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“Glory to the Righteous One” (*Tzvi la-tzaddik*) (Isa. 24:16): The Use of Biblical Quotations in the Polemic against the Sabbatean Movement

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Abstract: Promoted by Nathan of Gaza—a reputable figure—Sabbatai Tzvi was hailed as the messiah across the Jewish communities of the medieval world, thousands flocking to his side. One of his prominent detractors was R. Jacob Sasportas, who wrote numerous letters to his peers—rabbis of the western Sephardi diaspora—in order to dissuade them from giving Sabbatai their support and prove Nathan to be a false prophet. Much of Tzvi's novel consists of his extensive correspondence on the subject, together with the responses he received. The rich language in which it is couched reflects the biblical citations on which all the parties drew in order to clarify their position and substantiate their arguments. Herein, I examine this significant but relatively neglected phenomenon, focusing primarily on Sasportas' exegesis of Scripture and the peculiar meanings the biblical text assumed within the context of the polemic.

Keywords: biblical interpretation; the Sabbatean movement; textual polemics; R. Jacob Sasportas

This article analyzes the use of Scripture in the medieval polemic against the Sabbatean movement as exemplified by R. Jacob Sasportas in his *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*. One of the greatest opponents of Sabbatai Tzvi, his book—whose very title, *The Fading Flower of Tzvi*, is a play on Isa. 28:1—contains both Sasportas' letters and those of his correspondents (Sasportas 1954, from here see: Sasportas, ZNZ). Although much of the richness of its language is due to the biblical citations that fill it, this phenomenon has been little studied to date. Herein, I thus address the way in which the writers applied Scripture to current events and their distinctive interpretation of the biblical text.

First reviewing the historical background of the controversy that occasioned the writings of the letters in *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*, I then examine the polemical exegesis of the verses Sasportas links to Sabbatai Tzvi's name. This discussion is followed by an exploration of the biblical passages to which Sabbatai Tzvi and his followers appealed in proclaiming his messiahship and the debate that raged over the question of whether the redemption had finally arrived. As Nathan of Gaza was hailed as a true prophet, I then proceed to explore the role the biblical verses adduced played in the dispute over Nathan's status as a true or false prophet and the mass prophecy that formed part of the emerging movement. Finally, I address the place Scripture held in the wranglings over Sabbatai Tzvi's personality and antinomianism, the identity of his followers, the conduct of the Jewish community heads and Ottoman authorities, and the damage the movement caused.

1. The Context in Which the Book Was Written

Sabbatai Tzvi's emergence on the stage of Jewish history was unprecedented in its effect and import, creating waves that rippled through the Jewish world for generations to come (Barnai 2014, pp. 570–94). As Gershom Scholem has demonstrated, it represented an attempt to rid Judaism of its exilic garb and clothe it in the garments of freedom (Scholem 2019, p. 60). The period in which Sabbatai Tzvi arose was marked by intense messianic and apocalyptic fervor in all the great monotheistic

religions of the world (Dan 2001b, vol. 1, p. 23; Goldish 2004, pp. 2, 8–9; Goldish 2017, vol. 2, p. 493; Gross 2013, p. 34; Schwartz 2019, p. 351). Reflecting the relentless hopelessness of Jewish diaspora existence, since the days of Abarbanel the belief in a personal redeemer had replaced Maimonides' more moderate naturalistic approach (Schwartz 2005, p. 241; Scholem 2018, pp. 62–65, 301). By the middle of the seventeenth century, the idea of a mythical messiah had become deeply entrenched in Jewish thought, blind faith in this figure lying at the heart of the theology of many Jews (Liebes 2017, p. 29; Elqayam 1993b, pp. 3–4).

Spreading swiftly across virtually the whole Jewish diaspora—Europe, Bukhara, Kurdistan, Yemen, North Africa, and America—the movement encompassed all social sectors: rich and poor, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the rabbinic elite and the simple layperson (Scholem 2018, p. 1; Goldish 2017, p. 499; Dweck 2019, p. 1). In the wake of Sabbatai's conversion, it continued as a religious sect (Elqayam 1998, p. 138; Barnai 2014, p. 15).

The catalyst for its development was Sabbatai Tzvi's encounter with Abraham Nathan Benjamin Ashkenazi, known as Nathan of Gaza. Although opposite in character, the two men complemented one another (Scholem 1973, pp. 207–8; Elqayam 1993b, pp. 3–4; Elqayam 2016, pp. 191–92).¹ Although the movement's success was largely due to the political and conceptual circumstances of the places in which it flourished, it was also a function of the charisma of its central figures, the meeting between the “prophet” and “messiah” giving birth to a widespread movement (Barnai 2000, p. 83; Goldish 2004, pp. 4, 88; Goldish 2017, p. 495; Scholem 1973, pp. 464–65; Scholem 2018, pp. 115, 304).

A native of Izmir, Sabbatai Tzvi was regarded as strange from his birth, engaging in dramatic, unexpected actions and suffering from sharp mood swings. Today, he is frequently thought to have had a severe form of bipolar disorder (Scholem 1973, pp. 125–29; Scholem 2016, pp. 303–7; Scholem 2019, pp. 119–22). While he neither disseminated his ideas in writing nor spoke in public, his charisma captivated all those around him during manic episodes (Scholem 2019, p. 115; Liebes 1989, p. 10; Cahana 2016, p. 392). Nathan, in contrast, was a renowned mystic, serving as the movement's theologian/ideologue and one of its most prominent prophets (Elqayam 1998, pp. 147, 174). Unlike Sabbatai, he actively sought to encourage people—in particular the rabbinic elite—to join the faith and fill its ranks (Scholem 1973, p. 354; Scholem 2016, pp. 295–96). Nathan's effective propaganda thus led many to regard Sabbatai as the messiah (Scholem 2019, p. 304; Goldish 2004, pp. 1, 52, 55; Ben Ozer 1978, p. 11; Emden [1752] 2014, p. 12). As we shall see below, he also imbued Sabbatai's strange and antinomian deeds with a kabbalistic-symbolic significance (Wirszubski 1990, pp. 211, 235; Liebes 2017, p. 18). Despite Sabbatai's disorder, Nathan believed in his messiahship even more than Sabbatai himself (Liebes 1993, p. 31; Liebes 2017, p. 31).²

Born in Oran, North Africa—present-day Algiers—R. Jacob Sasportas (1610–1689) was descended from Nahmanides (eleventh generation). From an early age, he established a reputation as a Talmudic scholar, going on to serve several rabbinic offices in various North African and European Jewish communities—Saleé, Amsterdam, London, and elsewhere. During the Sabbatean crisis, he was a resident of Hamburg, where he held no official role. While known for his erudition, he also had a reputation for harshness, self-dignity, and self-confidence. As a leading rabbinic figure, he often behaved aggressively and militantly towards the leaders of the communities in which he lived and worked (Scholem 1973, pp. 523, 566–67; Moyal 1992, pp. 21–47, 55–57). He also vehemently attacked close friends who followed the false messiah—R. Aaron Zarfati, R. Isaac Nahar, and R. Isaac Aboab. In most cases, these relations were restored after Sabbatai's conversion to Islam (1 September 1666) (Moyal 1992, pp. 146, 150–52). Those with whom he corresponded included rabbinic peers from the

¹ Sabbatai Tzvi added the name Benjamin to Nathan after the only son of Jacob born in Canaan. For the bestowal of other symbolic biblical names in the movement, see (Elqayam 2016, pp. 191–92).

² The “believers” accused their rabbinic detractors of not understanding the significance of Sabbatai's actions: see (Elqayam 2019, p. 79).

Sephardi communities in Europe, his efforts at persuasion frequently failing (Moyal 1992, p. 193; Dweck 2019, pp. 17, 127).³

The challenging task of refuting Sabbateanism provided Sasportas with an opportunity to let loose the polemical aspect of his nature, break down the wall of aloofness behind which he had barricaded himself, and regain a prominent place in public life (Moyal 1992, pp. 50, 82). The collection of letters from this period contains a significant portion of his communications and some of the responses he received (Scholem 1973, p. 328).⁴ *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*—an “internal document”—serves as a rich source for the study of the beginnings of the Sabbatean movement, first being published in Amsterdam in 1737, long after its editor’s death (Schatz-Uffenheimer 2005, pp. 139–40; Scholem 2019, p. 97).

Sasportas edited and altered the letters slightly in order to demonstrate that he opposed Sabbatai Tzvi from the moment he heard about him, despite the fact that he did not initially appear to dismiss his messianic claims. While he initially credited the rumors, he changed his mind when news of Sabbatai’s antinomianism reached him, becoming a fierce and fervid detractor (Moyal 1992, pp. 128–38; Goldish 2004, p. 132; Schatz-Uffenheimer 2005, pp. 141–44; Dweck 2019, pp. 16, 158, 174).⁵

From a historical perspective, the details the letters contain do not always appear to be accurate (Scholem 1973, pp. 143–44; Scholem 2019, p. 60; Dweck 2019, p. 125). As we shall see below, they are extremely rich linguistically, Sasportas being fond of drawing expressions from Scripture and rabbinic literature via a variety of allusions (Moyal 1992, p. 76; Scholem 2019, p. 102). Hereby, he vehemently criticized Sabbatai’s followers via classical Jewish texts (Scholem 2019, p. 134).

