# Messianism in Medieval Jewish Thought

# EMUNOT: JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH

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Dov Schwartz

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# Preface

Messianism has played a significant role in Jewish thought and culture. This yearning for redemption in a people in exile is understandable, given that the announcement of its exile was tied to that of its birth at the "covenant between the parts" (Genesis 15:1-15). Jewish thought was first systematically formulated in the Middle Ages, and it was then that messianic approaches also found fitting expression. Knowledge about these messianic views in medieval thought is thus also important as a conceptual and cultural foundation of modern and contemporary messianic approaches.

The present work is an attempt to outline the basic characteristics of rationalist messianic approaches in the Middle Ages, and particularly the conceptual tensions between them. Specifically, it focuses on various manifestations of two messianic approaches that address the nature of the messianic process as well as the outlines of future redemption in general.

The first approach will, for the current purposes, be referred to as *apocalyptic*.[1] Terms such as "miraculous" or "supernatural" do not encompass the full span of this view. In its context, redemption means an essential and profound change in the cosmos, up to its destruction and rebuilding, and its attainment is tied to a glorious messianic tableau, with a plot and a distinctly mythical order. The second approach, to be referred to as *naturalistic*, challenges the assumption of the end of the world as a condition of redemption. It holds that we should not despair of the present world and its amendment and, therefore, should not ask for a new world to emerge on the ruins of the present one. This approach significantly lessens direct divine involvement in the redemptive process and almost excludes it altogether. This view characterized classic rationalists who recoiled from changes in the natural order and from the imaginary, and to some extent dangerous, character of the apocalyptic legacy. This book traces the emergence of these two positions in Jewish philosophy and their various manifestations until

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1 In this work, *apocalyptic* is used to denote content rather than form. Content-wise, the apocalyptic chapters in Isaiah, Daniel, and other biblical texts deal with the end of the world, with a wondrous war with mythical and demonic creatures, and so forth. In other words, apocalypse is tied to the supernatural and the mythical. Form-wise, apocalypse is formulated as visions, with their usual literary characteristics. By contrast, visionary writing is not widespread in the philosophical literature of the Middle Ages, and its character is also alien to the genre. See Malcolm Bull, ed., *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

the end of the Middle Ages, including the tension between them following their confrontation.

A book of this kind could hardly have been written in its present form during the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth. I will not enter here into the recurring conflict between the present and previous generation of scholars with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school and the extent of its biases. Clearly, however, misgivings still prevail about delving too deeply into the issue of messianism and its implications. Three brief examples of how messianism was handled will serve to illustrate this determination:

1) In an article devoted to this topic in his *Jüdische Schriften*, Hermann Cohen described the messianic idea relying solely on naturalistic motifs. He did not consider that apocalyptic messianism had any right to exist or exerted any influence.

2) David Neumark, among the more sober scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, devised an ambitious plan for writing, in ten volumes, the "history of Jewish philosophy" up to the end of the Middle Ages. He succeeded in writing four—an introductory volume, matter and form, the attributes in antiquity, and dogma. The messianic idea never featured in this plan, even though other theological issues, such as prophecy, do appear.

3) When Benzion Netanyahu dealt with the messianic issue in his important book on Abravanel (published in 1953), he rushed to explain and justify the motif of vengeance from Gentiles. The vengeance motif is widespread in apocalyptic messianic trends, be they philosophical or mythical, and one of their integral components.

Apologizing and downplaying messianic positions is currently unnecessary. Gershom Scholem's merit is that he dared to present a direct analysis of the messianic idea's elements without restricting himself to specific issues, such as the dates of redemption or historical messianic movements. Scholem's disciples presented detailed and exhaustive analyses of messianic manifestations in Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. The messianic component in rationalist Jewish philosophy, however, seems to require further attention. Scholars have not found the juncture of rationality and messianism appealing and this topic, except for a few important studies, has not been sufficiently discussed.

Note that the present work does deal at length with the approach conveying apprehensions about any concern with messianism. These apprehensions,

however, are not a modern phenomenon and had already existed in the Middle Ages. At that time, a trend emerged seeking to make messianic descriptions enlightened and universal, confronting the sources on the one hand and the *zeitgeist* on the other. The visions in the biblical, talmudic, and midrashic sources prophesied vengeance and retribution as well as a wonderful world for the god-fearing, mostly only for the Jews among them. The popular mood longed for the great and terrible day of the Lord, when God would take revenge on the Gentiles and on the "members of religions" (Moslems and Christians) for the suffering they had inflicted on God's chosen people. Rationality, as noted, attempted to contend with this sweeping approach and, supported by several prestigious figures (Maimonides, Rashba, and others), presented a fair and balanced confrontation with the apocalyptic view. Among rationalists, this confrontation persisted until the end of the Middle Ages and was only settled with the appearance of R. Yitzhak Abravanel.

The importance of this historical and philosophical chapter in the study of the history of ideas seems quite obvious, but an inquiry into this question will also provide some perspective on the conceptual forces active in Jewish thought. A deeper analysis of these philosophical and theological sources indeed reveals that contemporary positions have their roots in the Jewish world of ideas. Describing how the messianic idea came into being within Jewish thought is crucial because, contrary to Islam and Christianity, which required only a few decades to formulate a systematic theology, Judaism took many centuries to present a methodical philosophy. Hence, the study of medieval philosophy is not an archaic concern with dusty and crumbling books and manuscripts of interest to a tiny group of academics, but an inquiry into the cradle of systematic thought in Judaism. This probe into the messianic idea, then, is doubly significant: it points to fundamental trends that Jewish culture draws upon to this day, and affords a glimpse into the relationship of Judaism with its surroundings in the past and possibly in the present.

