

The Sickness of the Messiah: Theology and the Anthropology of Medicine

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ABSTRACT

For the faithful the advent of the Millennium signifies the end of sickness and suffering. Here I argue for another position in relation to Jewish Messianism – that the sickness of the Messiah is an integral part of, and indeed essential to, the millennial scenario. I discuss two Jewish messianic claimants, Sabbatai Sevi who suffered from what we would now call manic depression and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson who suffered from a stroke. I argue that, like Jesus, their suffering can be understood through a similar template- the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). Finally from a religious perspective their sickness represents a process of purification and atonement as they undergo a process of descent to purify the souls of sinners.

Keywords: Millennium, sickness, suffering, purification, Messiah

INTRODUCTION

Millennialism and the End of Sickness

For believers the advent of the millennium signifies the end of evil, pain, suffering, sickness and death. Sickness we be no more for the faithful. Christian millennialists assert that Christ will use his power to cure every sort of **sickness** malady, and infirmity (Rev 22:17). For the Christian Shakers the arrival of Ann Lee, seen by her followers as the embodiment of all the perfections of God in female form and as the second coming of Christ, signified the dawning of the millennium and the possibility of abolishing sickness. The Black Church led by prophet Mpadi Simon Pierre in the Congo maintained that God's future kingdom on earth would be devoid of sickness (MacGaffey 1983). The Walker River Paiutes performed the Ghost Dance for a period of five days after Wovoka promised that there would be no more sickness, disease, or old age and the dead would return (La Barre 1972). Followers of Mother Earth maintained that nature had become impatient with the Son. She would bring destruction upon the current order of the Son, thus restoring her original state whereby division and sickness would no longer occur (Littlewood 1993).

Compared to Christian eschatology, Jewish eschatological beliefs are less developed. In Jewish tradition there is little consensus on how, what, and when things happen at the end of times. After death, it is held that the soul

separates from the body and either goes straight to heaven (*Gan Eden*) or spends time in hell (*Gehinnom*) to purge itself of sins. In the End of Days, the Messiah will gather the Jewish exiles to Israel and the Temple will be rebuilt. Sometime later, the dead will be resurrected and reunited with their souls. This new, perfected universe is known as the World to Come – *HaOlam HaBa*. Various passages however from the Old Testament testify that there will be no more hunger or illness, and death will cease (Isaiah 25:8).¹

While believers assert an end to suffering come the millennium, many people have deployed the teachings of the Bible to assert that suffering is necessary before the World attains its highest level of perfection. As Harak (2000) notes, many people in the US have deployed this apocalyptic model to help them endure personal, national and international difficulties.

The Biblical model is part of a Divine plan for history whereby things get worse before getting better. While this model of course engenders fear it is also associated with feelings of comfort. There are several versions of this. For example Dispensational premillennialists hold that Christ will come before a seven-year period of intense tribulation to take His church (living and dead) into heaven. Historical premillennialists place the return of Christ just before the millennium and just after a time of great apostasy and tribulation.

This paper focuses upon Jewish Messianism where I argue for another position in relation to sickness. The Messiah's sickness plays a key role in propagation and intensification of millennial fervor. While the experience of sickness may stimulate millennial thinking, I contend that the illness of the messianic figure may be seen by his followers as not only a prelude to the arrival of the redemption but more so as essential to its occurrence. The leader's sickness is incorporated into the messianic scenario and followers of messianic movements assert that the Messiah's illness could be anticipated drawing from biblical texts such as Isaiah 53-the Suffering Servant narrative.

THEOLOGY AND MEDICINE

The debate regarding illness and suffering in the field of anthropology can be considered as old as the discipline itself (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997). Numerous ethnographic examples teach us that illnesses are not universal entities; rather illness manifests itself differently in different societies, cultures and times; and that there are culturally specific illnesses/sufferings. Recent work in medical anthropology reframes illness as social suffering. Perspectives on social suffering explore diverse aspects of human experience that are usually considered separately, bringing together conditions that simultaneously involve health, welfare, legal, moral and religious issues. Social suffering results from 'what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems' (Kleinman 1997:ix).

