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INTRODUCTION TO THE MILLENARIANISM AND MESSIANISM SERIES

Within Judaism and Christianity there has always been a great expectation that something monumental would happen that would transform human existence and bring an end to human history as we know it. In the Bible, from the time of the Babylonian Captivity, there has been the expectation that a messianic figure would appear who would bring about the culmination of Jewish hopes. In the subsequent centuries, as Palestine came under Greek, Syrian and then Roman control, the messianic expectation grew stronger and stronger. The Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that a great ferment and fervor existed in the period just before the beginning of Christianity.

And, of course, Christianity as a religion began as a claim that the messianic expectation of Judaism had been fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The early Christian texts, especially the four gospels, portray the life and death of Jesus as historically linked to biblical messianic expectations, especially as put forth in the book of *Isaiah*. However, the Crucifixion did not seem to be attended with the expected political triumph of the Jewish Messiah over all of the enemies of the Jewish people. In fact, it looked like a complete defeat. But as St. Paul explained at length, it would come to be fulfilled at the time of the Second Coming of Jesus into world history. Jesus first came to expatiate the sins of mankind, and he would return to reign on earth and to inaugurate the events leading to the Day of Judgment. The most forceful and exciting statement of when, where, and how the messianic triumph would occur was that which appears in the last book of the New Testament, *The Revelations of St. John*, which played a great role in future discussions within Christendom. This work, along with sections of the *Book of Daniel*, provided a blueprint centuries later for those seeking to determine exactly when the Second Coming would occur. It named and described many symbolic figures who would appear as the dramatic climax of human history neared. It also stressed the importance of the events that would lead up to the Second Coming. These included the appearance of the Antichrist, who would try to lead the believers

astray, the conversion of the Jews to belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

In the first century of the Common Era, Jews were crushed physically and emotionally by the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Some had hoped the Messiah would arrive in time to save the Temple and the holy city. After the Roman general, Titus, captured and destroyed the city and made captives of the Jews, survivors sought clues of God's plan for when the long sought Messiah would arrive. When a rebellion against Roman rule took place in the second century, some thought its leader, Bar Kochba, was the expected Holy One. In the centuries thereafter, Jewish leaders studied various malevolent developments in Jewish history as containing possible evidences of the birth pangs of the Messiah. They looked for clues about the mighty empires that would have to be destroyed, as foretold in the *Book of Daniel*, in order for the Messianic Age to begin. They tried to calculate from the symbols in the *Book of Daniel*, how long it would be after the end of the Roman Empire.

The messianic expectations on the part of both Jews and Christians reached new heights in the late Middle Ages in Europe. On the Christian side, the preachings and writings of the Italian monk, Joachim de Fiore, provided a new and urgent reading of *Revelation* as foretelling the third and final age of human history that would soon begin.

Jewish kabbalistic thinkers in southern France and Spain sought clues about when the Messianic Age would begin in the kabbalistic interpretations of biblical texts. Numerological readings of Hebrew terms, it was hoped, would provide significant clues. The Jewish scholars investigating this lived, of course, in Christian communities in Europe. Although often isolated by medieval anti-semitic laws and regulations, some interchange of ideas, interpretations, expectations and documents occurred. In the late Middle Ages, Christians became concerned about studying the Bible in the original languages and also about finding out what secret information the Jews might have in their possession. Jews and Jewish converts were contacted and employed in Christian research centers to find out when the long awaited return of Jesus, when he would begin his thousand-year reign on earth, would take place. So, by the late fifteenth century, Christian millenarians and Jewish scholars seeking to find out when the Messiah might arrive, knew of some of each other's findings and ideas. Leading Jewish scholars interacted with important persons in the Church and State in many places in Europe. In Spain, for example, until 1492, figures like Don Isaac Abarbanel, a leading theorist on messianism, was a prominent financial court adviser, first in Portugal and then in Spain.