The new movement did in fact prompt a need for an updated exegesis of authoritative Jewish sources, Scripture taking on greater significance in light of the fact that the new forms of prophecy were often delivered in a biblical style and the new Sages presented themselves as the reincarnation of scriptural figures (Scholem 1982, p. 80; Goldish 2004, pp. 53, 58). Close analysis of the sources reveals that the many of the letters make extensive use of biblical quotations.⁶ This device not only buttressed their authors’ claims, but also evoked associations in their readers, most of whom were Bible scholars. The writers frequently sought to “actualize” the biblical verses to fit their modern-day ideology. This flexible form of exegesis can be traced back to early rabbinic midrashim. As Joseph Dan notes:

Midrashic literature is characterized by the belief that every verse in the Bible carries innumerable meanings: biblical language is divine, expressing God’s unlimited wisdom that preceded the creation of the world and undergirds the universe. The Bible is thus the infinite source of divine truth, every verse within it being understandable in different and even contradictory ways without ever exhausting its significance (Dan 2001a, p. 13).

A reading of the letters evinces the impressive biblical knowledge and mastery of Sephardi scholars—in sharp contrast to early modern-day practice, where the Hebrew Bible is no longer studied systematically in Poland or Bohemia—as evinced by R. Judah Loew’s arguments, for example, made almost half a century prior to the emergence of the Sabbatean movement (Bokser 1994, pp. 34, 139; Sherwin 2006, p. 172; Ramon 2017, p. 19).

2. Messianism

The very title of Sasportas’ *The Fading Flower of Tzvi* is a play on Isa. 28:1, which depicts the moral decline of the northern kingdom of Israel at the end time: “Woe to the proud crown of the

³ For later Middle Eastern Sephardic Rabbis, see (Zohar 2001).

⁴ It does not include exchanges with Eretz Israel and Egyptian rabbis, however.

⁵ Some of the first letters published have also been preserved in his own handwriting, thus enabling comparison: see (Scholem 1973, pp. 575–78). George Washington, who edited his own letters, similarly reworked some of his earliest ones in order to hide his indecisiveness: see (Ellis 2005, pp. 19, 282).

⁶ The responsa in *Ohel Ya’akov* are also replete with wordplays, idioms, and biblical quotations/allusions—this usage perhaps being less systematic than in *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*, however: see (Sasportas 1737).

drunkards of Ephraim, and to the fading flower (*ve-tzitz novel tzvi* (וְצִיץ נֹבֵל זָבִי)) of its glorious beauty.⁷ Here, the term *tzvi* (צִיץ)—which signifies honor or beauty—is associated with degeneration, the flower that should be blossoming in fact withering and dying (Watts 1985, p. 362; Beuken 2000, p. 25; Wildberger 2002, pp. 8–9).

Traditional commentators focus on the contrast in the continuation of the verse between the glory of the flowers/fruit and the rapidity with which they fade.⁸ In his commentary (ad loc.), R. David Kimhi addresses the prophetic metaphor comparing the northern kingdom (Ephraim) to drunkards.

Sabbatai's surname being Tzvi, Sasportas hereby creates a name midrash that denigrates the false messiah. In adducing and explicating the prophetic metaphor, he adduces a phenomenon whose resplendence quickly fades. In this way, he suggests the Sabbatai's followers are ignorant inebriates like the Ephraimites.

In a letter to the Amsterdam rabbis, Sasportas responds to the rumors that Nathan of Gaza had proclaimed Sabbatai Tzvi to be the messiah:

From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One (Isa. 24:16). After Isaiah declared salvation, he uttered a loud shout: "But I say, I pine away, I pine away. Woe is me!" (ibid), because he knew this great secret—that the messiah would come after what is called "glory [tzvi] to the Righteous One". But he had no authority to say anything other than in allusions, as it is said: "For the treacherous deal treacherously" (ibid)—i.e., woe to me because the future traitors will put on the clothes of those who follow Tzvi. Thus, Habakkuk the prophet said: "The righteous shall live by his faith." (2:4) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 186a, pp. 294–95).

In the biblical text, *tzvi* denotes the glory the righteous person who is faithful to God's covenant attains, in contrast to the fate of the sinners who betray it (Kaiser 1973, p. 188; Hoffman 1993, p. 124).⁹ In the previous letter, however, it signifies Sabbatai's surname (Tzvi), whose messianic connotations appear to have led Sasportas to mourn his treachery against God. R. Abraham Miguel Cardozo (1672–1706)—the third most important figure in the Sabbatean movement—made use of this verse in support of precisely the opposite argument, contending that while the expression *tzvi le-tzaddik* refers to Sabbatai, the traitors are those who have not become his followers (Sasportas, ZNZ, 186a, p. 295; Liebes 1989, p. 15).¹⁰

According to the traditional exegetical approach, the term *tzaddik* in Isaiah signifies those Israelites who will remain after the imminent (presumably national) catastrophe, contrasting with the treacherous nations of the world who seek to harm Israel.¹¹ Sasportas' view is close to the spirit of this interpretation, regarding the *tzaddikim* ("righteous") as those who ignore the false messiah and cleave to their faith. Thereby, they form the remnant that will survive the polemic, the traitors following the false messiah without any contact with the nations of the world (a side issue in the controversy).

In the continuation, Sasportas quotes from Hab 2:4: "But the righteous person will live by his faithfulness". Here, the original intention was that the upright will be stable, because their way of life is based on faith—truth and fidelity to God's paths (Roberts 1991, p. 111; Andersen 2001, p. 208).¹² Although Sasportas presents the verse in a similar fashion, he introduces some minor changes to fit the hour. He thus identifies the "righteous" as the person who continues to cleave to God with a pure faith, not straying by believing in a false messiah. Cardozo, in contrast, understands "faith" as being that in Sabbatai Tzvi, the righteous person therefore being he or she who believes in his messiahship. The first

⁷ Biblical quotations herein follow the NRSV.

⁸ Rashi; R. Joseph Kara; R. Eliezer of Beaugancy ad loc. For all the traditional commentators, see (Cohen 2012).

⁹ According to Blenkinsopp (2000, p. 354), the *tzaddik* is God.

¹⁰ Although supporting Sabbatai Tzvi, Cardozo disputed some of the theology he and Nathan espoused: see (Yosha 2015, pp. 215–40).

¹¹ See R. Eliezer of Beaugancy, R. David Kimhi, and R. Joseph Caspi ad loc. According to R. Joseph Kara, the *tzaddik* is God. For all traditional commentators see (Cohen 2012).

¹² Rashi and R. Joseph Kara both contend that the *tzaddik* is Jehoiachin of Judah, exiled by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:8–17; 2 Chron 36:9–10).

letters of Hab 2:4 also serve as an acrostic spelling “Tzvi” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 186a, p. 295). This verse promptly became the Sabbatean ideological slogan, those who did not participate in the movement being called heretics (Elqayam 1993a, p. 13; Elqayam 1993b, pp. 34, 37; Ben Ozer 1978, p. 44).

In his letter to the Amsterdam rabbis, Sasportas subjects the name Gaza—the city in which Nathan first proclaimed Sabbatai Tzvi as messiah at Shavuot in 1665—to a polemical interpretation: “In truth, because nothing sweet has come forth from Gaza for those who wait for prophecy, nor the honey of faith from the lion’s carcass” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 7a, p. 13).¹³ This refers to Samson’s riddle: “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet” (Judg 14:14). The English “strong” renders the Hebrew *טו* (*az*), which derives from the same root as the name of the city. This wordplay suggests that the messianic movement that came forth from Gaza was bitter. In the biblical narrative, the riddle relates to the extracting of honey from the carcass of the lion Samson has killed (Judg 14:5–6) (Soggin 1981, p. 241; Niditch 2008, p. 157; Butler 2009, p. 337).¹⁴ Sasportas, however, seems to apply it to Lurianic kabbalah, Luria (1534–1572) being known in Hebrew by the acronym HaARI ha-qadosh (Ari is a lion in Hebrew). Nathan’s interest in kabbalah in general and Lurianic kabbalah in particular was one of the contributing factors to the messianic tension that arose in Judaism and prompted acceptance of the “messiah” (Wirszubski 1990, pp. 211, 244; Goldish 2004, pp. 4, 55; Barnai 2014, p. 29).¹⁵ Sasportas also adduces Gaza a little later, citing Zeph 2:4: “Gaza will be abandoned” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 7b, p. 14).