The experience of serious sickness, both physical and mental, necessitates explanation. The Anthropology of Medicine provides numerous examples whereby appeal to religious frameworks is made during episodes of sickness. These ultra human explanatory models often involve ideas deriving from what we might label under the rubric of theology, not only accounting for but also justifying this suffering and at the same time offering solutions in terms of religious healing. Theology and the interpretation of religious texts provide valuable ethnographic data for religious groups. As Littlewood and Lynch (216:2) note:

‘ A theology tells us what a person is, how people differ, how they act and are motivated, a theory of uniformity and difference; it offers a schema for the natural and ultra human worlds, for agency, and for influence; how appetites, emotions and cognitions arise, what they

signify; and a schema of our ultimate destination as beings. Every theology involves its practical, everyday psychology of human life.’

Significant differences exist between the disciplines of anthropology and theology. The academic study of anthropology studies humans within the natural world whereas theology deliberates upon the ultrahuman world. Davies (2002) notes the mutual hostility between anthropology and theology. However he emphasises that both are concerned with human experiences. Robbins (2006) examines the relationship between anthropology and theology and admits that can be awkward. First theology has impacted the discipline of anthropology. A good example is Asad's (1993) discussion of the Christian origins of religion and culture. Second theology can be taken as a piece of ethnographic data that informs us about the particular Christian culture that produced it. A good example is Susan Harding's (2000) *The Book of Jerry Falwell* which interrogates how the systematic thinking of church elites shaped fundamentalist culture. Third theology could facilitate the development of anthropology through examination of the concept of radical ontological otherness ie taking alternative ontologies seriously.

KABBALAH AND SICKNESS

This paper focuses upon Kabbalistic theology in the formation of Jewish millennial movements, particularly the Zohar and the Lurianic Kabbalah. The Zohar (Hebrew lit. "Splendor" or "Radiance") is the thirteenth century foundational work in the literature of Jewish mystical thought written in Spain by Moses De Leon. It contains scriptural interpretations of the Torah alongside material on mysticism, mythical cosmogony, and mystical psychology. **Lurianic Kabbalah** takes its name from Isaac Luria (1534–1572), one of the great sages of **Kabbalah**. **Lurianic Kabbalah** is considered modern **Kabbalah**, or **Kabbalah** as it was practiced from the sixteenth century to the present.

The Lurianic Kabbalah stresses the role of prayer and ritual in *tikkun olam*- repair of the World. According to this God contracted part of God's self into vessels of light—partly limiting himself—to create the world. These vessels shattered and their shards became sparks of light trapped within the material of creation. Some areas of the universe were illuminated representing goodness, while others remained in darkness representing evil. Prayer, especially contemplation of various aspects of the divinity

(*sephiroth*), is able to release these sparks of God's self, thus bringing about a reunion with God's essence, bringing them closer to a fixed world. Sickness is inevitable in this scheme of things. It is only through the performance of *mitzvot* (good deeds) that the universe will undergo a process of repair (*tikkun*). Thus healing of the world and of physical sickness run closely together. In the Messianic era the process of *tikkun* is complete and sickness will be no more. Moshiach shall mend the whole world so that all shall serve G-d in unity (*Hilchot Melachim* 11:4)

The Messianic era will witness ultimate physical and spiritual bliss:

‘All will be healed. The blind, the deaf and the dumb, the lame, whosoever has any blemish or disability, shall be healed from all their disabilities: “The eyes of the blind shall be clear-sighted, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened... the lame shall leap as a hart and the tongue of the dumb shall sing...”’ (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Kabbalah stresses the concept of “*yeridah l'tzorech aliyah*,” a descent for the purpose of ascent. The ascent is the fulfilment of the ultimate purpose in creation, the creation of a dwelling for G-d in this world. Any apparent negative happening occurs solely for the purpose of growth. Every descent in physical creation is indeed *necessary* for the purpose of an ascent to a point higher than before the descent. Evil is a necessary condition for the good. From this perspective sickness and suffering have a purpose. Every illness is a message from G-d and take appropriate spiritual action, healing ultimately comes from G-d alone but at the same time, we may, and must, use medicines that have healing powers.