The research method adopted in this study focuses on a wide spectrum of thinkers. The present book's essential innovation is that it does not, unlike the studies on messianic thought so far, focus on key figures. Both historically and philosophically, describing the conceptual aspects of a culture according to the doctrine of one or two thinkers as a suitable representation of a century or more seems mistaken. This is the approach that was applied in Joseph Saracheck's book, published in 1932, which attempts to describe a period by studying the teachings of a few isolated figures. Attention has also focused on printed works, while neglecting

manuscripts. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, printed works are only a fraction of the active thought of the period. The merit of the present work is that it describes currents of thought developing and resonating in the teachings of dozens of thinkers, seeking to present the leading philosophical doctrines against the backdrop of the period and its spirit. Many conceptual phenomena that seem startling and unusual in isolation thereby become understandable. The research method focusing on *conceptual circles* rather than on the thought of individual figures is applied in this work to one issue in the general context of the messianic idea—messianic tension—which bears implications for other dimensions of the encounter between philosophy and theology.

This book does not pretend to encompass the philosophical dynamic of the Middle Ages as a whole. It concentrates on the "Sephardic" rationalism that arose in the Iberian Peninsula, Provence, and Italy, and its impact on Jewish thought in Byzantium.[2] Lacunas will most probably be revealed regarding personalities or cultural areas, given that research on the philosophy and theology of rationality in Byzantium and Ashkenaz is only beginning. It does describe, however, the central developments in the messianic idea from West to East and suitably reflects the philosophical endeavor within the circles of Jewish rationality.

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Many colleagues have read this manuscript, wholly or partly, and most of them also made important comments. Some of them inspired the ideas mentioned in it—Moshe Hallamish, Moshe Idel, Menachem Kellner, Daniel Lasker, Lawrence Schiffman, and Eliezer Schlossberg. I am grateful to all.

I wish to express once more my deep thanks and appreciation to Batya Stein. Batya is not only my translator but a genuine partner to my writing, whose insights and contributions make her an author. I am honored and grateful for this privilege.

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2 In Ashkenaz, the rationalistic trend was marginal. For the differences between "Ashkenazi" and "Sephardic" messianism in general and specifically on Ashkenazi messianism, see, for example, Gershon D. Cohen, "Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim," *Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture* 9 (1967): 117–158; Elisheva Carlebach, *Between History and Hope: Jewish Messianism in Ashkenaz and Sepharad* (New York: Touro College, 1998); Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Between Carnality and Spirituality: A Cosmological Vision of the End at the Turn of the Fifth Jewish Millennium," *Speculum* 90 (2015): 458–482.

## Chapter 1

## METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

Research deals mostly with historical and conceptual events and analyzes them with a priori tools by placing them and framing them within given structural patterns. The scholarly consensus is that the actual phenomenon—the historical reality or the ideas—does not precisely fit the construct into which it is poured. Reality is complex and more blurry than the pattern or model representing it. Almost paradoxically, however, the event and its implications are hard to understand unless they are located within a pattern, a construct, a model. After scholars understand the structural trend and the place of the event within it, they are qualified to understand the event's authentic character. Models, then, are necessary research tools, even though they cannot fully reflect the complexity of reality.

An appropriate example of this use of models is the clear division into Neoplatonic and neo-Aristotelian trends, which is pervasive in the study of medieval Jewish philosophy. These two models will help in the initial description and mapping of how philosophical thought developed in the Jewish world at the time. An analysis of the concrete teachings, however, shows that the actual event is not a pure reflection of any model, and reality is far more complex than the strong and simplistic division into models. Neoplatonic patterns recur in philosophies considered distinctly "Aristotelian" and vice-versa—thinkers who are definitely viewed as Neoplatonic consistently display Aristotelian thinking.[1] Yet, the study of the concrete teachings cannot begin without setting up the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian models or, in another formulation, without setting up the models in order to dismantle them.

Relying on these assumptions, I will present several models and criteria for the development of the messianic idea in medieval Jewish philosophy, from the geonic era and up to the expulsion from Spain. These models and criteria

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1 For the reflection of this determination in another matter, see Dov Schwartz, "The Study of Models and the Teachings of a Forgotten Thinker," *Daat* 34 (1995): 153-156 [Heb].

are mutually related. Moreover, they even derive from one another. Their isolation and presentation follows the analysis of the complex philosophical and theological reality and its deconstruction into conceptual elements. Messianic models and criteria can be viewed from several angles. The richness of the messianic idea and the broad scope of the discussions about it enable its presentation from various directions, approaches, and perspectives. Ever since Gershom Scholem's attempt to promote inclusive messianic formats, scholars have effectively widened and developed several specific models.[2] Nevertheless, examining the question of models and criteria, and even reformulating it in light of the many sources and studies available since Scholem's original proposal, would seem a useful endeavor. My examination focuses on medieval philosophical thought, which is at the center of this study.

## THE CRITERIA

In the discussion that follows, I suggest six analytical criteria for mapping and locating messianic teachings, which are also relevant to medieval philosophical literature: (1) the character of the messianic era; (2) the messiah's personality; (3) the standing of the law; (4) the programmatic dimension; (5) the existence of a messianic orientation; (6) the sources of the messianic motifs. A detailed consideration of these criteria follows.