Here, he appeals to a prophecy of calamity spoken over the Philistine city portending its destruction and desolation.¹⁶ Commentators traditionally point to the fact that the prophet predicts that Gaza will suffer a bitter fate on account of its mistreatment of Judah and joy over the kingdom’s imminent fall.¹⁷ Whatever the case may be in this respect, despite their disparate times periods and circumstances, both Zephaniah and Sasportas share a hatred of the city and the acts performed therein.

In a letter to the Western communities, Sasportas expresses his disapproval of the prophets who claim to have foreseen the redemption even before the current crisis: “Long days of sorrow, days and years without redemption—they have seen false visions and held out empty hopes; frequent evidence of seers who have not seen the light of truth or engaged in prophetic illusions” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 197a, p. 308). The final clause here refers to the false prophets to whom the people and its leaders turned during the days of Isaiah: “They say to the seers, ‘See no more visions!’ and to the prophets, ‘Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions!’” (Isa. 30:10). In this ironic fashion, Isaiah presents the false prophets as speaking falsehoods and tickling the people’s ears, in contrast to the true prophets, who reprove the people and admonish them to correct their ways (Beuken 2000, p. 163; Childs 2001, p. 226; Wildberger 2002, p. 145).

Traditional commentators observe that Isaiah portrays the Judahites as preferring to hear prophecies of peace and wellbeing, thus rejecting the true prophets who opposed the policies adopted by the leadership.¹⁸ Sasportas appears to regard himself as playing a similar role to that performed by the true prophets in this regard. Just as they denounced ungrounded prophecies of salvation that threatened Judah’s survival in their view, as a rabbinic authority, he seeks to denounce the prophetic phenomenon embraced by the followers of Sabbatai Tzvi (Goldish 2004, pp. 51, 132; Scholem 2018, p. 321).

¹³ See (Goldish 2001, pp. 470–76; Goldish 2004, p. 134; Coenen 1998, p. 41).

¹⁴ R. Isaac similarly identified a word play in R. Joseph of Gikatilla’s *Sha’arei Ora*.

¹⁵ Nathan’s approach differed from Lurianic Kabbalah, however, Nathan even distancing himself from it at one point, see (Idel 1988, p. 259; Idel 1998, p. 199)—despite the fact that Sabbatai Tzvi himself favored zoharic over Lurianic kabbalah: see (Liebes 1983a, pp. 267–307; Liebes 1983b, p. 196; Idel 1998, p. 184; Scholem 2019, p. 118). For Cardozo’s view of Lurianic kabbalah, see (Yosha 2015, pp. 161–66).

¹⁶ Zephaniah himself plays on the words *גזא* (Gaza) and *עזבה* (abandoned). See also (Sasportas, ZNZ, 24b, p. 37; Berlin 1994, p. 102; Vlaardingerbroek 1999, p. 136).

¹⁷ Rashi and R. Joseph Kimhi ad loc.

¹⁸ See R. Joseph Kimhi; R. Joseph Caspi ad loc.; and below.

With respect to the rapid spread of the Sabbatean movement and its recognition by the Jewish community leadership, Sasportas observed:

This has been an innocent year in which letters have arrived from No-Amon/Thebes, Egypt, Eretz Israel, Aram, and all Asia heralding our redemption and the name of the heartless youth, a false prophet in Gaza by the name of Nathan. He not only proclaimed himself a prophet but even enthroned the King Messiah over all Israel—a fool and a boorish, wicked man¹⁹ known in Israel as Sabbatai Tzvi, may his name be erased. All Israel have called on his name, recognizing him as king, savior, redeemer, the only deliverer of Israel. The ministers and deputies have also put their hand to his shoulder—the sages who have written us here (Sasportas, ZNZ, 104b, p. 170).

The phrase “heartless man” is drawn from Prov 7:7, where it signifies an ignorant person who is easily led astray (Shupak 2007, pp. 17, 90; Hurovitz 2012a, p. 237). As the traditional commentators observe, this denotes a leader unable to foresee the consequences of his actions. This interpretation is consistent with Sasportas’ caution against such blindness.²⁰ In order to demonstrate the danger attendant upon the rabbinic elite’s belief in Sabbatai’s messiahship, thereby bestowing legitimacy upon it, Sasportas also alludes to Ezra’s denunciation (9:2) of the leadership’s taking of foreign wives, an act that laid the small remnant of returnees open to the risk of assimilation (Myers 1965, pp. 76–77; Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 175).²¹

Another significant claim Sasportas raises against the Sabbateans was that the time had not yet come for the messiah’s advent, which cannot be brought forwards or preempted:

If you arouse or awaken love to the point that it awakes of its own accord, without fear of the case of the Ephraimites, who turned back on the day of battle, because God has made her forget wisdom and draw insight from other attempts, and from—Sanballat’s letter to Nehemiah: You and the Jews are thinking of rebelling. You have become their king and given them prophets to call you King of Judah in Jerusalem (Sasportas, ZNZ, 64a, pp. 98–99; also 36b, p. 60).

The opening sentence comes from Canticles: “That you do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases” (Cant 2:7). In the original, the girl’s intention appears to have been to dissuade the Jerusalemites not to interfere in her relationship with her beloved, but let it develop at its own pace (Exum 1994, p. 118; Assis 2009, pp. 61, 178).²² The doublet may serve to strengthen the sentiment (Zakovitch 1992, p. 61). This interpretation suggests that the proclamation of the advent of the messiah was premature.

Significantly, R. Joseph Kimhi relates this verse to the hastening of the redemption, maintaining that the only way to bring it closer is through repentance—i.e., observing the commandments and doing good deeds. Other ways, which he compares to carnal lust between animals, are of no effect. Kimhi bases this view on a series of biblical examples of attempts to accelerate the redemption, which not only failed, but also wrought extensive damage.²³ In appealing to this verse in opposing Sabbatean messianism, Sasportas thus followed R. Joseph Kimhi’s lead.

Seeking to evince the foolishness and danger of preempting the redemption, Sasportas then cites the reckless behavior of the Ephraimites, who desired to gain a foothold in the Ayalon Valley close to Gath, a foolhardy enterprise that ended in disaster (1 Chr 7:20–23) (Japhet 1993, p. 181; Galil 1995, p. 119).²⁴ He then cites Job 39:17: “Because God has made her forget wisdom” in arguing that God can make people ignorant (Habel 1985, p. 547). This substantiates his claim that decisions should never be

¹⁹ Cf. “But he whose heart is presumptuous in giving a judicial decision, is foolish, wicked and arrogant” (Abot 4:7).

²⁰ See R. Joseph Kimhi and R. Joseph Caspi ad loc.

²¹ The traditional commentators employed this expression (השרים והסגנים) in exegeting other passages that speak of the elite: see Rashi on Amos 4:1; R. Joseph Kimhi on 1 Kgs 21:8; Gersonides on 1 Sam 17:4.

²² According to Zakovitch (1992, pp. 64–65), she beseeches them not to press love or awaken her from a love dream.

²³ See R. Joseph Kimhi ad loc., based on Num 14:44–45; Deut 1:42; 1 Sam 6:19; Isa 60:22; Jer 29:5. See also b. Sanh. 92b.

²⁴ While the traditional commentators also note the Ephraimites’ haste in this regard, they do so for other reasons. Rashi argues that they were not sufficiently familiar with local customs, the Meiri that they acted without being commanded to do so by God and were thus defeated: see each ad loc.

taken impetuously. Sanballat's letter to the Persian authorities similarly misrepresents Nehemiah's intentions as though seeking to be proclaimed king, an act that would have been regarded as a rebellion and have brought catastrophe upon the heads of the returnees (Neh 6:5–9).

Sasportas further notes that the redemption will come in its own time and cannot be induced by citing Zech 4:6: "Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, which hovers in your spirit over the messiah" (Sasportas, ZNZ, 55b, p. 88). In their original context, this verse relates to the rebuilding of the Temple or the anointing of a king during the restoration period (Meyers and Meyers 1987, p. 267; Peterson 1984, p. 239; Wolters 2014, p. 120). Although Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and R. Eliezer of Beaugancy all understand it in this sense, R. Joseph Kara applied it to the redemption of the entire nation from the Babylonian exile, an exegesis more in line with the spirit of the period we are currently addressing, during which messianic redemption stood at the center of the Jewish agenda.²⁵

In the context of the messiah's advent, Sasportas argues that, while patience is required, despair can never be entertained. Here, too, he appeals to two scriptural verses: "Lest you say: The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved—i.e., trust deeply in God and let your heart take courage and trust in God" (Jer 8:20; p. 27:14) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 209a, p. 323). In Jeremiah, the Judahites are in despair in the face of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple (Carroll 1986, p. 112; Lundbom 1999, p. 534; McKane 1986, vol. 1, p. 195).