‘Every Jewish *neshomah* (soul) in its *gilgul* (life cycle) in a particular body has descended in order to afford it the **opportunity** to do certain specific *mitzvos* and thus realize its potential. Its *yeridah* (descent) is for the sole purpose of a subsequent *aliyah* (ascent) and, as we will see, as everything physical is a reflection of its spiritual counterpart, so it is with everything. Every descent is for the purpose of an ascent. Indeed, there is no ascent without a **prior** descent. This is true of souls, of nations and of each individual in his own life’

(http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/80898/jewish/Yeridah-Descent-for-Aliyah-Ascent.htm)²

THE SUFFERING MESSIAH

Morgan and Weitzman (2014) note how through the centuries, the messianic tradition has provided a language through which modern Jewish philosophers, socialists, and Zionists could envision a utopian future. They note that messianic fervour has sporadically erupted throughout Jewish history as a real, concrete expression of frustrations and hopes and has regularly had significant political and social consequences. Messianism has been “a permanent and ever-present feature of Jewish history”, manifesting itself in movements, revolts and pretenders, which, commencing with the Hellenic and Roman domination of Palestine, regularly punctuated the history of the diaspora (Werblowsky 43).

The conviction that the Messiah will come is central to Orthodox Judaism:

‘The belief in the coming of the Messiah, the treasured hope of the Jew throughout all the centuries of misery and persecution, is regarded by most Jewish thinkers as the dogma of Judaism, some of them would not make this belief essential to Judaism. They consider it mainly as a “branch,” or corollary to others more important, but almost all agree that the belief in the coming of a Messiah is an important feature of Judaism. The nature and limitations of this dogma, however remained unsettled, the Jewish authorities differing widely in their conception of it, according to the material and intellectual position of the people at their respective times’ (Greenstone 1948:8-9).

There is a long tradition in Orthodox Judaism arguing that the Messiah would suffer.² The Talmud, a collection of traditions and commentaries from the Post-Biblical period (from about 300 B.C. until about 500 A.D.), mentions two messiahs—The first suffers and is rejected by his people and the second reigns gloriously. The Suffering Messiah -Messiah Son of Joseph (*Mashiach Ben-Yosef*) is likened to Joseph because his brothers reject him. He is rejected by Israel. The Glorious Messiah is referred to as Messiah Son of David (*Mashiach Ben-David*) for two reasons. First, like David he will reign gloriously over Israel and subjugate the other nations under Israel. Second, he is called Messiah Son of David in that he must be a physical descendant of David, according to the Tenach (Old Testament).

The Zohar similarly speaks of the Suffering Messiah:

‘...In the Garden of Eden there is a hall which is called the Hall of the Sons of Illness. The Messiah enters that Hall and summons all the diseases and all the pains and all the sufferings of Israel that they should come upon him, and all of them came upon him. And would he not thus bring ease to Israel and take their sufferings upon himself, no man could endure the sufferings Israel has to undergo because they neglected The Torah’ (Zohar 2:212a).

Thus there are two Messiahs one suffering and one reigning gloriously. The first suffers for the sake of Israel as he takes their woes upon himself to ease their pain. The suffering lasts from his creation until his advent.

Here I concentrate upon two Jewish ‘false’ messianic claimants- Sabbatai Sevi and Menachem Schneerson. In both instances their illness, bipolar disorder for Sevi and a stroke and subsequent death for Schneerson, have led to an intensification of millennial fervor. As I shall discuss below, both illnesses can be reframed as religious states. The discussion of Sevi derives from historical data (subsequently interpreted by renown scholar of Jewish Mysticism, Gershon Scholem) while the account of Schneerson’s illness derives from original ethnographic research conducted from 1991-2000 in Crown Heights, USA and in Stamford Hill UK (Dein 2011).

Like Jesus, the two Jewish Messianic claimants share a similar messiah template, the ‘suffering servant messiah’ template. Jesus suffered physically: Isaiah 52:14 declares, ‘There were many who were appalled at Him—His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.’ His suffering was emotional: ‘All the disciples deserted him and fled’ (Matthew 26:56). Finally he suffered spiritually: ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus had the weight of the sins of the entire world on Him (1 John 2:2).

Kravitz (2010) argues that this template is related to the wide appeal and success of these three Jewish messiahs, as it offers their followers the option of vicarious atonement which relieves people from dealing with their own transgressions and permits people to evade the demanding task of assuming personal accountability for all their actions, including their transgressions.

SABBATAI SEVI

Sabbatai Sevi (sometimes spelled “Zevi” or “Zvi”) was a seventeenth century Jew who publicly proclaimed himself to be the Messiah in 1665. Sevi, an adherent to a popular Jewish theology called Lurianic Kabbalism, was a charismatic man who suffered from what now would be called manic depression. Scholem (1973: 124) asserts that Sabbatai’s behaviour, after his first two marriages, reveals the first symptoms of his mental illness. Sabbatai’s first manic episode occurred before his 20th birthday. Over time his practices became more bizarre and antinomian. He would often quote Isaiah 14:14: —‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high’, and maintained that he could literally —fly or levitate himself during his manic —up episodes (Ibid:127). While manic, he stated that he was indeed the awaited Messiah, son of David (Ibid:127).