### 1. The Redemptive Era: Apocalyptic Messianism vs. Messianic Naturalism

What will be the typical characteristics of the future world? According to the apocalyptic approach, the messianic era means the end of the present

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2  See Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1-36. For examples of the study of models, see Shalom Rosenberg, "The Return to Paradise: The Idea of Restorative Redemption," in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 43, 78-86 [Heb]; Moshe Idel, "Patterns of Redemptive Activity in the Middle Ages," in *Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1984), 253-279 [Heb]; idem, "Introduction," *Messianic Movements in Israel*, by Aharon Zeev Aescoly (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 9-28 [Heb]; idem, *Messianism and Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1992) [Heb]; Menachem Kellner, "Jews and their Messiahs," *The Jewish Quarterly* 155 (1994): 7-13. Other works dealing with the history of the messianic idea in the Middle Ages are Julius H. Greenstone, *The Messiah Idea in Jewish History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1906); Joseph Saracheck, *The Doctrine of the Messiah in Medieval Jewish Literature* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1932). Works devoted to the history of Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages (such as those by Julius Guttmann, Isaac Husik, and Colette Sirat) have also made a significant contribution. Philosophical essays, however, even by important historians (such as "Galut" by Yitzhak Baer as well as others), do not significantly add to our understanding of the conceptual reality. These works, though essential for the understanding of the texts' philosophical foundations and for the development of current Jewish thought, have hardly promoted further concrete research.

world and the collapse of history. Accompanying the dramatic end will be a series of catastrophic events involving the extinction of one or another part of humanity and the destruction of the cosmos. A new world, with an entirely different order, will replace the present natural world. In this new world, pain, suffering, death, and destruction will be no longer. Humans will live forever, entirely free from evil, instinctual drives, and inner qualms. The apocalyptic approach, then, despairs from the realization of redemption in this world and replaces it with a new and imaginary world, when a new reality will emerge on the ruins of the present one. The apocalyptic approach has its origins in a series of midrashim on redemption that began to take shape in the Hasmonean period, and then became part of many theological sources. This widespread approach clung to the literal meaning of the texts and interpreted apocalyptic prophecies verbatim—"new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). Supporters of the apocalyptic view accept the aggadic terms literally and view paradise, hell, the resurrection of the dead, the day of the Lord, and so forth as actual places or events. Apocalyptic messianism too is an independent, self-sustaining goal rather than an instrumental element serving other ends. Note, moreover, that apocalyptic redemption is collective and its momentous changes relate to the public realm. It does not emphasize individual intimate redemption and does not discuss it as a key autonomous element, assimilating the individual personality into the cosmic and national events. Apocalyptic messianism in the Middle Ages therefore demands that we disregard individual attachment (to cosmic entities such as the general soul, the active intellect, and so forth), intimate communion, and other individual goals. Finally, apocalyptic messianism is not specific to people living at a particular time. All the righteous or all who deserve it, whether alive now or in the past, will share in it. This characterization again attests to the inclusiveness of redemption in its apocalyptic version.

By contrast, the naturalistic approach holds that the messianic era will occur within history and not in its collapse. The world will continue on its course and natural laws will remain in place. Since messianism will be realized in the present material-earthly world, how will we recognize it? Messianic events will be manifest mainly in two areas. The first is the socio-political realm, involving the establishment of a just society and a fitting and productive regime. The second is related to the motif of humanity's progress. The future society will direct its resources to cultural development as well as to spiritual and intellectual enrichment instead of turning to war efforts on the one hand, and to material consumption and hedonism on the other. The naturalistic version of redemption is valid solely

for the generation of redemption and does not involve participation by the righteous or the deserving from previous ones. The sources of the naturalistic approach are distinctly rationalistic and its advocates are part of the rationalist trend that developed in the Middle Ages. This approach fostered a suitable technique for interpreting apocalyptic prophecies—allegory. Naturalists, then, extracted the texts from their literal sense and granted them an inner meaning in the spirit of their thought. Naturalism relies on approaches tending toward personal, natural, and spiritual redemption. These views hold that the greatest form of human perfection is manifest in the individual, and messianic teachings are a tool for its attainment. Furthermore, individual perfection is spiritual or mental and definitely internal, so that its interest in external reality is limited. In the naturalists' teachings, therefore, general messianic events become at most instrumental and thereby lose their crucial significance.

## 2.  The Personality and Character of the Messiah

Messianic approaches, at least in Western religions, tend toward the personification of the messianic idea. The abstract, intangible messianic idea is poured into a concrete figure ("messiah") that is a realistic and feasible representation of it. The analysis of the messiah's figure and its characteristics, then, will optimally reflect the general meaning of the messianic position.

   A review of the messiah's typical traits according to the different conceptions indeed reveals a broad variety of characteristics. How can we describe the character and personality of the messiah? The answers to this question can be classified into four groups: (1) Many sources present the messiah as a charismatic commander and ideal hero, who is also an acclaimed politician. According to the King David paradigm, the messiah heroically wages the wars of the Lord and, through the force of his personality, gathers behind him the people of Israel and all its exiles to renew the sovereignty of the realm and religious worship in the Holy Land. (2) Other sources present the messiah as a pained figure, "humble and riding upon an ass" (Zechariah 9:9), a sufferer among sufferers and a leper among lepers. Christian sources contributed to the development of this figure in Jewish medieval philosophy. (3) Some present the messiah as an intellectual, a spiritual Torah leader, a kind of traditional Jewish scholar. This messianic figure epitomizes erudition and knowledge. (4) Some present the messiah as a magician, who effects the changes of the messianic era by resorting to his wondrous, supernatural powers.