Interestingly, Rashi and R. Isaiah di Trani both relate to the political situation during the period under discussion, noting that the people had despaired of Egyptian aid in the face of the Babylonian advance. R. Joseph Kara, in contrast, more generally addresses the people's impatience at the exile and wait for deliverance. Just as we saw above, this broader approach is more compatible with the events during Sasportas' lifetime.²⁶

The second, more optimistic, quote is from Psalms, where it serves to encourage those who believe in God and hope for the salvation that will ultimately arrive (Weiser 1971, p. 254; Kraus 1988, p. 337). This is customarily understood as relating to deliverance from the wicked or enemies of one sort or another. Sasportas could thus weave it into his argument to boost the morale of the opponents of the Sabbatean movement.²⁷

Countering the claims made by the Sabbatean R. Aaron Zarfati, Sasportas maintains that, following a lengthy wait, the redemption will come swiftly, precisely as is happening falsely now:

I interpreted the verse "If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (Hab 2:3), because it is contradictory. My exegesis of "If it seems to tarry, wait for it" is that there are many ages in the days of the messiah. When it comes, it will come suddenly and quickly. I also understand "I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly" (Isa. 60:22) as when the end comes, I will bring it without delay. And if the people say: Another three or four weeks you will hear that none of his words have fallen to the ground because the Sultan has placed the crown of the kingdom on his head and given him all of Judah and Jerusalem, then no longer will Jacob be ashamed (Isa. 29:22) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 17b, p. 28).

R. Zarfati appeals to three scriptural verses in this passage. In the first—Hab. 2:3—the prophet encourages his audience to wait patiently and not despair, knowing that the redemption will eventually come (Roberts 1991, p. 110; Andersen 2001, p. 207). Interestingly, according to Rashi this suggests that a prophet will arise in the future who will announce the precise date of the fall of Babylon and the inception of the redemption (see Rashi ad loc.). The Sabbateans may have taken it as support for their prophetic model (Nathan) and his heralding of the arrival of the redemption: while the Jewish community had long been awaiting salvation, it was now imminent and would come quickly. The phrase "I will accomplish it quickly" is drawn from Isa. 60:22 and indeed relates to the Restoration

²⁵ See each ad loc.

²⁶ See ad loc.

²⁷ See R. David Kimhi, R. Isaiah di Trani, and the Meiri ad loc.

(Sasportas, ZNZ, 17b, p. 28). This seems to indicate that, when the time comes, the latter will happen suddenly (Hoffman 1993, p. 268; Koole 2001, pp. 261–62; Paul 2008, p. 245; Blenkinsopp 2003, pp. 217–18). In this context, in the Babylonian Talmud, R. Alexandri states in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: “If they are worthy, I will hasten it; if not, [the messiah] will come at the due time” (b. Sanh. 98a). If Israel repents, the redemption may thus come earlier.

Most traditional commentators followed the lead of the Talmudic interpretation of this verse and that from Daniel, in which the matter is adduced.²⁸ In his commentary on Daniel, however, R. Isaiah di Trani observes that, while Daniel is said to be wise, a resolver of riddles, and imbued with God’s spirit, he never suggests that the redemption should be hastened. We also must thus refrain from doing so. In order to base his argument on the prohibition against accelerating the redemption, R. Isaiah cites the verse from Isaiah quoted above.²⁹ Herein, he differs from the opinion held by the Sabbateans.

Interestingly, following Nathan’s proclamation, a penitential trend did commence amongst the Jewish communities (Ben Ozer 1978, p. 41; Glikel 2006, p. 151; Scholem 1973, pp. 367–68, 465–66; Scholem 2019, p. 306). According to R. Zarfati, the redemption was therefore on the doorstep.³⁰ The final verse—taken from Isa. 29:22—states that, just like Abraham was delivered, so Jacob (as representative of Israel) will also be (Blenkinsopp 2000, pp. 409–10; Beuken 2000, pp. 126–27; Childs 2001, p. 226; Wildberger 2002, p. 114).³¹ The choice of this text is not coincidental, Zarfati often creating very short name midrashim on Jacob, Sasportas’ given name, in his polemical writings (Sasportas, ZNZ, 18b, p. 29).

The Sabbateans also appealed to Isa. 7:9: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” to back up Sabbatai’s messianic claims. Herein, Isaiah creates a word play—*im lo ta’aminu, ki lo te’amenu* (לֹא תִאֱמִינוּ, כִּי לֹא תִאֱמִנּוּ)—in calling upon Ahaz of Judah and his ministers to wait for salvation rather than, in their desire to avoid submitting to Aram and Israel, subject themselves to Assyria (Galil 2001, pp. 62–65; de Jong 2007, pp. 195–202; Johnston 2009, p. 108; Aster 2017, p. 88). Speaking in God’s name, he thus warns the people that if they do not believe him, they do not deserve his aid (Hoffman 1993, p. 51; Childs 2001, p. 64; Watts 1985, p. 93; Wildberger 1991, p. 302). According to the traditional interpretation of this verse, rather than relating to redemption in all its possible forms, it indicates more God’s belief in human beings, expressed in his commitment to preserve them.³²

When applied to the Sabbatean movement, Sabbatai’s followers appear to have threatened their opponents that God would abandon them and leave them to their fate.

3. Sasportas’ Arguments against Nathan of Gaza and Mass Prophecy

The renewal of prophecy in general and Nathan’s support of Sabbatai in particular both helped legitimize the Sabbatean movement.³³ Sasportas thus invested great effort in seeking to prove that Nathan was a false prophet (Goldish 2004, pp. 7, 136; Dweck 2019, p. 169).³⁴ False prophets and the need to confront them are well documented in the Hebrew Bible.³⁵ According to Sasportas, speaking falsehood is already prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:16 [12]) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 26b, p. 40; 51a, p. 83).³⁶ On several occasions, he argues that the messiah’s advent will not necessarily be

²⁸ Rashi; Kimhi; Ibn Ezra, second commentary on Dan 12:42.

²⁹ See R. Isaiah di Trani on Dan 12:3.

³⁰ In his response to this letter, Sasportas (ZNZ, 25b, p. 39) notes that the timing is still premature.

³¹ For a similar view, see R. Eliezer of Beaugency, ad loc.

³² See Rashi, R. Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, R. Joseph Caspi, and R. David Kimhi ad loc.

³³ For the revival of prophecy in the days of Joseph Karo and even earlier, see (Altshuler 2016, pp. 81–104) (Hebrew). For revelation during the Second Temple period, see (Goodman 2007, pp. 350–51).

³⁴ Differing from biblical prophecy, Nathan’s prophetic activity centered primarily around his ability to read people’s inner thoughts: see (Scholem 1973, pp. 213–14; Freimann 1912, p. 46).

³⁵ See 1 Kgs 22:6ff; Mic 3:5–12; Isa. 30:10; Jer 14:13–14, 27:9; Ezek 13:1ff; etc.

³⁶ For his use of Psalms to denounce lying (Ps 31:18[19], 119:86 [94], 120:2), see *ibid*, 56b, p. 89; 58a, p. 91; 65a, p. 100. Most of the traditional commentators address the prohibition against giving false testimony from a legal perspective: see Rashi; R. Joseph Kara (second version on Ruth 1:2); the Meiri on Prov 6:16; 16:1; Gersonides on Deut 19:19; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Judges, Hilkhot Edut 17:1.

heralded by a prophetic utterance, prophecy only being renewed after the true messiah has appeared.³⁷ In line with this approach, he wrote R. Aaron Zarfati, stating: “They will instruct you and tell you that I have spoken the truth, that the coming of the messiah does not require a prophet—but after his advent, I will pour out my spirit on all mankind, etc.”³⁸ The second part of this sentence alludes to Joel 2:28 [3:1], which in its original context refers to the fact that prophecy will only return in force after the redemption (Dweck 2019, p. 181).³⁹ R. Lieb ben Ozer attests that the Sabbateans gave a different interpretation to this verse: the messiah having already come, the mass prophecy occurring is true and not false (Ben Ozer 1978, p. 57).

In a number of letters, Sasportas observes that were there indeed to be a herald of the messiah, the only person who could fulfill that role would be Elijah.⁴⁰ He thus cites Mal 4:5 [3:23]: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” The expectation of Elijah’s return—having not died as a mortal—in relation to the redemption is well documented in post-biblical literature, in particular apocalyptic texts (Smith 1984, p. 342; Snyman 2015, p. 189). Some traditional exegetes highlight the fact that Elijah will appear again before the end of days.⁴¹

Expressing astonishment over the fact that Nathan had not yet delivered any signs or wonders to confirm his prophecy, R. Raphael Supino refers to him as “one who boasts of gifts not given” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 50b, p. 82). This alludes to Prov 25:14, which relates to the treacherous and fickle person who does not keep his word (Shupak 2007, p. 170; Murphy 1998, p. 192; Clifford 1999, p. 225; Hurovitz 2012b, p. 503).⁴² In the continuation of this letter, he calls Nathan a “stumbling block” (*even negeph*)—a term Isaiah employs to describe how those who do not walk in God’s path will eventually come to ruin.⁴³

In order to reinforce his claim that Nathan is a false prophet, Sasportas also quotes Jeremiah’s dispute with Hananiah b. Azzur: “As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet” (Jer 28:9) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 50a, p. 81; 187a, p. 296). As a way of testing the veracity of his rival’s prophecies of imminent deliverance, Jeremiah says that they will be proven true if they come to pass, not being conditional like prophecies of rebuke (Carroll 1986, 554; Lundbom 2004, p. 335; Allen 2008, p. 316).⁴⁴ He may, in fact, be suggesting that historical experience teaches that such prophecies are never fulfilled (McKane 1996, vol. 2, pp. 719–20).⁴⁵ This view closely corresponds to Sasportas’ position in relation to the Sabbatean movement.