His antinomian tendencies are well known. He would deliberately and spectacularly break the laws of Moses, eat forbidden foods and utter the sacred name of God, and subsequently claim he had been inspired to do so by special revelation. According to Kabbalist Isaac Luria, a major source of inspiration for Sabbatai Sevi, the Jewish Messiah would be a pious man, possess an immaculate soul, and have a deep connection to the world of spirits. For him, this provided a convincing explanation for his bizarre actions, for it meant that his craziness was due to the fact that he was the Messiah and that he was connected to a secret, mysterious world.

Scholem explains that Sevi rationalised his strange and antinomian conduct (during his manic phases) and perceived his —up phase as holy —mystical improvisations, which he could neither fully understand or explain (Scholem 1973:147). Sabbatai’s followers also perceived and understood the anguish and suffering that Sabbatai experienced during his —down phase, as —‘a mysterious passion in which the suffering messiah atoned for his own sins or for those of Israel’ (Ibid 148).

It was Nathan of Gaza who was famous as a prophet and who persuaded the Jewish community that Sevi was indeed the Jewish Messiah. An expert in Kabbalah, he experienced ecstatic visions that finally culminated in a vision that recognised Sabbatai’s messiahship. In 1665 Sevi heard that Nathan had the ability to prescribe the appropriate *tiqqun* (i.e., to heal,

repair or cure) for a person's troubled soul, and decided to consult Nathan about this. To Sabbatai's surprise, Nathan told him that his soul did not require *tiqqun* as Sabbatai's soul was already of a high order due to the fact that he was the Messiah! (Scholem 1973:213,214,215).

Nathan of Gaza, drew close links between Sabbatai's suffering (particularly during his —down phase) and that of the Jewish nation- he was seen to suffer on behalf of the entire Jewish nation. He also equated Sabbatai's suffering and Job's suffering (Nathan saw Job as the prototype of the messianic king) linked with descriptions he found in the Kabbalah. Based upon an angelic conviction, Nathan became convinced that Zevi was the Jewish Messiah and persuaded him as such. In 1648, he assumed his messianic vocation amid intensified apocalyptic expectation and news of terrible pogroms in Poland. Zevi gained a huge following spanning Italy, Holland, Germany, and Poland. His followers maintained that he would usher in a new age of redemption for Israel. His extreme practices were still perceived by his followers as indicating some special exalted condition of the soul (Scholem 1973:147) and it is likely that he himself regarded them as some sort of religious revelation rather than a form of mental illness. Scholem (1973:148) argues that Sabbatai's followers also perceived and understood the anguish and suffering that Sabbatai experienced during his —down 'depressive' phase, as —a mysterious passion in which the suffering messiah atoned for his own sins or for those of Israel. He was attributed with power to save the souls of sinners of past generations.

However when Sabbatai visited Istanbul in 1666, he was arrested and imprisoned by Muslim authorities. The Sultan offered him a choice: either conversion to Islam or certain death. Sabbatai chose the former. Some of his followers maintained that he had been assumed into Heaven while others surmised that the apostate was actually an imposter. Gershom Scholem (1973: 792) explains the effect of Sabbatai's apostasy on his followers:

'Sabbatai's apostasy took his close followers and his most vehement unbelievers by utter surprise. Neither literary tradition nor the psychology of the ordinary Jew had envisaged the possibility of an apostate messiah. . . . In order to survive, the movement needed to develop an ideology that would enable its followers to live amid the tensions between inner

and outer realities. Very quickly Sabbatian doctrines developed and crystallized in the years following the apostasy. Two factors were of significance: on the one hand, a deeply rooted faith, nourished by a profound and immediate experience . . . and, on the other hand, the ideological need to explain and rationalize the painful contradiction between historical reality and faith. The interaction of these two factors gave rise to Sabbatian theology, whose doctrine of the messiah was defined by the prophet Nathan in the years after the apostasy.'

