crystallizing “own experience,” so that the given language and his own experience begin to

diverge. This creates a “crack” or a “tear” in the language of the tradition, so that one’s own experience of divine being and the language mediated by the tradition (with its images) are no longer congruent, and a first awareness of utterability and thus of the difference between sign and signified emerges. “It is precisely this element of the indefinable, of the absence, of the capacity for expression, that constitutes the greatest difficulty of the mystical experience. It cannot be translated simply and completely into clearly defined images or concepts.” (ibid: 19–20)

The revelation of God, His speech, or His voice are increasingly presented as the absolute meaning before the word that circumscribes any concrete meaning. Thus, the initial tear widens into an abyss between the word of God and its meaning articulated by the mystic. God in His excessive transcendence and as the absolute and ineffable origin of language now remains radically meaningless. “The word of God must be infinite [...] the absolute word is meaningless in itself, but it is pregnant with meaning.” (ibid: 22) With the emerging awareness of this symbolic difference, however, not only is the infinite meaning of God’s word in the biblical text newly forged and deepened, so that in its depths the text discloses infinite meaning, but now the mystic himself gains also a completely new competence. He is “no longer just a factor [...] in the process of upholding tradition, but also in the process that develops it and drives it forward.” (ibid: 17) Beyond the difference between the pre-established order of symbols and the concrete situation of interpretation, mystical subjectivity is constituted through the modification of this given order as “own experience,” which in case of doubt will invent new symbols and rules. If the mystical subjectivity is initially the effect of the semiotic difference that settles in the folds of language, its actual potential is realized only in the case where one’s own experience fully emancipates itself from the given structure of language, and turns against this order of symbols and laws that has been pre-stabilized by tradition. The mystic suspends the legal and symbolic order in the name of “his own law” (ibid: 20) – i.e. in the name of precisely this own, messianically founded experience.

This moment of mystic and messianic realization is thus made possible by the heretical act of interpretation as an internal historical event: It is the hour of birth of the Jewish mystical subject, now sovereign, rising above legal authority in a messianic state of exception. In this way, Jewish tradition becomes the event of its self-overcoming, which derives the sovereign subject from the absolute being of God, which in its excessive transcendence and formlessness verily reveals itself as nothing and thus in its potentially destructive power.

Sabbatai Zvi, the mystical Messiah, represents thus the fundamental epochal change from the objective legal order to the sovereignty of the subject, which the political philosopher Leo Strauss describes for modernity as a whole (cf. Strauss 2001). In place of the sovereignty of the law, which gives authority to the subject, comes the sovereignty of the subject, which now overrules the law or establishes it as the work of the subject. Even if the Enlightenment neutralizes the power of the sovereign through the law of the subject's reason, this law, based only on the subject's reason, loses its effective power at the first profound conflict over the meaning of the law and is potentially overruled by a sovereign verdict. Leo Strauss therefore intended that only a law that is valid above all subjective power – divine or platonic – can overcome this cyclical logic of subjective power and law.

But Scholem's real point is this: Instead of looking for a way that could restore the lost objective validity of the rule of law for the modern age and overcome the age of subjectivity, he takes this modern crisis as the point of departure for the understanding of the whole of tradition and of the ancient, objective law ordained by God in the Law of Moses. Whereas Moses until now seemed to possess an authority directly from the law decreed by God, Sabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank stand for the subjectively mystical experience that undermines this authority and thus reminds us of its own formless origin, now Moses' law is itself understood as function of a subjective interpretation of the ineffable voice of God.

In this sense, Scholem presents a Hasidic Midrash of the revelation of Sinai as a back-projection of this idea of interpretation onto the Mosaic revelation:

In a most succinct and impressive way this whole problem of authority and mysticism is summed up in a saying handed down by one of the great saints of Hasidism, Rabbi Mendel Torum of Rymanow (died 1814), a saying which I shall here endeavour to interpret. What, it may in fact be asked, is truly divine about the revelation as it was given to Israel at Sinai, a revelation which, well understood, is an exceedingly sharply defined piece of doctrine and a call to the human community, a revelation that is extremely articulated in all its elements and in no way represents a mystical solution that remains infinitely interpretable? Already in the Talmud there is a discussion about this question of Israel's experience in receiving the Ten Commandments. What actually could they hear, and what did they hear? According to some of them, all the commandments came to them through the unbroken medium of the divine voice. According to others, they only heard the first Two Commandments – "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall have no other gods before