The messiah's personality can obviously be built from more than one feature. Alternatively, one or another characteristic may be conveyed through two messianic figures—the son of Joseph and the son of David as, respectively, the suffering messiah and the triumphant warrior messiah. Evidently, then, choosing one of the messiah's specific characteristics or even integrating several of them conveys the messianic approach of the thinker who presents it. The messiah is thus an expression of the general idea. Another question that emerges in this context is the relationship between the messiah's personality and the messianic era. In some approaches, the messiah is an indication or a symptom of the era and messianic events take place deterministically, independently of a special person or of a nation's collective activity. These approaches thus view the appearance of the messiah as expressing the beginning or the end of an era. By contrast, some hold that the messiah is the one who brings about the messianic era and actively fulfills the messianic promises. The essential or contingent dependence of redemption on the figure of the redeemer is thus a matter for the discussions that are part of the various approaches.

## 3. Religious Law (Halakhah) in the Messianic Era: Conservatism vs. Antinomianism

The foundation of Jewish religion is a comprehensive and rigorous code of law pertaining to the most intimate aspects of life. By its very nature, the commandments of Halakhah limit and confine the Jew's freedom. One question, then, needs clarification here: will this rigorous law still be binding in the messianic era? To trace the roots of this question requires addressing another complex issue first—the reasons for the commandments. One conclusive determination is possible in this regard: whatever the rationalist view of the commandments in the Middle Ages, it invariably perceives them as founded partly or wholly on restraint and education. As such, the purpose of the commandments is to impart virtues and moral qualities to believers.

The basic question, whose answer will also be dealing with the question of Halakhah's survival, is now in place: what will the future anthropological model look like? What will humans be like in the messianic era? If one envisages them as lacking any evil wants and desires, no educational restraining law will be necessary. In other words, according to the approach that assumes a new human type in the future—perfect, without any evil drives and cleansed of all sins and transgressions—Halakhah

has no room. This approach presents a classic antinomian position: "the commandments will be abolished in the world to come" (TB Niddah 61b). By contrast, should we assume that the future anthropological model will be identical to the current one and that future humans will have passions, desires, and inner doubts, religious law will be preserved as is. This conservative position therefore supports the view that "the commandments will not be abolished in the world to come."

Perceptions of the future human being obviously depend on the assumptions about messianic events in general. Whereas a new human type without evil drives is the fundamental premise of the apocalyptic approach, the naturalistic approach vigorously denies any changes in the human model. The modern period, however, offers mixed approaches, which preserve the human model and, at the same time, uphold antinomianism. These views prevailed at the time of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) and are already evident in Moses Mendelssohn's work. A separate issue is the nature of messianic antinomianism in kabbalistic teachings such as the "doctrine of sabbaticals" (*shemitot*) and in Sabbatean theology. In the Middle Ages, however, the range of views generally varies according to the anthropological model and the general perception of messianic events.

## 4. The Program of the Messianic Process: Determinism vs. Voluntarism

The motifs, signs, and stages of the messianic process are seemingly determined a priori. The structure of the process is detailed in the messianic chapters of the books of the prophets, in the tannaitic and talmudic sources, and in various midrashim dealing with redemption. The descriptions in the various sources are not all consistent and coherent, and they are subject to different and extreme interpretations in both directions. They do include, however, several programmatic presentations of the signs of redemptions and its various stages. The messianic process, as it were, has a time sequence as well as some kind of distinct order.

Are the various stages and elements of the messianic process, then, deterministic or voluntarist? Can the course and the rhythm of the messianic process be affected and, if so, to what extent? The deterministic approach can offer two theses: (1) The messianic process has a set program. Once the process has begun, nothing can stop it and it will necessarily reach its end, so that even events that seemingly delay it and contradict it are essential to it and promote the process even against their will. (2) The messianic process has a stable and set date, determined according to calculations in prophetic

verses or according to charts created by expert astrologists. When the date arrives, the messianic process necessarily takes place. In the Middle Ages, many approaches combined textual exegeses and astrological calculations to determine the time of redemption.

The voluntarist approach offers two contrary theses: (1) The nature of the messianic process is not programmatically determined. Even after the messianic process has begun, therefore, it can be stopped and made to retreat to an earlier stage or to its beginning. (2) The messianic process has no set date and depends on the spiritual level of a people or of the world. Some openly and consistently attested to their disinterest in such a set date and the matter then became entirely redundant. Disinterest could be a result of the prohibition to engage in calculations of the end (TB Sanhedrin 97b) or of the emphasis on individual redemption as a supreme end that, by comparison, makes other ends less worthy. The dominant approaches are obviously the synthetic ones that claim, for example, a set date that could be cancelled if the conditions for the arrival of redemption were to occur before it—"hasten it in its time" (Isaiah 60:22). Messianic approaches, then, can be classified according to their attitude to the messianic program.

## 5. The Existence of a Messianic Orientation

Messianic approaches, as noted, rely on various sources of authority. Specific thinkers may be convinced that they have interpreted the texts authentically, aiming, as it were, at the writer's intention, but ultimately, it is the view and personal taste of the philosophical interpreter that explain the text. The interpreter too, however, is committed to various parallel texts (biblical, talmudic, aggadic, and so forth), presenting a series of motifs that cannot be ignored. The observer of messianic sources will find in them diverse motifs that partly or fully convey the messianic era—the end of days, the day of the Lord, the footsteps of the messiah, the messianic era, the resurrection of the dead, the world to come, paradise, and hell—all of which need to be addressed hermeneutically and philosophically.