The theology defined by the prophet Nathan after Zevi's apostasy saw his conversion part of an intentional strategy to assume evil's form and then kill it from within. The rationalization after the disconfirmation was that the Messiah must suffer and descend into the depths of apostasy in order to bring about the Redemption (i.e. convert to Islam). Parallels with Jesus's death are striking. As Scholem (1973:795) notes, 'When discussing the Sabbatian paradox by means of which cruel disappointment was turned into a positive affirmation of faith, the analogy with early Christianity almost obtrudes itself.'

The influence of Lurianic theology on the development of the Shabbatean movement has become a topic of intense scholarly debate but undoubtedly Zevi and Nathan drew upon Kabbalah as a source of authority, pointed to Kabbalistic texts and deployed Kabbalistic hermeneutics to support their claim (Dweck 2011).

ZEVI'S DEATH

Much has been written on the death of Sabbatai Zevi. Although Sabbatai died in 1676, the major teaching of the Sabbatians was that he only appeared to die. His death was kept secret by his inner circle of followers but soon stories circulated purporting that he was buried in a cave but when his brother inspected the grave it was empty and the cave was full of light.

According to Scholem (1973:919-920):

'Sabbatai called his brother, his wife and the rabbis who were with him, and announced: 'Know ye that I shall pass away on the Day of Yom Kippur, at the time of the *ne'ilah*. Carry me then to the cave that I have prepared for myself near the sea, and on the third day my brother Elijah shall come to the cave.' [Sabbatai then, indeed, died on Yom Kippur, at the time of

the *ne'ilah*.) When his brother came to the cave on the third day, he found the entrance barred by a huge dragon, but he said [to it] that his brother [Sabbatai Zevi] had commanded him to come and the dragon let him pass. Once inside, he found the cave empty. 'Neither our Lord nor anything else was in the cave, but it was full of light'.")

Caygill (2009) refers to Sevi's death as a 'second occlusion'. The first 'occlusion' referred to his apostasy. A theology developed according to which his death was an occultation and he would return to fulfil his messianic role. Long after the death of their charismatic leader, the *Donmeh*, still existing in Turkey today and numbering about 4,000 individuals, faithfully continue to await the return of Shabbatai Tzvi, the self-proclaimed Messiah, to finally bring about their long awaited redemption.

A number of parallels can be discerned between Zevi and Jesus Christ: prophetic recognition, violent action in the temple/synagogue, transgression of the law, questionable death, disappearance of the body from a cave, divinisation and imminent resurrection. Nathan proclaimed that pure faith, independent of the observance of the Law, was the supreme religious value that secures salvation and eternal life for the believer. Nathan's proclamation strongly resembles the declaration made by Jesus who also demanded no observance of law, merely belief in salvation through faith (Scholem 1973:283; Dimont 1971:227).

LUBAVITCH

Lubavitch, otherwise known as *Chabad*, refers to a group of Hasidic Jews comprising about 200,000 members worldwide. Their last leader, Menachem Schneerson, the Lub+avitcher Rebbe ('Rebbe' is the formal title for the Lubavitch spiritual leader) lived in Crown Heights, New York City until his death in 1994 from a stroke. Anthropologist Simon Dein conducted fieldwork amongst this movement from 1989 - 2009 and lived in the Stamford Hill community until 1995. The ethnographic data presented here derives from this fieldwork (see Dein 2011).

During his lifetime the Rebbe had always emphasized the close relationship between sickness and spirituality. Typically his followers would write to him about sickness of any degree of seriousness, both physical and mental. He would respond by asking them to check their religious artifacts, usually the *mezuzah*- a piece

of parchment called a *klaf* contained in a decorative case and inscribed with specific Hebrew verses from the Torah. The sickness in question was usually attributed to some aberration in the writing of the Hebrew text, its repair would result in healing (Dein 2002). Lubavitchers maintain that there is a one to one relationship between the Hebrew language and the physical world. Here rather we concentrate upon the Rebbe's own episodes of sickness and their spiritual implications.

From 1991, there grew an increasing fervor among the Lubavitch that their spiritual leader, might be the long-awaited Messiah, the one who would usher in the end times redemption. Like Jesus, Rebbe Schneerson never explicitly claimed that he was the Messiah, but he impressed his many followers such that many of them, if not almost all, strongly maintained that he was *Moshiach*. He was heirless and the messianic assertions were fuelled by normative Hasidic teachings that a Rebbe has the potential to be *Moshiach*. The idea that the leader of a Hasidic group could be the Jewish Messiah can be traced back to the Founder of Hasidism-the Baal Shem Tov.