Me" (Ex.20:2/3) – directly from God's mouth. [...] According to Rabbi Mendel of Rymanow [...] not even the first two commandments come from an immediate revelation to the whole community of Israel. Everything that was revealed to them, what Israel heard, was nothing but that aleph with which the first commandment begins in the Hebrew text of the Bible, the aleph of the word "anochi", "I". This seems to me a most remarkable and thought-provoking sentence. In Hebrew, the consonant aleph represents nothing less than the laryngeal onset of the voice [...], which precedes a vowel at the beginning of a word. The aleph thus represents the element from which every articulated sound originates, and in fact the Kabbalists have always understood the consonant aleph as the spiritual root of all other letters, which in its essence encompasses the entire alphabet and thus all elements of human speech. To hear the aleph is really akin to nothing, it represents the transition to all audible speech, and it certainly cannot be said that it conveys in itself a specific sense of a clearly defined character. With his bold statement about the actual revelation, Rabbi Mendel reduced this revelation to a mystical revelation, that is, to a revelation that in itself was infinitely meaningful, but without any specific meaning. It represented something that, in order to establish religious authority, had to be translated into human language, and that is what Moses did in the sense of that saying. Any statement that justifies authority would therefore only be a valid and high-ranking, but necessarily still human, interpretation of something that "transcends" it. (Scholem 1973a: 46–48)

The final consequence with which Scholem summarizes this logic here – that "it [is] the mystical experience that gives birth to and releases authority" – must, however, be described as his own interpretation and conclusion, insofar as the Torah itself takes as its starting point that the people of Sinai actually only "saw the voices" (!), while Moses spoke with God face to face. The idea that Israel only heard the onset of a voice is therefore highly compatible with the very traditional view that only Moses received and understood the revelation directly, while the people could only hear a more or less vague sound or noise. In this respect, Scholem goes beyond Mendel Rymanov's own conclusion, as if, with this Hasidic version, the tradition as a whole should now be understood as a work of interpretation. All the more significant in this context is the statement by the theologian Franz Rosenzweig, which Scholem quotes here in an accompanying footnote: "Revelation [...] has only itself as its immediate content, with *va-yered* [= he descended, in Exodus 19:20] it is actually already finished, the interpretation begins with *va-yedaber* [= he spoke, Exodus: 20:1], not to mention '*Anochi*'

[= the 'T' at the beginning of the Ten Commandments]." (ibid: 265, emphasis added) In any case, through Rosenzweig's understanding, the principle of interpretation would indeed have been projected back onto Moses' revelation, so that it would have been elevated to the last principle of traditional revelation as well. The crisis that broke out in Sabbatianism could thus be overcome through this backward projection onto tradition.

The full implications of this back-projection, however, emerge from Scholem's second implicit conclusion. In other words, the whole point of this now hermeneutically and semiotically grounded theory of symbolism lies not only in this "first" back-projection of heretical suspension onto the founding act of religious authority by Moses, but also precisely in the consequence for the authority of the one who suspends the symbolic constitution in the name of a new messianic revelation. The very claim to absoluteness of the heretical subject himself is now defused and challenged in his claim to exclusivity by the anchoring of his "own experience" in the nameless "nothingness" of revelation that is to determine his decision. Both claims to absolute authority, then, the orthodox one to the objectivity of the law, and the modern one to the absolute, antinomian subjectivity, are rejected by the back-projection of the heretical crisis onto the whole of tradition. Both are always already relativized as interpretations of the meaningless beyond any absolute grasp.

Thus, through the historicizing of the crisis, Scholem succeeds in achieving a reintegration of the messianic revolution, achieving in fact a considerable limitation of damage to the catastrophe of the destruction of the Jewish way of life, as Scholem laments for modern Jewish culture in the shape of the Enlightenment, Reform, and Science.

## V The Reconstruction of the Enlightenment as an Ethics of the Kabbalistic Symbol

If the early Scholem initially inscribed the post-Nietzschean philosophy of life in a mysticism critical of reason and the Enlightenment, the later integration of the mysticism of messianic life aims at a comprehensive theory of symbols that finally ties in with the neo-Kantian philosophy of the Enlightenment, as set out by Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In other words, Scholem's Kabbalah of symbolic forms ultimately represents a rehabilitation of the idea of a comprehensive Jewish Enlightenment that dialectically inscribes life and form in an ethics of pluralistic life forms.