Replying to R. Raphael Supino, Sasportas also eruditely combines two passages relating to peace prophecies: “The prophet has outwardly healed the brokenness of the daughter of my people, saying, ‘Peace to those who far off and to the close redemption is nigh’” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 53a, p. 85). The first citation is from Jer 6:14: “They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ but there is no peace.” These prophets apply a band aid to wounds, pacifying the people with false assurances.⁴⁶ The danger their optimism poses lies in the fact that they are hostages to

³⁷ Ibid, 11a, p. 20. See also 194b–195a, p. 305.

³⁸ Ibid, 25b, p. 39. See also 97b, p. 148.

³⁹ Cf. (Crenshaw 1995, p. 164; Barton 2001, p. 94). The traditional commentators paint a similar picture.

⁴⁰ Sasportas, ZNZ, 25b, p. 39; 26a, p. 40; 55a, p. 88; 66a, p. 103; 101b, p. 154, etc. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Kings 12:2. (Goldish 2004, p. 134; Altshuler 2016, pp. 119–20).

⁴¹ See Ibn Ezra (commentary handed down to a disciple), R. Eliezer of Beaugancy, and R. Isaiah di Trani ad loc.

⁴² The traditional commentators remain closer to the text, understanding it as referring to a person who vows to give charity or a gift and does not keep his word: see Rashi and R. Joseph Kimhi ad loc.

⁴³ Isa. 8:14; (Raday and Rabin 1989, vol. 2, p. 353; Kaddari 2006, p. 695; Blenkinsopp 2000, p. 242); Rashi ad loc.; R. David Kimhi on Gen 4:7.

⁴⁴ See also (Applegate 1997, p. 85; Deut 18:20–22).

⁴⁵ The peace to which false prophets so often alluded symbolizes success, prosperity, and wellbeing: see (Sharp 2000, p. 431; 2003, p. 120). Jeremiah only denied the immediate arrival of salvation, of course, not its very possibility: see (Rom-Shiloni 2009, pp. 215–16).

⁴⁶ Jeremiah represents the false prophets as quacks or idol healers, when the situation in fact calls for surgical intervention: see Rashi and R. Isaiah di Trani ad loc., both of whom regard the verse as relating to false prophets (McKane 1986, p. 146; Craigie et al. 1991, p. 104; Allen 1994, p. 86).

their audience, thus being incapable of changing their ways and plunging the people into disaster (Carroll 1986, p. 198; Lundbom 1999, p. 430).

The second verse is drawn from Second Isaiah: “Creating the praise of the lips. ‘Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will heal him’” (Isa. 57:19). In its original context, this is a prophecy of consolation given by the prophet to those who had returned to Zion and fallen into hardship (Hoffman 1993, p. 260; Paul 2008, p. 433).⁴⁷

Hereby, Sasportas fiercely denounces Nathan and his declaration of the imminent redemption, arguing that it will bring calamity upon the people in the same fashion as in the case of Hananiah, a false prophet from the First Temple period (Jeremiah 28).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Sabbatean movement was its popular ecstatic prophecy, which erupted on an unprecedented scale, primarily amongst the uneducated lower classes (Scholem 2019, pp. 137–39; Elqayam 1998, p. 172; Coenen 1998, pp. 58–59).⁴⁸ Sasportas’ letters clearly indicate that this was a growing phenomenon, convincing many that Sabbatai Tzvi was the messiah:

Many worthless and reckless people (*rekim u-phohazim*) have, indeed, begun prophesying in this land. They have made themselves like convulsers who fall to the ground and speak nonsense and foolishness and predict the future—and are believed. Every empty-minded person devoid of sense (*adam hasar-lev*) calls them true prophets, giving thanks to God that he has given us a prophet in our midst and making so bold as to speak against the sages of the Mishna and gemara (Sasportas, ZNZ, 115b, p. 186).⁴⁹

According to R. Jacob Emden (1698–1776), one of the slightly later leading opponents of the Sabbatean movement, the mass prophecy that broke out in Izmir was a fulfillment of Joel 2:28 [3:1] (Emden [1752] 2014, p. 25).⁵⁰ As we have seen above, Sasportas, who also makes use of the same verse, thought that this prophecy had to yet to come about.

Sasportas refers to the simple folk who flocked to Sabbatai Tzvi as “worthless and reckless.” In the Hebrew Bible, this phrase is applied to those who followed Abimelech, Jephthah, and David at the beginning of his career (Judg. 9:4; 11:3; 1 Sam 22:2).⁵¹ Marginal groups, they had no possessions or inheritance, thus wandering around between settlements seeking challenges and attaching themselves to rebellious and dubious leaders (Avraham 2011, pp. 21–37; Sasson 2014, p. 379; Altman 1978, pp. 14–17). The expression “devoid of sense” likewise alludes to a term that occurs twice in Proverbs, denoting a fool who has no foresight.⁵²

Sasportas’ writings evince that many women participated in the mass prophecy movement (Rapoport-Albert 2011; van der Haven 2012, pp. 41, 61).⁵³ In one passage, he refers to the “women who sew bands on their wrists (*metaphrot kesatot*)”—an allusion to Ezek. 13:18. Herein, Ezekiel accuses those who followed the false women prophets who arose on the eve of the destruction of the First Temple of not only failing the people, but also actively bringing down catastrophe upon their heads.

⁴⁷ Like Jeremiah, Isaiah employs medical imagery, pointing out that only God can heal the people’s wounds: see (Koole 2001, pp. 109–11; Childs 2001, p. 472). Interestingly, Rashi and R. Joseph Kara (ad loc.) treat “near” and “far” as religious categories—i.e., observance or non-observance of the commandments. R. David Kimhi (ad loc.), in contrast, perceives it in geographical terms—i.e., proximity or distance from Jerusalem.

⁴⁸ For further, slightly later, testimonies, see (Ben Ozer 1978, p. 8; Freimann 1912, p. 49; Emden [1752] 2014, pp. 24–27).

⁴⁹ See also 115b, p. 186.

⁵⁰ See also (Goldish 2004, p. 123). For Emden as one of the greatest polemicizers against the Sabbatean movement, see (Liebes 2007, p. 198).

⁵¹ The traditional exegesis of Judg 9:4 portrays this group as scoundrels uninterested in improving society: see R. David Kimhi, Gersonides, and R. Isaiah di Trani’s disciple ad loc.

⁵² Prov 17:18; 24:8; R. David Kimhi; Gersonides on Prov 17:18; (Shupak 2007, p. 168; Hurovitz 2012b, pp. 381, 493).

⁵³ Cf. (Coenen 1998, p. 59; Ben Ozer 1978, p. 54; Emden [1752] 2014, p. 24). The phenomenon was also known amongst the Spanish expellees, not long before the period we are discussing: see (Grossman 2003, p. 289). It was also a feature of seventeenth-century England: see (Mack 1992). For the biblical and ancient Near Eastern period, see (Hamori 2015; Stökl 2012, pp. 216–17; Nissinen 2017, pp. 61, 73, 98, 118).

intimidating the righteous and encouraging the wicked (Sasportas, ZNZ, 115b, p. 186) (Eichrodt 1970, pp.171–72; Allen 1994, p. 196).⁵⁴

Sasportas also charged the Sabbatean “prophets” with possessing a “spirit of falsehood (*ruah sheker*).” This language is drawn from 2 Kgs 22:20–22 (Sasportas, ZNZ, 62b, p. 97).⁵⁵ In the biblical text, the “spirit of falsehood” is a type of prophetic entity sent by God in order to lead the king astray, Ahab ultimately falling in battle.⁵⁶ This forming a theological aporia, R. David Kimhi observes that those seeking to understand the verse literally find it difficult. In his view, it refers only to God’s punishment of Ahab, who deserved death at the hands of heaven, and not to true prophets. R. Joseph Kara similarly argues that no one knows precisely what kind of spirit it was.⁵⁷

Sasportas thus appears to be saying that if God was involved in any way in the mass prophesying of the Sabbatean movement, he was testing the people.⁵⁸

A contemporary witness, Thomas Coenen, similarly attributes the prophecy given by Moses Serviel to the false spirit of Ahab’s prophets (Coenen 1998, p. 65).