Philosophers, then, must consider the question—is there a messianic orientation? In other words—is there any connection (causal or chronological) between the various motifs building up the messianic idea that can ensure proper acquaintance with them? The answers of medieval Jewish thinkers to this question can be split into three: (1) Some endorse a messianic orientation and hold that the first motif leads to the second, the second to the third, and so forth. All these motifs intertwine in a splendid messianic weave, wherein each motif and each event represents a stage in the complete messianic

process. (2) Some absolutely negate such an orientation and hold that each messianic motif is meant to be realized at a different time. In their view, no essential link binds one messianic event to another. (3) Some see messianic motifs as different expressions of the same event, so that their meaning is to be determined according to this event's perception. For example, whoever holds that messianism will be concretized only at the individual level (the soul's return to its source in Neoplatonic approaches, communion with the active intellect, and so forth) will explain the messianic motifs as different expressions of that level. The messianic orientation thus also serves as a suitable criterion for mapping the various messianic approaches.

## 6. The Motifs Underlying the Messianic Process: New Contents vs. Restoration

Messianic thought, as noted, is woven based on a given pool of motifs that relies on the authoritative sources. The interpretation of these motifs, which is determined according to each philosopher's personal doctrine, is what shapes the type of messianism and its image. The interpretation of the pool of motifs relates to different points along the time axis: a wondrous past versus a dreamed up future.

Two options are thus available: (1) The philosophical interpretation of the messianic idea may rely on contents that are entirely new, unknown in the biblical and general history familiar to us. The new contents may be apocalyptic or naturalistic. According to apocalyptic conceptions, the novelty of the future world is manifest in a utopian order, supernatural and superhuman, entirely unlike anything in the historical past. According to naturalistic conceptions, the novelty is manifest in the union of humanity as a whole in order to realize either social or intellectual aims or all of them together. (2) The philosophical interpretation may present the messianic idea as restorative, that is, as a return to a distant and wondrous past. According to this option, the messianic motifs are not new but rather an expression of longing for the distant past—the beginning of history or of the process (paradise, the general soul, and so forth). The longing could also focus on a relatively nearer past, such as the yearning for a renewal of religious worship in the Temple or the inspiration of prophecy. The messianic view will therefore be defined according to the orientation of the interpretation— toward a distant or nearer past or toward an imaginary future.

Gershom Scholem pointed to this criterion as a significant key to the understanding of the messianic idea's development. Studies on this

question, however, have shown that the conceptual messianic reality is far more complex and this principle does not always fit the reality.[3]

## Implications and Ramifications

Up to this point, the focus has been on an initial description of several key criteria whose elaboration led to the development of the messianic idea in the Middle Ages. These criteria obviously bear essential implications for other and more specific aspects of the messianic idea, aspects that are branches or items derived from the general roots that made up the above list. Following are several examples of such aspects:

1) The balance between natural individual redemption and social, national, or universal redemption. I consider this issue at length below since it follows directly from the tension between the apocalyptic and the naturalistic messianic approaches.

2) The various patterns of activity meant to influence the messianic process directly or indirectly, and the value ascribed to each of these activities. This activity may come forth in collective repentance, in messianic emigration to the Land of Israel, in calculations of redemption's timing, and in magic and theurgic activities.[4]

3) The value of the intellectual and scholarly concern with messianic issues in the present. Some reject this concern and view it as a negative sinking into delusions and fantasy, and some affirm it as a form of legitimate Torah study.

4) The attitude of thinkers toward current messianic events, such as the appearance of a false messiah. These attitudes afford a glimpse into the conceptual approach itself and into its application to pragmatic events.

5) Hermeneutical problems related to the messianic issue, such as refraining from mention of certain messianic goals in the Torah and in other sources. One may also add here the issue of esoteric interpretation, which developed in the Middle Ages in relation to the messianic idea.

6) The controversy with Christianity as a factor that shapes the messianic philosophical endeavor. This is a significant issue

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3 See Scholem, "Toward an Understanding"; Rosenberg, "The Return to Paradise." See also the chapters that follow.
4 On this issue see, at length, Idel, "Patterns of Redemptive Activity."

because many philosophers were directly or indirectly involved in disputes with Church representatives and Christianity had a well-developed messianic view.

7) The dogmatic status of messianism and its place in Jewish faith. Setting up messianism as a principle of faith was extremely problematic, and the attitude toward this issue at times reflected the thinker's solid messianic stance.

These seven issues and many others like them are determined, developed, and formulated according to decisions by religious thinkers concerning different messianic models. In the current discussion, therefore, I address the implications and ramifications described here. The study of the concrete conceptual-messianic reality, then, abides by a series of criteria and models, to which I also resort to some extent in this work.

## WHAT IS RATIONALISM?

My present concern is the analysis of rationalist thinkers' messianic discussions and, since the meaning of the term *rationalism* changes over time, a general description of medieval rationalism seems appropriate here. Medieval Jewish philosophy is subject to two mutually contradictory jurisdictions. On the one hand is theology, which rests on set assumptions serving to justify religion that, according to the medieval approach, originate in revelation. On the other hand is philosophy, which assumes freedom of thought, curiosity, and paths to knowledge. Philosophy is self-sustaining and has no need for heteronomous assumptions, just as it is not subject to any other authority beside thought. Reason and revelation are mutually contradictory and religious philosophy thus attempts to do the impossible—combine philosophy and theology. The various approaches shift between three focal positions:

1) *The Supremacy of Philosophy*. This approach views the achievements of reason and its rules as the only truth criterion and, therefore, explains the holy texts solely according to these rational inferences and rules. Thinkers such as R. Yitzhak Albalag and R. Yosef Ibn Caspi endorsed this stance.