In March 1992, the eighty-nine year old Rebbe Schneerson suffered a stroke that rendered him paralyzed on the right side of his body and unable to speak. His profound incapacity did little to detract his followers from their messianic assertions. Lubavitchers in Crown Heights took to carrying 'Moshiach Bleepers' at all times to alert them when the Rebbe publicly declared that he is *Moshiach*. While initially the leaders of the movement stated that the stroke was 'mild' it was not long before they admitted its seriousness

Shortly after his first stroke, a *Sefer Torah* (scroll containing the text of the Torah) was written in New York and every Lubavitcher was asked to donate a dollar towards a letter. The aim of writing this was to perfect the Rebbe's soul and, in turn, his body. By writing a perfect Torah, the **Rebbe's** soul becomes perfect again and this will affect his body.

His first stroke gave rise to arguments over his medical care, the group's future direction, and most significantly question of whether Rabbi Schneerson himself was the Messiah. In relation to his medical care, Rabbi Groner, the Rebbe's secretary and the one controlling access to him, took on the responsibility for dealing with the Rebbe's health, but his actions were severely

criticized by others, including Rabbi Krinsky, when they thought he was not pursuing sufficiently aggressive treatments. Some of these differences became public, compounded by speculation among those who did not have direct knowledge of the Rebbe's condition or treatment.

His followers made sense of the Rebbe's new disabilities in light of their belief that he might be the Messiah (Dein 2001:394):

‘Despite his profound incapacity, messianic fervor in the Lubavitch community intensified, culminating in plans to crown him as Moshiah [the Messiah]. Lubavitchers referred to Isaiah 53, “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering”, and argued that his illness was a prerequisite to the messianic arrival. . . . that the Rebbe himself had chosen to become ill and had taken on the suffering of the Jewish people. In other words not only did his suffering have a purpose but it could actually be anticipated through reading Isaiah 53. ‘

Two years later, on March 10, 1994, Rebbe Schneerson suffered a second stroke, this one rendering him comatose. Even with the Rebbe in a virtually vegetative state, his inner circle was still able to maintain a semblance of normalcy in the community. Despite the fact that he was unconscious and attached to a ventilator, his aides debated whether or not to switch off his life support. They questioned whether Schneerson had the same physical make up as other humans and they were divided as to whether or not physical interference would influence his physical state and whether his illness should be allowed to run its natural course (See Ehrlich 2004). Despite his illness his followers were unshaken, again holding fast to their belief that he could be the Messiah. One Lubavitcher Rabbi gave the following rationalization:

‘The Rebbe is now in a state of concealment. The Jews could not see Moses on Mount Sinai and thought he was dead. They built the golden calf and had a vision of him lying dead on a bier, whereas he was in fact alive and in a state of concealment. The Rebbe is in a state of *Chinoplet*, a trance-like state where the soul leaves the body. The soul of the Rebbe has to go down to lower realms to drag up the souls of the sinners. He must do this before he declares himself as Moshiah.’

According to Dein (2010:543): ‘[Rebbe Schneerson's] faithful followers saw this

[the second stroke] as a prelude to his messianic revelation and the arrival of the redemption. As he lay dying in intensive care, several hundred followers assembled outside Beth Israel Medical Centre singing and dancing—anticipating the imminent arrival of the redemption. . . . Supporters and believers signed petitions to God, demanding that he allow their Rebbe to reveal himself as the long-awaited Messiah and rise from his sickbed to lead all humanity to their redemption.’

THE REBBE'S DEATH

Three months after this second stroke, on June 12, 1994, Rebbe Schneerson died. Some of his followers cried while others danced; some fasted and others drank heavily (Mahler 2003). This did little to extinguish the belief that he could be the Messiah. Lubavitchers expressed another and this time even more startling rationalization—the idea that the Rebbe would be resurrected. In fact the funeral procession in New York City via satellite on the same day that Schneerson died showed Lubavitchers dancing and singing in anticipation of his resurrection and imminent redemption. One observer on the street stated in relation to those celebrating, ‘They were certain that any second, the hoax would end and the Rebbe would get up and lead us to the redemption right then.’

While the exact numbers are unknown, the conviction that Rebbe Schneerson would resurrect from the dead soon spread through the Lubavitch community worldwide and gained a significant following. In Stamford Hill according to Dein (2001:397) ‘Very soon, the overwhelming feeling in the community was that the Rebbe would be resurrected and that the redemption would arrive.’