Georg Simmel's philosophy of life already fashioned life in a dialectical relationship to the form that emerged from it, and thus always tried to overcome in his own way the "state of emergency" of an intrinsically formless life. His later philosophy of life appears like a Nietzschean concept of life from a re-stored Hegelianism – i.e. he thinks of life in its dialectic as a power that always reaches beyond itself, which can never be fixed or finalized in an ultimate constellation, but is always articulated in a new constellation (cf. Simmel 1918: 160–170). Life in itself is transcendence and thus always presents itself in an open structure.

In this context, Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1925) appears above all to have given the impetus for reformulating the problematic of life and form, mysticism and symbol, myth and concept. The affinity between Cassirer's and Scholem's theory of symbols is unmistakable. Cassirer formulates this problem as follows:

The pure immediacy of life [...] can [...] be seen entirely or not at all: It does not enter into the representations that we seek from it, but remains as something fundamentally different, opposed to and outside of them. The original content of life cannot be grasped in any form of representation, but only in pure intuition. [...] The decision is whether we want to understand the substance of the spirit in its pure originality [...] – or whether we want to devote ourselves to the fullness of the diversity of these mediations. (ibid: 48–49)

In fact, Cassirer in this context develops a theory of the genesis of symbolic consciousness from its originally mythical constellation, i.e. the supposed identity of symbol and symbolized in myth. The mystic becomes aware of the fundamental difference between the symbol and the symbolized through the modification of his own experience compared to the shaping of tradition, in order to recognize the fundamental legitimacy of the various symbol orderings through this difference.

It [= the myth] cannot reveal and express itself in any other way than in it [= its own world of images] – but the further it progresses, the more it begins to become something "external" to this expression, for which its actual expressive powers are not entirely adequate. Here lies the basis of a conflict that gradually becomes more and more acute and which, while splitting the mythical consciousness within itself, at the same time truly reveals its *raison d'être* and depth in this split. [...] The progress consists in the fact that certain basic traits, certain spiritual determinations of the earlier stages are not only

developed and expanded, but that they are renounced, that they are verily absolutely destroyed. (ibid: 290, 289)

In other words, the crisis of the mythical symbol is always faced with the alternative of a destruction of the symbol, destructive to both life and culture, or its pluralization in a hermeneutic ethics of the symbol, as Cassirer finds modeled in Nicholas Cusanus' *Theology of the Coincidentia Oppositorum*:

The content of faith itself, insofar as it is always and necessarily human conceptual content, has become a "conjectura" [= supposition]: It is subject to the condition that one being and one truth can only be expressed in the form of "otherness". No single form of belief can escape this otherness, which is based in fact and in the essence of human knowledge itself. So now there is no longer a generally valid and generally binding "orthodoxy" opposed to a plethora of mere "heterodoxies", but the otherness that is heteronomous recognized as the basic element of doxa itself. The truth, which in its essence remains unassailable and incomprehensible, can only be known in its otherness. [...] From this basic point of view, Cusanus has constructed a truly magnificent "tolerance", which is anything but indifference. Because the majority of forms of belief are not just tolerated as a mere empirical coexistence, but are demanded speculatively and epistemologically justified. (Cassirer 1994: 31–32)

With this recourse to Nikolaus Cusanus, in whom Cassirer sees in fact the founding philosopher of an alternative and pluralistic version of modernity, the horizon opens up to a symbol theory beyond its classic modern alternative between Hegel's absolute identity of self-consciousness and an absolute vitalism of the purely intuitive and therefore destructive life of radical life philosophy. Cassirer here is actually presenting an ethics of pluralistic forms of life as a model for a different Enlightenment, which apparently found its mystically underscored reformulation in Scholem's reflections on the Kabbalah and its symbolic forms.