The many turbulent developments in Europe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries convinced both Jewish and Christian thinkers that the end of days was at hand. In the West, the forced conversion of most of Spain's Jews, the collapse of the Moorish kingdom in Spain, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and later Portugal, and the unification of Castille and Aragon were taken as indications that something monumental was starting. 1492 was seen as the miracle year, the *annis mirabilis*. The Voyages of Discovery emanating from Portugal and Spain, the new worlds they revealed and the riches they brought

back to Europe had to be part of the great Divine plan. Christopher Columbus, in his *Book of Prophecies*, told Isabella that he would find enough gold in the Americas to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem!

At the other end of Europe, the Ottoman invasions conquered Constantinople, the seat of Eastern Christianity, in 1453, and spread as far as the Balkans, Budapest, the outskirts of Vienna, and the waters around Italy. This also had to be some indication of divine significance. And in Europe, the corruption of the papacy and of the clergy, railed against by Savonarola and Erasmus, was taken as a sign of the deteriorating world that would precede the coming of the Messiah. The resurgence of Greek and Roman learning provided ammunition for those seeking clues about the ways of God in History. All over Europe, the eruption of reform movements within the Church, which led to the establishment of non-Catholic Christian states in England, Germany, Bohemia, and Switzerland, and the emergence of organized Reformed churches as powerful alternatives to Roman Catholicism, all made various visionaries think in terms of the dramatic scenarios in both the book of *Daniel* and *Revelation*. Some hardy thinkers saw the Turkish Empire as the last empire before the divine one. Others saw the pope or the papacy as the Antichrist who was about to be overthrown as a prelude to the Second Coming of Christ. Some commentators on Scripture had come to the conclusion, based on calculations drawn from *Daniel*, that the Millennium would commence 1260 years after the fall of the once mighty Roman Empire. This made it all important to figure out exactly when the Roman Empire ended. Much had to be studied and examined about the last days of the Roman Empire. Sir Isaac Newton became a super-expert on the late, late Roman Empire after it had moved out of Rome and even after it had moved out of Italy in the sixth and seventh centuries. The Scottish mathematician, John Napier, devised the system of logarithms to help in these difficult calculations.

The *Book of Daniel*, Chapter 12, verse 4, told that at the time of the end, people would move to and fro and knowledge would increase. People living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the voyages of exploration, the creation of colonies all over the world, the development of international commerce and the startling increase of knowledge in so many areas, as sure signs that the Time of the End was fast approaching.

The early modern period saw a wide variety of different and often incompatible millenarian and messianic scenarios being set forth, some of which guided the leading players in different parts of European history. A rich and often wild ferment of ideas, incorporating earlier texts, new Judeo-Christian interpretations, and elements of what was to emerge as the new science, melded together. Examining developments from 1500 onward in terms of these ideas throws quite a different light on the course of events and the motivations behind all sorts of developments, from the theocracy of Savonarola in Florence and the dramatic doings of the early reformers in Germany, to the plans advocated by early Christian Hebraists, Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and optimistic Jewish thinkers who were looking for some ray of hope after the expulsion of the Jews from Iberia. The religious controversies

that dominated English history in the sixteenth century, the religious civil wars in France, the rise of Calvinism in the Netherlands and the Dutch Rebellion, along with the religious fragmentation of the German states, and the rise of Protestant sects in Poland and Hungary, all set forth millenarian interpretations. And climactic events such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada looked to many at the time as a most important sign of God's plans for mankind.

Many Jewish scholars had figured out that 1648 would be a most important year for the Jewish world, the moment of the arrival of the Messiah. Protestants in England and The Netherlands had calculated that 1655–56 would be decisive, beginning with the conversion of the Jews. With religious issues holding such an important part in the conflicts all over Europe, millenarian and messianic thinking and acting played an exciting role in the history of the times.