Sasportas also appealed to Deut. 18:19 to undermine Nathan’s credibility: “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.”⁵⁹ Here, he argues that if Nathan was a true prophet, the rabbis who rejected him would be liable to divine punishment. Having not received any, he must be a false prophet (Sasportas, ZNZ, 42a, p. 67).

4. Sasportas’ Attacks on Sabbatai Tzvi and His Followers

In order to undermine the legitimacy of the false prophet, Sasportas also cited biblical verses traditionally associated with the coming of the messiah that in his view Sabbatai Tzvi had not fulfilled. One of these was Zech 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” This originally relates to a future king from the house of David, over the years then being transferred to the King Messiah (Wolters 2014, p. 287).⁶⁰ Sasportas similarly wonders why the nations and kings have not bowed in fear and immediately recognized Sabbatai Tzvi as Ps. 72:11–17 describes as happening when the messiah comes—another passage that also originally referred to an earthly king rather than the messiah (Sasportas, ZNZ, 7a, p. 13; 12b, p. 21; 231a, p. 349).⁶¹

Sasportas further sought to counter Sabbatai’s credentials on the basis of his dubious acts, in particular his antinomianism, which, as we saw above, was kabbalistically–symbolically disseminated by his followers.⁶² Thus, for example, he annulled all the fasts ordained to commemorate the destruction of the Temple (Sasportas, ZNZ, 32a, p. 53; 37b, p. 61; 41b, p. 66, etc.).⁶³ According to the written

⁵⁴ The description relates to their dress or the mantic techniques they practiced: see (Greenberg 1983a, p. 239; Kasher 2004, p. 303). According to R. David Kimhi (on v. 19), these women intimidate and seduce the innocent righteous into heeding their prophecies while predicting long life for those who pay them well.

⁵⁵ See also 74b, 114; 117b, 189. According to the Sages, this was the spirit of Naboth the Jezreelite, killed on the orders of Jezebel, Ahab’s wife: see b. Sanh. 89a. Sasportas states this explicitly in the first letter quoted here.

⁵⁶ 1 Kgs 22:34–40. See (Gray 1970, pp. 452–53; Devries 1985, p. 268).

⁵⁷ See each ad loc.

⁵⁸ See Deut 13:1–4; (Nelson 2004, p. 171). According to Rashbam (Samuel b. Meir), this relates to those prophets who prophesy with the help of unclean spirits, God only empowering them in order to test Israel. R. Joseph Bachor Shor (ad loc.), on the other hand, notes that even the true prophet who speaks favorably of idolatry thereby becomes a false prophet. For the test, see Maimonides, Preface to the Commentary and *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:24.

⁵⁹ m. Sanh. 11:5; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Love, Hilkhot Yesod ha-torah 2–3.

⁶⁰ For messianic exegesis, see b. Sanh. 99a and Rashi there; R. Isaiah di Trani on Zech 9:9. In the commentary he handed down to a disciple, however, Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) objects to the view that this verse deals with the King Messiah.

⁶¹ See (Weisman 1995, p. 296; Weinfeld 1995, p. 216). Ibn Ezra (first commentary on p. 2:6) and R. David Kimhi (on p. 72:20) suggest that the king is either Solomon or the messiah.

⁶² For the idea that Sabbatai Tzvi married his third wife, Sarah the Ashkenazi, known for her disreputable reputation, in line with God’s command to Hosea to marry a harlot in order to prompt the people to repent from their idolatry (Hos 1:2–9), see (van der Haven 2012, p. 44).

⁶³ Cf. (Scholem 1973, pp. 236–37, 256; Goldish 2008, p. 397). This behavior, which appears to have been well known well even before Sabbatai Tzvi’s proclamation as messiah, may well have been a function of a mental disorder: see (Goldish 2015, p. 170). For additional testimony, see (Ben Ozer 1978, p. 8; Freimann 1912, p. 48).

correspondence, he based this decree on Zech 8:19: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace” (Sasportas, *ZNZ*, 53b, p. 85; 218b, p. 335; 234b, p. 353; 236b, p. 355).⁶⁴

In its original context, this verse describes the emotions of the returnees regarding the imminent advent of the messiah (Knohl 2019, p. 73).⁶⁵ According to Sabbatai Tzvi, the days of the messiah had, in fact, arrived, it thus being possible to transform the “Three Weeks” (*beyn ha-metzarim*) between 17 Tammuz and Tisha B’Av from a period of mourning into a redemptive celebration (Cahana 2016, pp. 394–97).

Sasportas also quotes a letter sent by R. Joseph Halevi of Livorno to R. Hosea Nantawa of Alexandria that addresses the issue of annulling the commandments:

Be shocked (*šomu šamayim*), be utterly desolate at this, under this the earth trembles. He was even so bold as to issue an edict to all the people to eat and drink on fast days, the officials and their deputies even participating in this in and around Izmir and Alexandria, saying: Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord. They shall rise in the morning to sing and praise in the synagogue as on a feast day and arise to laugh and go to their tents joyful and glad of heart over all the good their God has given them to eat to abundance and fill the belly and fine clothing (*mekhasseh atik*) (*ZNZ*, 115b, pp. 186–87).

The first sentence in this passage is drawn from Jer 2:12, in which the prophet expresses his astonishment over a particularly abhorrent form of conduct (Lundbom 1999, p. 267; Hoffman 2001, p. 136; Allen 1994, p. 42).⁶⁶ The “earth trembles” comes from Prov 30:21–23 and denotes the mental turmoil caused by a series of intolerable events that have disturbed the social order.⁶⁷

Halevy then quotes a verse from Ezra 9:2. As we saw above, Sasportas also appeals to this text, which represents the heads of the community as the being first to violate the commandments. He then proceeds to describe the act of eating and drinking on fast days in a depiction closely corresponding to the sin of the golden calf (Exod 32:6): “They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.”⁶⁸ Rashi and Nahmanides understand this verse as referring to a bloody, orgiastic rite God has not commanded.⁶⁹ In my opinion, it may allude to an ecstatic ritual, Sasportas thus pointing to the prophetic phenomenon characteristic of the Sabbatian movement.⁷⁰

The reference to going to their tents is taken from 1 Kgs 8:66. Although this alludes to the people returning home after the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the command “To your tents!” (with minor variations) signifies rebellion, as in the stories of Sheba son of Bichri and Jeroboam son of Nebat (2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16) (Gray 1970, p. 235). The rejoicing and contentment indicate a sense of arrogance, however frequently also being associated with drinking (Cogan 2008, p. 290).⁷¹ I suggest that, in addition to the traditional interpretation, according to which the joy and abandonment of those who participated in the dedication of Solomon’s Temple was due to the

⁶⁴ Cf. b. Roš Haš. 18b.

⁶⁵ According to Ibn Ezra, the fast days in honor of the destruction of the Temple will no longer be observed during the redemption, not having been given by a prophet: see his second commentary on Esth 9:31.

⁶⁶ Rashi and Radak cite the fact that the heavens will be shaken in precisely the same way as the earth was: see ad loc.

⁶⁷ “Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when glutted with food, an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress.” See: (Shupak 2007, p. 207; Hurovitz 2012b, p. 575; Clifford 1999, p. 266; Murphy 1998, p. 236). R. Isaiah di Trani suggests that this refers to the fact that the place will tilt and totter when an unworthy leader arises: see ad loc.

⁶⁸ In its original context, the verse also appears to have alluded to sexual misconduct, a common element of foreign ritual: see (Childs 1974, p. 556; Durham 1987, p. 422; Propp 2006, p. 553).

⁶⁹ See ad loc. Judah Halevi contends that the reference here is to an uncommanded act (*Kuzari* 1:92–97).

⁷⁰ Cf. the rite performed by the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:28) and R. Joseph Caspi on Ezekiel’s reprimands (1 Kgs 20:28) regarding the people’s ritual abominations, wherein he also adduces Elijah’s clash on Mount Carmel.

⁷¹ See also Qoh 9:7; Esth 1:10; Ruth 3:7.

fulfillment of the promise given to his father David, Sasportas may also be relating to the same phenomenon amongst the Sabbateans, which evokes the incident of the Golden Calf.⁷²

These verses are then followed by two interwoven quotes. The first derives from Isa. 23:18: “Her [Tyre’s] merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to the Lord; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord.” Sasportas splits this into two, however, inserting a text from the adulterous wife in Num 5:22: “‘Now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen. Amen.’” (Bodd 1983, p. 66). Hereby, he paints a picture of the public celebrations in which the messiah’s followers engaged, which ended in disaster, perhaps like the fate of Tyre and the adulterous woman alike.