Like the philosophy of Cassirer's symbolic forms, the Kabbalah of symbolic forms postulates an original "otherness" in the formlessness of the original experience and thus enables an analogous constellation of plural interpretations, which in itself already establishes an ethics. In fact, Scholem not only demands a coexistence of the divergent mystical forms of life for Jewish mysticism, but he also always makes them a requirement for the interreligious context. In this sense, he poses the question:

[W]hy [...] actually does a Christian mystic repeatedly see Christian visions and not those of a Buddhist. Indeed, why does a Buddhist see the figures of his own pantheon and not Jesus or the Madonna? Why does a Kabbalist meet the prophet Elijah on his way to Enlightenment and not a figure from a foreign world? The answer, of course, is that the expression of their experiences translates immediately into traditional symbols from their own world, even if the objects of that experience are fundamentally the same, and not [...] entirely different. (Scholem 1973a: 26–27)

With this symbolic integration of the Sabbatian crisis, Scholem finally effects a rehabilitation of the philosophical Enlightenment which he attacked so violently in the first phase of his life-mystical rebellion against the Jewish culture of Enlightenment, Science, and Reform. In fact, he not only rejects the inner-Jewish secession from post-Nietzschean philosophy caused by the retreat into Jewish mysticism, but he actually opens up the horizon for a possible alternative dialogue between philosophy and Jewish mysticism on a symbol-theoretical basis.

## **VI The Legitimation of Jewish Culture out of the Spirit of Gnosticism**

What is actually involved here is a rehabilitation of Jewish philosophy and Enlightenment, however implicit, from the spirit of Jewish Gnosticism. With this implicit return to a paradigm of neo-Kantian Enlightenment from the spirit of Jewish Gnosticism, Scholem's Kabbalah actually seeks to re-establish the legitimacy of Jewish modernity in the face of its vulnerability to crises.

This new foundation of a Jewish legitimacy of modernity is in fact diametrically opposed to the legitimation that Hans Blumenberg (1996) sketched in his monumental work on the legitimacy of modernity. In contrast to Blumenberg, who intends to overcome Gnosis and its "completely different" God, and thus of theology as a whole (with its excesses of political theology) by the Cartesian subject, Scholem aims at the rehabilitation of mystical Gnosis as a condition for the possibility of a pluralistic ethics. This ethics revises and at the same time integrates the orthodox, secular, and Reform-oriented definitions of the divine "formlessness" in their claim to truth. Gnosis means, from the perspective of a critical awareness of the way in which the symbol works, that insofar as every symbol simultaneously reveals and conceals God's nature, every symbol is legitimate in principle (1), and that insofar as every authority is now in principle an



authority based on interpretation, there is no authority in the classical – orthodox or heretical – decisional sense, no absolute law and no absolute messianic decision. Thought through to the end by the two deities, Gnosis separates between the absolute being of God and God as being and cause of the respective orderings, the infinite God beyond language and at the same time the “finite” God of his utterances. In this way, Gnosis actually becomes a prerequisite for a theology of another Enlightenment and thus for a pluralistic ethics, which is based on the unity of the ensemble of the various theologies – from Orthodoxy to Reform, from Halacha to Kabbalah, indeed from theology to the secular philosophy of culture – referred to in the various forms of life. Being beyond the symbol remains ontologically open to its historical meaning of being, designating “God,” “life,” “being,” or even “nothing,” so that this legitimacy of modernity, unlike the radical negation of all theology in the philosophy of Blumenberg, actually makes possible not only a relationship between the theologies, but also and especially between theology and philosophy.

Ultimately, the Kabbalistic Gnosis reconstructed by Scholem appears as a counterpart to the negative theology of Nikolaus Cusanus, as Ernst Cassirer describes it in his book *Individuum und Kosmos* (1994) as another source for a possible genealogy of modernity. While the completely different god of Kabbalah and Cusanian mysticism resists any codification as the absolute origin of an “orthodox” system, his light only appears in the infinitely colored facets of his refractions and interpretations. Both Kabbalah and Cusanian theology are in fact indebted to a specific appropriation of the negative theology of Maimonides, which facilitates the evolution of this medieval Enlightenment into a neo-Platonically mediated version of mysticism and a skeptical enlightenment and ethics of pluralistic life-forms.

## VII Conclusion: The Messiah as a Symbol of a Deconstruction

This closes the circle of Scholem’s adoption of philosophy for mysticism. The transformation of the post-Nietzschean philosophy of life into Sabbatian mysticism and messianology was at the same time a reckoning with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which introduced both as limit and problem the reintegration of this messianic mysticism into a comprehensive theory of the symbol. By means of this theory, Scholem actually effects a return to the paradigm of the Enlightenment on a changed theological basis, in order to facilitate a different, as we would say today, “post-secular” dialogue between theology and

philosophy (cf. Habermas/Ratzinger 2004),<sup>7</sup> but also to jettison the political problem of the messianic dynamic.