Only five days after the Rebbe's death, a full-page advertisement in a widely circulated Jewish Orthodox weekly in New York City (the *Jewish Press*) declared that Rebbe Schneerson would be resurrected as the Messiah. Two years after Rebbe Schneerson's death, the *International Campaign to Bring Moshiah* placed a huge billboard beside New York's George Washington Bridge proclaiming Rebbe Schneerson was the Messiah.

Unsurprisingly the Lubavitcher expectations of imminent resurrection shocked Orthodox Jews outside the movement. Assertions of the group adopting Christian ideas arose rapidly. David Berger (2008: 26.), professor of Jewish History, past president of the Association for

Jewish Studies, and outspoken critic of Lubavitch wrote:

‘[A] large majority of Lubavitch hasidim believe with perfect faith in the return of the Rebbe as Messiah son of David. . . . The dominant elements among Hasidim in the major Lubavitch population centres of Crown Heights in Brooklyn and Kfar Chabad in Israel—perfectly normal people representing a highly successful, very important Jewish movement—believe that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson will return from the dead . . . and lead the world to redemption. Berger went on to say, “With the exception of Sabbatianism, Lubavitch messianists have already generated the largest and most long-lived messianic movement in Jewish history since antiquity’

Accounting for the Lubavitch rationalization from a social scientific perspective, Dein (2001:399) says:

‘[The] Lubavitch are not a group of fanatics. . . . They are sane people trying to reason their way through facts and in the pursuit of understanding. Like many groups whose messianic expectations fail to materialize, resort is made to eschatological hermeneutics to explain and reinforce the messianic ideology. . . . The Rebbe’s illness and subsequent death posed cognitive challenges for his followers. They made two predictions that were empirically disconfirmed: that he would recover from his illness and that he would usher in the Redemption. In accordance with cognitive dissonance theory . . . they appealed to a number of post hoc rationalizations to allay the dissonance.’

Dein continues:

Not surprisingly, these new beliefs have attracted a lot of derision from the wider Jewish community and, on account of their proclamations of the imminent resurrection of Schneerson, some have labeled [them] . . . ‘Christians’.

The significance of the Lubavitch example to the study of Christian origins is underscored by David Berger (2008:3): ‘Though largely ignored thus far, this is a development of striking importance for the history of world religions, and it is an earthquake in the history of Judaism.’³

Shortly after his death Lubavitch split between the Messianists and Non-messianists. The former group’s views are on a spectrum from the Rebbe is Moshiach, to the fact that he never died, to the claim that he is God himself (see

Dein 2011 for a discussion of this). Until now a small group of messianists continue to ‘welcome’ the Rebbe in his synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway, even preparing his chair and stander at every service, and persist in singing the *yechi*, signifying that the Rebbe is still alive. As they sing they eagerly ‘watch’ the deceased Rebbe approaching the front of the synagogue. Berger (2008: 170) writes about this ‘incarnation theology’: ‘the Rebbe is nothing but divinity, that he is indistinguishable from God, that nothing can occur without his agreement, that no one can tell him what to do, that he could answer any question instantaneously that he is entirely without limits’ .

At the time of writing the messianic fervor in the Lubavitcher community has all but abated but still a few mainly Israeli Lubavitchers, maintain that he never died and is the Jewish Messiah. My own experience in Stamford Hill is that there is little discourse about his messianic status although when questioned, a common response is that the Rebbe had all the qualifications to be Moshiach and there was no better candidate but stop short of admitting that he is Moshiach or is still alive.

However, as evidenced by the many petitions deposited there, his followers continue to flock to his gravesite—the *Ohelin* Queens Now York, in the hope of receiving blessings and miracles. But even though the Rebbe is no longer there to lead the movement, it has largely survived his death. The Rebbe has been replaced by his teachings which continue to provide both hope and direction.

CONCLUSION

Sickness and the Purification of Evil

While we may understand the convictions (like resurrection) of Christians in response to Christ’s death and those of the Shabbateans and Lubavitchers in terms of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, Reiken and Schacter 1956; Dein 2011; Komarnitsky 2014), the theory is however problematic in that we can never know whether the followers actually experienced this.⁵ In contrast here I account for these convictions through the appropriation of biblical texts which provide retrospective rationalisations. In both instances discussed above the sickness of the presumed Messiah was an essential part of the millennial scenario- they had to develop sickness before the arrival of the

Redemption and their sickness is interpreted in religious terms.