2) *The Equivalence of Philosophy and Theology*. This view holds that "healthy" and proper free thought is coextensive with the

rules of theology. R. Saadia Gaon and other geonim endorsed this view.

3) *The Supremacy of Theology*. This view sees revelation and the texts that followed it as the sole truth criterion. The basic rules of this approach derive from a literal reading of the text or from an interpretation that does not rest on reason and logic. This was the view adopted by R. Shlomo ben Abraham of Montpellier (*min ha-Har*), R. Moshe Taku, and other thinkers who devoted their endeavors and literary concerns to Kabbalah.

The various approaches, as noted, shift between these focal positions. For example, Judah Halevi's stance is located between positions (2) and (3), but may not merge with (3). Maimonides' view has been the subject of a strong controversy involving exegetes and scholars and is located between positions (1) and (2). The present work defines the term *rationalism* in its broad denotation, that is, all the views that do not merge with position (3). I call the first position *extreme rationalism*, and the views between positions (2) and (3) *moderate rationalism*. All the views that assign some authority to the achievements of free thought—regardless of whether the thought is identical to theology or inferior to it but of value—are included in the *rationalist* categories. Hence, I do not consider kabbalists here. The study of extreme rationalism began in depth around the 1980s, but moderate rationalism has hardly been studied, except for its manifestations in the tenth to twelfth centuries. The present study addresses one expression of Jewish rationalism—the attitude toward the tension between apocalyptic and naturalistic messianism. Following is a brief presentation of the chronological and systematic progression of this tension's development in the Middle Ages.

## THE TENSION BETWEEN THE MESSIANIC APPROACHES

Every criterion in the list presented above may, as noted, serve as a tool and an initial benchmark for the classification of medieval philosophy's messianic approaches. In this work, I examine the first basic criterion (apocalyptic vs. naturalistic messianism) and present it as a yardstick for classifying and mapping various messianic outlooks that emerged in Jewish rationalism. The tension between apocalyptic messianic thought and naturalistic thought suitably reflects the general development of

the messianic idea in the Middle Ages. In the analysis of this criterion, I will occasionally address other criteria suggested above, but the general character of the messianic era and the tension between apocalyptic messianism and messianic naturalism will be the main factor guiding the discussion. Following are several schemes that will reflect the development of the tension on the messianic issue from a chronological historical perspective and from an inner conceptual one.

## Chronological Development

The chronological course of the tension between apocalyptic messianism and naturalism may be described as follows:

Period I: From the tenth until the end of the twelfth century, purely apocalyptic and naturalistic views tend to emerge in Jewish philosophy.

Period II: The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are characterized by mixed approaches, which include both naturalistic and apocalyptic elements.

Period III: From the mid-fifteenth century until the expulsion from Spain, both the apocalyptic and the naturalistic approaches return to their pure versions, in a context of conceptual diversity.

The inner conceptual progression matches the chronological one. The development along the time axis fits the struggle between two conceptual considerations that had prevailed in the Middle Ages: the rationalist philosophical consideration inclines toward individual redemption (the soul's return to its source or rational communion), which essentially leaves no room for public, social, or cosmic redemption. By contrast, the consideration that arises from a majority of the revelational sources (biblical, talmudic, and midrashic) literally compels recognition of public and collective messianic goals. Chapter Three shows that advocates of individual redemption need the naturalistic approach, whereas supporters of the apocalyptic approach are not overly interested in the individual per se. For the apocalyptic approach, the individual is a component in the messianic collective. The confrontation between the various messianic approaches on the character of future events, then, does not hinge only on the issue of miracle vs. nature, as many had held. Instead, it touches directly on the essence of human perfection. Rationalists viewed perfection as a distinctly individual intimate issue (*conjunctio* or union with a supreme intellect), which fully dictates

the terms of the theological doctrine. Opponents of rationalism rejected the exclusive primacy of individual perfection and held that theology draws literally on the sources. The tension in messianic thought is thus perhaps a further expression of the ancient confrontation between reason and revelation.

## The Developmental Stages

The systematic development of the tension between apocalyptic messianism and messianic naturalism went through four stages:

Stage I: The apocalyptic messianic model, which had so far been conveyed in scattered midrashim, was consolidated, justified in seemingly rationalist terms, and integrated into Jewish philosophy as a necessary and unquestionable demand of reason. This stage unfolded at the end of the geonic period and was mainly evident in R. Saadia Gaon's philosophical project. This stage is the topic of Chapter Two.

Stage II: The naturalistic messianic model emerged as exclusive due to a lack of alternatives: the rise of individual and eternal redemption at the expense of public, social, and cosmic redemption required the creation of a non-apocalyptic model. Individual redemption came about in the wake of a Neoplatonic group of thinkers on the one hand, and an Aristotelian one on the other. The philosophical consideration overrode all others, and messianic naturalism appeared. This stage, which is conveyed in the writings of various twelfth-century thinkers and culminated in the teachings of Maimonides, is the subject of Chapter Three.