As we saw above in connection with Luria/lion, on occasion biblical names and expressions take on a kabbalistic sense. The Hebrew phrase *מְכַסֶּה אֵת* (*mekhasseh atik*), for example, which appears at the end of MT Isaiah, originally referred to fine clothing (Hoffman 1993, p. 122).⁷³ In the Talmud and Zohar, however, it alludes to the necessity of concealing esoteric doctrine.⁷⁴

Sabbatai Tzvi’s detractors were startled not only by the number of rabbinic scholars who accepted the movement’s antinomianism, but also by the Ottoman authorities’ relatively laissez-faire attitude towards it, apparently a function of their aversion to turning Sabbatai Tzvi into a martyr, thereby stirring uprisings (Barnai 2014, p. 23; Dweck 2019, pp. 121–22; Ben Ozer 1978, p. 44; Scholem 1973, p. 603; Goodman 2019, p. 402).⁷⁵ In light of these circumstances, the movement’s opponents frequently appealed to an image from Isa. 10:14: “There was none that moved a wing, or opened its mouth, or chirped” (Sasportas, *ZNZ*, 29a, p. 47; 37a, p. 60; 63a, p. 97; 106a, p. 171). In its original context, this relates to the Assyrian king’s boast that the world was at his mercy, no one being capable of stopping him from carrying out his wishes (Watts 1985, p. 150; Wildberger 1997, p. 421; Hoffman 1993, p. 64; Childs 2001, p. 92).⁷⁶ When applied to the Sabbateans, it served as a denunciation of the scholars who raised no alarm at the movement’s antinomianism, and possibly also the authorities’ relatively relaxed response.

In a letter to the Western communities, Sasportas adduces the damage their rabbis were doing:

A scoundrel and a villain man is the leader. He turns to the prophet—a teacher of lies who is the tail who attacks all those who, lagging in faith, tag after him and the little foxes that ruin the vineyards—tail turning tail. And with torches of fire they led their followers astray after falsehoods, burning the sacred crops of the Sages. And the harvest of the wisdom of our Sages and their vineyards neatly structured, edicts and fences and posts to posts—they broke down the fence as straw is trodden down in the water of manure pile (Sasportas, *ZNZ*, 198b, p. 310).

Here, Sasportas identifies Sabbatai Tzvi with the “scoundrel and villain [who] goes around with crooked speech” in Prov 6:12 (Shupak 2007, p. 62; Hurovitz 2012b, p. 223). He then cites Isa. 9:14–15 and its denunciation of the false prophet: “So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day—elders and dignitaries are the head, and prophets who teach lies are the tail.” According to this verse, a false prophet tags behind his master, flattering him and thus leading both into ruin (Kaiser 1983; Hoffman 1993, p. 62).⁷⁷ The expression “attack all the lagging in faith” alludes to Amalek in the wilderness (Deut 25:17–18): assault of the helpless being an unforgivable act, the people were condemned to an endless war against this enemy (Nelson 2004, p. 302; Christensen 2002, p. 623;

⁷² See R. Joseph Kara and R. David Kimhi ad loc.

⁷³ See (Kaddari 2006, p. 842).

⁷⁴ b. Pes. 119a; Zohar 3:105b. See (Klein-Braslavy 1996, pp. 37–38).

⁷⁵ According to Barnai (2001, vol. 1, p. 134), the opponents of the Sabbatean movement, who were in the minority, feared informing on his followers lest they put the community as a whole at risk. When they did so, the authorities did indeed take action.

⁷⁶ In his commentary on p. 147:13, the Meiri adduces Isa. 10:14 and Ezek 39:26, both of which signify unassailable safety and security.

⁷⁷ Rashi (ad loc.) observes that the people are led astray not only by the leaders but also by the (false) prophets.

Tigay 2016, pp. 629–30). First identifying the Sabbateans with the “little foxes that ruin the vineyards” (Cant. 2:15), Sasportas then proceeds to compare their destructive activity with Samson’s burning of the Philistines’ fields by setting the foxes’ tails alight (Judg 15:4) (Assis 2009, pp. 69–70; Zakovitch 1992, p. 108; Boling 1981, p. 235; Soggin 1981, p. 246).⁷⁸ The image of the tiered vineyard is based on the description of Yeshivat Kerem in Yavneh, where the students studied in this formation (y. Ber. 33a). In contrast, the devastation of the vineyard alludes to the parable of the vineyard in Isa 5:5, according to which the vineyard will ultimately be demolished by enemies on account of the people’s sins (Wildberger 1991, p. 183).⁷⁹ Sasportas concludes the passage by quoting Isa 25:10—a prophecy of salvation for Israel that describes the fall of Moab via agricultural images (Hoffman 1993, p. 128; Childs 2001, p. 185; Wildberger 1997, p. 539).

With respect to the punishment meted out to the members of the Sabbatean movement, in his letter to the Amsterdam rabbis, Sasportas compares the false prophet to the seer who induces people to worship idols, who must be killed in order to purge the evil from the midst of the people (Deut 13:1–5) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 133a, p. 214).⁸⁰ He then combines the strange fate of Korah and his followers (Num 16:29) with the fire Elijah called down on the captain of fifty (2 Kgs 1:12) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 12a, p. 20).

In a letter to the rabbis of Vienna, Sasportas addresses the practical aspect of punishment. Here, he draws on Prov 17:26: “To impose a fine on the innocent is not right, nor to flog the noble for their integrity” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 6a, p. 117). In its original context, this verse states that one must know how to punish the righteous person who has sinned, acting in measured fashion rather than seeking to shame him or her (Shupak 2007, p. 124).⁸¹ According to R. Joseph Caspi, the righteous person should not be punished on the same level as the wicked. Rashi—for whom the *tzaddikim* are the people of Israel—also believes that they do not receive such a severe penalty.⁸²

Sasportas employs this verse to argue that the sages who have erred are not wicked like the worthless men who despised Saul on the day he was enthroned in Mizpah, the king eventually pardoning them for this act (1 Sam 10:27, 11:12–13). He then also adduces David’s constraint in not punishing Shimei son of Gera, who threw stones at him and cursed him during Absalom’s revolt (2 Sam 16:10; 1 Kgs 2:8–9) (Sasportas, ZNZ, 76a, p. 117).

Addressing Sabbatai Tzvi’s personality, Sasportas drew on several biblical verses: “Herein is revealed one of the worthless and reckless ones, scorned by others and despised by the people. And in the land of whirring wings a new king arose in rebellion against the true one” (Sasportas, ZNZ, 197a, p. 308). As we noted above, the “worthless and reckless” are the marginalized in society. The expression “reproach of men others (*herpat adam*)” is drawn from p. 22:6 and relates to Sabbatai’s despised nature. In its original context, it signifies the difficult situation in which the psalmist finds himself, his sorrows robbing him of all human form (Weiser 1971, p. 222; Kraus 1988, pp. 295–96).⁸³ Alternatively, it may denote his self-effacement before God (Craigie 1983, p. 199).

Sasportas then cites Michal’s critique of David’s dancing when he brought the ark back to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:20) (Hertzberg 1964, pp. 280–81; Bar-Efrat 1996, p. 71).⁸⁴ The “land of whirring wings”, taken from Isa. 18:1, appears to be Egypt, where many people recognized Sabbatai Tzvi as the

⁷⁸ Commentators have understood the foxes in Canticles in various ways: Saadia Gaon identifies them with Pharaoh, Nahmanides with the spies, R. Joseph Kimhi with Amalek, and R. Joseph Caspi with the Jews of his generation studying foreign ideas (see each ad loc.). For his part, Sasportas links them with the Sabbateans. For Saadia Gaon, see (Mikra’ot 2001, p. 51).

⁷⁹ R. David Kimhi (ad loc.) notes the meaning of the parable—namely, the withdrawal of divine providence from Israel, thereby placing them at the mercy of the nations.

⁸⁰ Cf. (Tigay 2016, p. 387). Gersonides (ad loc.) contends that this refers to death by judicial sentence.

⁸¹ According to Hurovitz (2012b, p. 383), this verse should be read as indicating that the righteous should not be condemned for uttering harsh words of rebuke.

⁸² Ad loc. The verse is also interpreted in other ways. R. David Kimhi and R. Isaac di Trani view the *tzaddik* as not punishing the innocent. According to the Meiri, the *tzaddik* should not be punished, having committed no offense.

⁸³ According to Ibn Ezra (ad loc.), the poet considers this to be one of titles attributed to him by his enemies.

⁸⁴ R. David Kimhi maintains that Michal viewed David’s behavior as despicable.

messiah (Scholem 1973, p. 328; Scholem 2019, p. 123).⁸⁵ Today, however, scholars maintain that Isaiah was alluding to Kush/Sudan, south of Egypt (Hoffman 1993, p. 95). In the past, R. Joseph Kara and R. Eliezer of Beaugancy both regarded it as the territory south of the Ethiopian Highlands (ad loc.). Whatever the case may be in this respect, it includes Egypt, where many had followed Sabbatai Tzvi and Nathan of Gaza.