So, from Portugal to Sweden to Poland to Italy to Palestine and Constantinople, there were exciting and excited messianic outpourings. For example, in Portugal in the late sixteenth century, there was constant expectation that a lost king, King Sebastian, lost in battle, would return and usher in the Messianic Age. Then, in the next century, there was a claim that Jesus would come first to Portugal to rescue the new Christian Marranos and take them with him to Palestine where they would rebuild the Temple. At the same time, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel proclaimed in 1655 that the coming of the Messiah was imminent because a Portuguese explorer had reported finding some lost tribe members in the Andes mountains. And Menasseh learned from perusing Queen Christina's copy of La Peyrère's *Du Rappels des Juifs* that the King of France would soon lead the Jews to the Holy Land where they would rebuild the Temple and where the Messiah would rule with the King of France as his Regent. Menasseh rushed back to Amsterdam to tell people that the coming of the Messiah was imminent. To prepare for this he rushed to England to get the Puritan government to re-admit the Jews as a prelude to the Messianic Age. Foreign diplomats at the time said it was impossible to talk to Oliver Cromwell about mundane business because he was only concerned about when the Messiah would come. We have an account of some Swedish emissaries who had come to London to discuss some disputes about the Russian fur trade with Cromwell. They reported that the only thing Cromwell would discuss was if there were any new reports about when the Messiah was coming.

When Menasseh ben Israel arrived in England to begin his negotiations with the British government, he was met at the dock by a Welsh millenarian with the improbable name, Arise Evans, who told him that the son of the recently beheaded King Charles I would be the Regent of the Messiah and would rule the world with him. Menasseh is reported to have said that this seemed most unlikely but that he could believe that either the King of Sweden or the King of France could play such a role. Poland, at around the same time, was being invaded by the Swedish army. Just as the Swedes seemed to be over-running the country, the Polish King held up the statue of the Black Madonna in front of the Swedish troops who immediately withered away. This was taken as a divine sign and was followed by an actual marriage of King John Casimir to the

statue of the Black Madonna. This was followed by the destruction of the various Protestant millenarian groups in Poland as a token of Polish love for the Madonna who had saved them.

The Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles asked me to organize a series of conferences on Messianism and Millenarianism in 1997–1998 in view of the growing interest and concern with the Millennium, and to present these conferences at the William Andrews Clark Library.

For over twenty years I had been setting forth my own researches into the subject, and organizing conferences of other scholars at the Clark. In 1975 I gave a paper at the Clark, in the series, *Culture and Politics*, organized by Perez Zagorin. My paper was on “Jewish Messianism and Christian Millenarianism” and dealt with the amazing interactions between Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam and the British and Dutch Christian Millenarians, and with the French Marrano theologian and courtier, Isaac La Peyrère, who was predicting that at any moment the King of France would lead the Jews back to the Holy Land and rule the world with the Messiah! After more research on such matters I was invited in 1981–82 to be the Clark Professor to organize a lecture series on the subject. I was able to bring together people working in different disciplines and in different countries. And I was able to work with an exciting group of young scholars in the bowels of the Clark, and to imbibe the fruits of rooting through the rich collection of seventeenth-century religious tracts in the Clark collection.

So, it seemed fitting that a more comprehensive group of conferences should be organized at the Clark near the end of century, bringing together people in many disciplines from Europe, Israel, Canada, Brazil and the United States.

Although the messianic and millenarian movements often were intertwined and took place in the same geographical space and chronological time, it was thought best to divide the conferences by the religious groups involved. Originally I had hoped to have conferences on Jewish messianism, Moslem millenarianism, Catholic millenarians, British millenarianism, and Continental millenarianism. For reasons beyond my control, we ended up with just four conferences, leaving the Moslem side of the story for later discussions.

In the second half of this century, the study of millenarianism has been led in part by studies such as Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Gershom Scholem’s studies on Jewish mysticism, by the studies into the forces at work in the Puritan Revolution in England and North America by Christopher Hill, Hugh Trevor-Roper and others, by the studies on millenarian religious views in The Netherlands and in Bohemia, by studies on the influence of Jacob Boehme’s mysticism, by studies on the impact of the early Quakers in England and all over Europe, and by studies on the millenarian movements and proto-Jewish ones in Transylvania and Poland. The wealth of material examined in the last fifty years of religious movements incorporating millenarian and messianic ideas, and the influences of these groups, needs a lot of cross fertilization of disciplines, scholars and ideas.

National histories have had difficulty with historical actors who moved

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