Stage III: Two symmetrical conceptual phenomena led to the gradual collapse of the naturalistic and individual model and to the renewed ascent of apocalyptic messianism. On the one hand, revelational sources regained authority in the course of the controversy around Maimonides' writings and the rise of thinkers who combine Halakhah and philosophy, challenging the exclusive standing of individual redemption. Chapter Four is devoted to this phenomenon. On the other hand, extreme rationalists turned the notion of public messianism into a vague symbol—a riddle and a parable of individual redemption. They thereby led to the collapse of public, concrete redemption as a real option, even in its natural garb. Chapter Five is devoted to this issue. Gradually and persistently, these two developments cast doubt on the validity of the naturalistic model. But the naturalistic

approach did not give up center stage without a struggle and kept a hold on the teachings of various thinkers through the motif of Halakhah's eternity, which is not usually present in the apocalyptic approach. This issue is discussed in Chapter Six. Many thinkers offered unsystematic formulations of their messianic views, combining mixed motifs. Stage III, then, was characterized by hints and by messianic motifs operating below the surface. This stage unfolded mainly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Stage IV: Contrary to the random hermeneutical framing and to the mixing of motifs in the messianic approaches of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophy, from the mid-fifteenth century until the expulsion from Spain, philosophical thought was characterized by sharp formulations and by the systematic, distinct, and extensive presentation of positions beside one another. Note, however, that except for clear and systematic delivery, fifteenth century messianic thought is hardly inspiring or original. Many thinkers set the apocalyptic view beside the individual naturalistic one, defined them in detail, and resolutely chose one or another. Clear formulations replaced the blurring and layering of the fourteenth century and the two messianic views, the apocalyptic and the naturalistic, came into open confrontation. The clarification of positions that had unfolded in the course of the controversy surrounding Maimonides' writings at the beginning of the thirteenth century recurred, this time in depth and at length, while several significant monographs written in the course of the fifteenth century also contributed to this trend. By contrast, fourteenth-century thinkers had conveyed their views mostly through their interpretation of authoritative sources. Stage IV attests that medieval philosophy did not offer a solution, a compromise, or a decision on the confrontation between apocalyptic messianism and naturalism. This stage ended with the teachings of Yitzhak Abravanel, which tilted the balance in favor of the apocalyptic view. Chapter Seven is devoted to this stage.

In the sixteenth century, after the expulsion from Spain, positions changed and new criteria emerged.[5] The confrontation between the apocalyptic and the naturalistic models, which had been so significant in the Middle Ages, no longer appeared to dominate the shaping of various messianic conceptions. The apocalyptic model, in its theoretical or kabbalistic garb, became central, as is already evident in R. Yitzhak Abravanel's messianic teachings.

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5  Cf. Hayim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Exile and Redemption through the Eyes of the Spanish Exiles," in *Yitzhak Baer Jubilee Volume*, ed. Shmuel Ettinger et al. (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1960): 216–227 [Heb].

I turn now to a systematic discussion of the various stages, tracing the various manifestations of the apocalyptic model, the naturalistic model, and the tension between them in medieval Jewish philosophy. In the course of discussing these models' various manifestations, I deal with specific messianic events (the messianic era, the resurrection of the dead, and so forth) and, through them, analyze the fluctuations between apocalyptic messianism and messianic naturalism in philosophical approaches that create a defined conceptual structure.

## Apocalyptic Messianism in a Rationalist Garb

Apocalyptic messianism emerges in Jewish philosophy during the geonic era. For historical, polemical, and systematic reasons, some geonim developed conceptual approaches containing rationalist motifs, manifest in their critical view of aggadot and midrashim contradicting logic and reason. R. Saadia Gaon, Rav Shrira, and Rav Hai Gaon, for example, frequently and unhesitatingly pointed to the critical principle that states, "one is not to rely on aggadic statements" and "one does not challenge on the basis of Aggadah."[1] Several geonim consistently rejected the anthropomorphization of the divine and, relying on rationalist arguments, supported the rabbinic view of the Oral Law. Behind this rationalist approach were inner motivations, beside elements of the polemic with Karaism and Islam. On the messianic issue, however, many geonim adopted the conservative position adhering to a literal reading of the sources, that is, the apocalyptic model of messianism. Among them was also one who relied on clearly rationalist arguments to support the conservative model—Saadia. This issue is at the focus of the present chapter.

## THE RATIONALIST JUSTIFICATION OF APOCALYPTIC MESSIANISM

Apocalyptic messianism draws on the imagination and, as such, is incompatible with pure rationalism. By Saadia's time, Alfarabi had determined that rationalism relies on knowledge of the natural and the cosmic order. Given that knowledge of the rules of physics and metaphysics is necessary and even compelling for a medieval philosopher in order to attain perfection, the greatest refutation of philosophical rationalism is the complete and eternal collapse of both the natural and human order. For

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1 *Teshuvot ha-Geonim*, ed. Yaakov Mussafia (Lyck: Mekitsei Nirdamim, 1864), 31a [Heb]; *Toratan shel Rishonim* (Frankfurt am Mein: Slobotsky, 1882), 45; *Zikaron la-Rishonim*, ed. Abraham E. Harkabi (St. Petersburg, 1879), 4. Cf. *Otsar ha-Geonim le-Masekhet Hagigah*, ed. B. M. Levin (Jerusalem, 1931), 59-60 [Heb]; Avraham Ovadiah (Gottesdiner), "The Story of Rav Hai Gaon," *Sinai* 2 (1931), 562-564 [Heb]; José Faur, *Studies in the Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1978) [Heb].

Saadia, however, rationalism is the justification of Scripture through reason. In his wake, rationalist thinkers endorsed apocalyptic approaches, and even granted them ostensibly rational justifications in their messianic teachings. The rational justification of apocalyptic messianism began during the geonic period, which is also the time when systematic Jewish philosophy appears.