Elsewhere, Sasportas presents Sabbatai as utterly unworthy of greatness, because he is a slave who has become a king. Here, he harks back to Prov 30:22, adduced above (Sasportas, ZNZ, 200b, p. 313).

Another explanation of Sabbatai's strange, antinomian behavior derives from a different perspective. One of the most prominent aspects of his personality was his dramatic mood swings and unpredictable conduct during manic episodes, which Nathan sought to account for via kabbalistic symbolism (Scholem 1973, pp. 128, 130; Scholem 2019, p. 303; Scholem 1982, pp. 64–65; Scholem 2016, pp. 305, 307; Elqayam 1993b, p. 20; Elqayam 1998, p. 147).⁸⁶ The sources we are discussing make use of biblical verses in order to draw parallels between Sabbatai Tzvi and the Suffering Servant (Scholem 2019, p. 208; Liebes 2017, p. 20). This is evident in Nathan's letter to Sabbatai's two brothers in the wake of the latter's conversion: "Of him Scripture says: My servant shall prosper. This is written of King Messiah, oppressed and afflicted who yet did not open his mouth. His grave was made with the wicked and his tomb with the rich" (Sasportas, ZNZ, 125a, pp. 200–1). This language is taken from the fourth Servant passage in Isaiah, in which the personage is described as despised and smitten, afflicted and scorned because of the people's sins. Enduring all these hardships in silence, he will ultimately prosper (Isa. 53:3–5, 12) (Hoffman 1993, pp. 246–47; Childs 2001, pp. 414–16; Blenkinsopp 2002, pp. 350–51; Paul 2008, pp. 363, 366–69). In its original context, this text may have been directed towards the prophet himself or towards Jerusalem during the Restoration period, only later being applied to Jesus in Christian literature (Watts 1985, pp. 230–32; Hoffman 1993, pp. 246–47; Paul 2008, p. 362).⁸⁷ It is thus unsurprising that, in sharp contrast to Nathan of Gaza, Sasportas denies Sabbatai's identification with the Suffering Servant, particularly after his conversion to Islam, which the hard core of the movement regarded as representing his sufferings on behalf of the people as a whole. Whatever the case may be in this respect, Sasportas stresses that this scriptural exegesis is Christian and not Jewish (Sasportas, ZNZ, 189a, p. 298; Dweck 2019, p. 226).

Finally, we must address the question of whether evidence exists that Sasportas made use of medieval exegesis. As a Sephardi rabbi, it is possible that Sasportas was brought up at the knees of traditional commentaries. Working as a corrector in Menasseh ben Israel's publishing house, he had access to the latter's extensive library (Dweck 2019, pp. 44–45, 89, 122).⁸⁸ In 1524, Daniel Bomberg published the second edition of *Miqra'ot Gedolot* in Venice. Including the biblical text and medieval commentaries, this contained substantial revisions to the first edition, serving as the authoritative text for generations to come. Bomberg's corrector was Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah, who, like Sasportas, had made his way to Europe from North Africa (Dweck 2019, p. 39; Stern 2011, pp. 76–108).

We may thus reasonably assume that Sasportas was well acquainted with medieval traditional exegesis. In *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*, he cites two commentators by their acronyms—Rashi and Radak—on a number of occasions.⁸⁹ He also mentions two others—Nahmanides and Gersonides.⁹⁰ The former is cited because he is one of Sasportas' ancestors (eleventh generation; see above), Sasportas and

⁸⁵ See also (Emden [1752] 2014, p. 95).

⁸⁶ According to Mark (2008, p. 31), Nathan's proclamation of Sabbatai Tzvi as messiah was due to, rather than despite, his odd comportment. Although many of his strange actions appeared to be in line with halakhah, not all of them were explicable: see (Cahana 2016, pp. 398, 418).

⁸⁷ Rashi (ad loc.) identifies the "Servant of the Lord" as Israel.

⁸⁸ For proofreaders and their education during this period, see (Spiegel 2005, pp. 249–91).

⁸⁹ ZNZ, 76a, p. 117; 190b, p. 300 (Rashi); *ibid.*, 77a, p. 118; 95b, p. 145 (Radak).

⁹⁰ The interpretive work of these two men has been relatively neglected in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century editions of *Miqra'ot Gedolot*: see (Kalman 2008, pp. 819–43).

his forebears thus holding to the right and proper faith in line with his forefather (Sasportas, *ZNZ*, 104a, p. 169; 138b, p. 223; 239b, p. 358). While he thus does not adduce Nahmanides in an exegetical framework, it is reasonable to presume that he was familiar with his writings. Nahmanides' commentary on the Torah was first published in Rome in 1480 (Greenberg 1983b, p. 60). With respect to Gersonides, Sasportas appears to allude to his commentary in appealing to the reading of "Radak and his colleagues" of Elijah's dispute with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kgs 18:35–36. The context suggests that he has Gersonides in mind here (Sasportas, *ZNZ*, 77a, p. 118). We may thus deduce that Sasportas was well versed in medieval traditional biblical exegesis.

5. Conclusions

Herein, I have sought to demonstrate the use of biblical texts in the Sabbatean polemic as exemplified in R. Jacob Sasportas' *Tzitzat novel Tzvi*. In general, the letters it contains appear to have been edited, Sasportas initially believing in the news of redemption and only subsequently turning into a fierce opponent of the movement. The very title of the work evinces the role biblical language plays in it. Drawn from Isaiah, it denigrates the false messiah, portraying him as a despicable figure via a name midrash. Noting the shock the news that Sabbatai Tzvi had been proclaimed the messiah caused him, Sasportas highlights this reaction by appealing to Isaiah's prophecies of devastation and agony in light of the people's infidelity to God and his covenant. He thus identifies Sabbatai Tzvi's followers as renegades. Gaza—the city in which Nathan proclaimed Sabbatai as messiah—also serves him as a negative image. Isa. 28:1 and Hab 2:4 in fact served both sides in the Sabbatean polemic.

Sasportas also depicts those who announced the redemption throughout the generations as false prophets in line with the biblical examples who deceived the people. Denouncing Nathan of Gaza, he also lamented the fact that some many community leaders had become avid supporters of his "gospel". In order to prove that the redemption had not yet come, he appealed to Canticles, long understood allegorically. In similar fashion, he also adduced other verses that relate to salvation, concluding that the time for the messiah's advent was still to come and must be awaited patiently.

As the conjunction of prophet and messiah aided in the dissemination and acceptance of Sabbatean beliefs, Sasportas sought to undermine Nathan's credibility as Sabbatai Tzvi's prophet. Here, he drew on biblical verses relating to the restoration of prophecy during the redemption, a phenomenon that would only occur following the messiah's advent. He interpreted these in a very different manner to the Sabbateans themselves. As part of this task, he also dealt with the identity of the prophet destined to proclaim the messiah, and the question of whether such a figure was in fact anticipated in Scripture. In this context, he warned against the prophets who prophesied peace on the eve of the destruction of the First Temple, deceiving the people and hastening the fall of Judah and the razing of the Temple. In the same vein, he also addressed the mass prophecy that erupted with the emergence of the Sabbatean movement, comparing it to the spirit of falsehood that led those who prophesied astray during the reign of Ahab.

He also attacked Sabbatai Tzvi personally, evincing that the verses that over time came to be applied to the messiah did not originally refer to him (the messiah/Tzvi). Representing him as a pathetic and worthless via the use of biblical verses, he also excoriated his annulling of the fasts commemorating the destruction of the Temple and their transformation into feast days. In this regard, he appealed to numerous biblical texts, on occasion combining several together.

Just as R. Jacob Sasportas made extensive use of biblical literature in support of his arguments, so too did Sabbatai Tzvi and his followers. Both being steeped in Scripture, each side raised associations familiar to the other. The Sabbatean controversy thus well illustrates the fact that the scholars of the Sephardi diaspora across Europe were well versed in the Hebrew Bible, making use of its texts in order to prove and support their own claims and refute those of their opponents.

I shall close with an issue related to traditional exegesis. As we have seen above, the correspondents generally applied the biblical text to their own day, resting their arguments against the Sabbateans on Scripture. R. Sasportas thus follows those exegeses that support his view, on occasion even making

them fit the discussion at hand to bolster his attack against Sabbatai Tzvi, Nathan of Gaza, and the multitude of their followers. He also appeals to passages commentators have traditionally regarded as alluding to idolatry during the biblical period in order to paint his opponents in an unfavorable light and delegitimize the movement. In denouncing them, he also makes use of the derogatory epithets characteristic of the wisdom literature. While these are typically understood generically, he concretizes them in order to identify personalities within the Sabbatean movement. Finally, he brings to prominence verses traditionally deemed to indicate that it is forbidden to hasten the redemption. He thus filters, contemporizes, and concretizes the exegesis of earlier commentators.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
CC	Continental Commentaries
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
ML	Mikra Leyisra'el
OHT	Olam ha-Tanach
OTL	Old Testament Library
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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