In the end, Sabbatai Zvi not only proves to be a possible harbinger of the positive, symbolically mediated character of modernity, but he must now paradoxically be appointed as the messiah of modernity, who – to borrow Walter Benjamin's theological political fragment – frees modern Judaism from all political messianism.

In fact, if one considers how often Scholem points out that the messianic is indeed the seduction of life *par excellence*, but at the same time can only manifest itself in destruction on account of its claim to be absolute, then Sabbatai Zvi's destroying work of redemption is not only exemplary for the theological-political aporia of Jewish messianism, but for eschatological modernity as a whole. The idea of an absolute political utopia realized in history can only find itself in the nihilism of destruction or in totalitarian rule.

In contrast to Scholem's vehement insistence that the messianic in Judaism, unlike in Christianity, is a public event,<sup>8</sup> the whole restoration work of his reflections on the symbol in tradition is based on the counter-thesis that the messianic as a public political event denotes the catastrophe in itself. From the perspective of the symbolic, metaphysical restoration of this work of destruction, the work of destruction of Sabbatai Zvi assumes the positive meaning of a necessary destruction inherent in the essence of messianic mysticism, which now, from a retrospective perspective, can simultaneously be seen as "therapy" and "healing" from all messianic politics.

In this way, however, the act of destruction itself becomes a symbol of the very impossibility of the messianic in real political history – the third event, as it were, of a destruction of the temple, namely the "temple of modernity" or rather of its specific subjectivity, which in precisely the political messianism and its political theology of the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth wants to assert its own being "here and now" and yet in its violence and destruction is always refuting itself. At the juncture where the halachic order or

7 Jürgen Habermas later worked through these perspectives in Habermas 2022.

8 Cf.: "Judaism, in all its forms and configurations, has always adhered to a concept of salvation that saw it as a process that takes place in public, on the scene of history and in the medium of community, in short, which is decisive in the world of the visible and cannot be thought of without such a manifestation in the visible" (Scholem 1963c: 7; see also Taubes 1996).

the taboo established by Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages against any messianism finds itself endangered, where the exilic life after the destruction of the Second Temple is threatened by the mystical spirit of Messianism, that is the point at which now – after the Sabbataian destruction – a new order is to be established which not only has its own viability for modernity as a symbolic form of life, but it is necessary to commemorate in the drama of Sabbatai Zvi the destruction of messianism as a symbol which thus – like the destroyed Temple in 70 A.D. – makes it possible to codify the restoration of the orders of life as an unmistakable warning sign. The new pluralistic symbolic orders of life, which replace the absolute orthodox order, need their own founding symbol, which Scholem established in his monumental biography of Sabbatai Zvi (Scholem 1973b). Thus, however, the ruin of messianic subjectivity becomes at the same time an alternative messianic symbol of the ethical order of Jewish culture in the spirit of a critical Jewish Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Cf. Scholem 1963c. Here Scholem unfolds, among other things, the tension between messianism and apocalypticism in order to work out the difference between utopian hope and the destructive intrusion of another eon. It is precisely this tension that creates the abyss that the messianic activist wants to bridge through his concrete actions in order to conjure up the real inner-worldly destructive powers. Scholem aims here at a critique of the moralization and historicization of the messianism of the Enlightenment and the science of Judaism when he plays out the apocalyptic as an unforeseeable event against them: "In ihnen [= den moralisierenden Deutungen des Messianismus] kündigt sich ein Moralismus an, der späteren Umdeutungen des Messianismus im Sinne einer vernünftig besonnenen Utopie willkommen sein musste. Im Grunde aber kann der Messias nicht vorbereitet werden." (ibid: 27) At the same time, however, he incessantly repeats the warning "against human action that fails to bring redemption" (ibid: 32). This warning condenses into an insight into the modern ambivalence of political Zionism between the seduction of a political messianism and its impossibility: "It is no wonder that the readiness for irrevocable commitment to the concrete, which does not want to be brushed off, a readiness born of horror and doom, which Jewish history has found only in our generation, when it began the utopian retreat to Zion, is accompanied by overtones of messianism, without, however, being able – conspiring to history itself and not to a meta-history – to commit itself to it." Political Zionism, which has tended to draw on Sabbatai Zvi since its beginnings, is the current political constellation of messianic aporia between utopia and apocalypse, which Scholem is obviously trying to circumvent with his ethical-moralizing messianism of plural forms of life in order to take on – of course only implicitly and regardless of how critically underpinned – the messianism of the Enlightenment.

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