## Double Faith and Eccentricity

R. Saadia Gaon's messianic outlook is a classic instance of the merger of apocalyptic views into a rationalist doctrine. He is considered the first systematic philosopher in Judaism (if we disregard the philosophy of Daud ibn Marwan al-Muqammis as an integral link in Jewish thought). A cornerstone in the study of Saadia's theoretical work is the definition of "double faith" adopted by Harry Austryn Wolfson, stating that Saadia is unequivocally committed to a view of Jewish belief in revelation as amenable to rational verification. Regardless of whether we approach revelation from a rational direction or accept it unquestionably, we will reach the same truth.[2] Saadia's conviction in this regard was so strong that, in the preface to *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, he proceeded to clarify why the Sinai epiphany and the giving of the Torah were at all necessary if we can fully grasp the principles of revelation through reason. The answers he suggested to his question do not affect his basic underlying assumption—we can reach truth relying solely on reason. At the beginning of Treatise III, Saadia even offers a prescription for formulating the principles and the commandments of the Torah based solely on logical thinking, without recourse to revelation. This view can therefore be defined as naïve rationalism, granting extensive authority to reason.

Prudent readers expecting the first philosophical and rationalist systematic treatise in Judaism to be balanced and judicious confront a rather strange development. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* indeed deals with a series of key issues in the building of Jewish faith, with each treatise addressing one of them. Treatise I, for example, is devoted to a discussion of creation, Treatise II, to God and the divine attributes, Treatise VI to the soul, and so forth. These prudent readers, familiar with authoritative and philosophical sources, would expect a discussion of the messianic issue to cover at most one treatise. Saadia, however, devoted to the messianic idea and to related questions no less than three full treatises: Treatise VII

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2  Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The Double Faith Theory in Clement, Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas, and Its Origin in Aristotle and the Stoics," *Jewish Quarterly Review,* n. s. 33 (1942): 213–264.

deals with the resurrection of the dead, Treatise VIII with redemption, and Treatise IX with the world to come. For Saadia, then, the messianic idea is tantamount to about one-third of Jewish faith as a whole. The issue of the essence of God and the explanation of God's existence—to which only one treatise is devoted—takes up about one-third of the scope devoted to the messianic idea, even though the author was well-aware that his book launched the era of systematic philosophy in Judaism, since he apologized for writing a book on Jewish philosophy in its preface: "I saw, furthermore, men who were sunk, as it were, in seas of doubt and overwhelmed by waves of confusion and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths nor a swimmer who might take hold of their hands and carry them ashore."[3] This formal fact amply attests to the character of Saadia's messianic philosophy and to the essential importance he ascribed to it.

## Interpretation, Knowledge, and Messianism

Saadia, as noted, legitimized the apocalyptic approach within a rationalist context and presented it as an integral part of a rationalist worldview, as evident in the hermeneutical method he formulated in Treatise VII of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. He issued a clear statement on the *Tāwīl*—the allegorical interpretation of the canonic text—a matter of significant concern for Moslem theology in general and for the *Mu'tazila* in particular. Serious questions were raised in the discussion, such as: are humans allowed to interpret God's words in contradiction to their literal meaning? Can matters delivered through revelation be interpreted allegorically? According to Saadia, the exegete is committed to the literal meaning of texts but is given license to transcend it in four cases:

1) When the literal meaning contradicts sensorial perception, that is, when a literal understanding is "rejected by the observation of the senses." For example, the text calls Eve "the mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20), whereas the senses attest that humans give birth only to humans. The literal meaning, then, must be transcended to determine that the reference is only to human descendants—"the mother of all speaking living [creatures]."[4]

3 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 7 (henceforth *Beliefs and Opinions*).

4 This is Saadia's interpretation in the *Tafsir* Genesis *ad locum*. See R. Yosef Kafih, *Peirushei Rabeinu Saadia Gaon al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1976), 16 [Heb].

2) When the literal sense is "negated by reason." For example, the text determines that the Holy One, blessed be He, is "a devouring fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24), whereas rational thought shows this to be impossible, since fire is ignited and then burns out, whereas the Holy One, blessed be He, precedes all and is eternal. God's *revenge* when punishing sinners is thus to be interpreted as fire, because it appears at the proper time and then disappears: "because the punishment of the Lord your God is a devouring fire."[5]

3) When the literal meaning of one statement contradicts the literal meaning of another. The literal meaning of one of them should then be rejected and adapted to the other. For example, one verse forbids trying God (Deuteronomy 6:16) and another supports doing so (Malachi 3:10). The solution is to interpret one verse literally and the other not. In this example, God should indeed not be tried. Humans, however, must test their standing before God and find out whether they are worthy of God's miraculous intervention in their favor.

4) When rabbinic tradition (*athār*) offers an interpretation opposed to the literal one. For example, Scripture determines that the wicked are punished with forty stripes (Deuteronomy 25:3), whereas tradition lowered the punishment to thirty-nine.[6]

According to Saadia, as shown below, messianic texts are not included in these four instances of license because of God's omnipotence, and transcending their literal meaning is therefore not allowed. These four allegorical cases, however, show surprising parallels with the four sources of knowledge premised by Saadia. In the preface to *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Saadia addressed the epistemological question: whence do humans draw the correct and accurate knowledge they are endowed with? In his view, the four roots of true knowledge are:

1) The senses, meaning knowledge based on the apprehension of the five senses (*ḥawāss*).

2) The intuition of the intellect (*'aql*), meaning knowledge that does not require external experience, such as first principles and elementary moral statements.

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5  Ibid., 136.

6  M. Makkot 3:10. *Beliefs and Opinions*, 265-266. See M. Zucker, ed., *Peirushei Rav Saadia Gaon li-Breshith* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1984), 191-192 [Heb]; Saadia Gaon, introduction to *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. L. E. Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 130-131.