Judaism has always argued for the neutralisation rather the rejection of evil. For Hasidim evil is divinity in exile, its scattered aspects necessitate reconstitution. But such spiritual descent has its dangers and the risk of non -return is very real (see Littlewood 2013). Hasidim hold that the descent of a Rebbe into the physical world is a fulfilment of his quest for divinity and perfection. His community service strengthens his soul and is a holy mission.

While there is voluminous anthropological writing on the use of healing ritual as purification by removing the object, experience, emotion , force, spirit or person causing the sickness (Bell 2000) , sickness itself may represent a spiritual purification (Sevensky 1981), for both Sevi and Schneerson their illnesses represented a process of neutralisation of evil essential to the arrival of the Redemption. For both Sevi and Schneerson their suffering signified processes of purification of evil and atonement. In the case of Sevi his down periods signified atonement for the sins of Israel and in the Rebbe's case his stroke signified the elevation of the souls of sinners. We may draw parallels here with Jesus whose suffering and vicarious atonement was again a necessary element of the advent of the Millennium.⁴

Finally as Krawitz (2010) contends, their deaths relieve people from dealing with their own transgressions and permits people to evade the demanding task of assuming personal accountability for all their actions, including their transgressions. All threemessianic narratives draw upon the suffering servant, dying and rising Messiah template. Furthermore all three movements, Christianity, Sabbataism and Lubavitch survive the death of their messiah.⁶We may well ask whether there is a chance that a new millennial movement will arise in Judaism and perhaps even separate from mainstream Orthodoxy leading to a new religion.

Notes

- In Kabbalah the body, sin and sickness are closely aligned. The body is modeled after the soul. Each one of the physical parts is an embodiment of a part of the soul. The soul of Adam is a grand collective, all-encompassing entity that includes all the souls of mankind. Sin, by definition, separates the self from G-d. Accordingly,

the original sin separated the souls from their root in Adam on the side of holiness, and caused them to fall to the *sitra achra* (literally the realm of evil). Processes of atonement and purification will bring the fallen souls back to God and hasten the messianic arrival.

- The Jewish response to sickness involves prayer, atonement and the use of medicines.
- Orthodox Judaism maintains that the Suffering Servant refers to the Nation of Israel rather than an individual messianic figure. Knohl (2000)uses the Dead Sea Scrolls to argue that there was a messianic figure who was crucified before Jesus and his followers stated that he had been resurrected on the third day-a precursor of the resurrection narrative. While commentators sometimes point out that prior to Jesus the Servant wasn't identified with the messiah, there is some evidence that this interpretation wasn't unknown. Some authors point out that the followers of Jesus would not have expected his death.
- While Scholem (1973) contends that Shabbateism and its messianic ideology were intimately connected with the popularity and dissemination of the Lurianic Kabbalah, Idel (1988) strongly contests this and argues that in the first half of the seventeenth century knowledge of Lurianic Kabbalism was restricted to the elite, and had little to do with the spread of the movement among the masses.
- Shaul Magid's (2014) "*The Divine / Human Messiah and Religious Deviance: Rethinking Chabad Messianism*" questions the common idea that the belief of some members of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement in the messiahship of their deceased Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, is best seen as a Christianizing heresy. For him such messianism perhaps bear a closer resemblance to the occultation of the twelfth imam in Shi'ite Islam than to Christianity, but is also rooted in a number of well-known Hasidic sources and may represent a tradition stretching back to the Second Temple period.
- Indeed the parallels between Lubavitcher Messianism and early Christianity have been drawn (see Marcus 2001)

- Timpe (1999:220) writes that cognitive dissonance occurs when:
- ‘An individual holds beliefs or cognitions that do not fit with each other (e.g., I believe the world will end, and the world did not end as predicted). Non-fitting beliefs give rise to dissonance, a hypothetical aversive state the individual is motivated to reduce. . . . Dissonance may be reduced by changing behavior, altering a belief, or adding a new one.’
- Aside from Judaism and Christianity, there are examples of gods who die and subsequently return to life found in the religions of the Ancient Near East, Biblical and Greco-Roman mythology traditions. Included here are Osiris and Dionysus. This concept of a dying-and-rising god was first discussed in comparative mythology by James Frazer's(1993) seminal *The Golden Bough*

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