

Citation:

J. Dan, Levensbericht G.G. Scholem, in:
Jaarboek, 1985, Amsterdam, pp. 213-215

Herdening van

Gerhard Scholem

(1897–February 21, 1982)

by **J. Dan**

Prof. Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem, who died in Jerusalem on February 21, 1982, at the age of 85, was the founder of the modern scholarly study of Jewish mysticism, and is regarded as the greatest scholar in the field of Jewish studies in this century. His systematic studies of the history of Jewish mysticism from the 2nd century A.D. to the present revolutionized not only our understanding of Jewish mystical thought, but also many concepts concerning the history of Jewish thought and the development of the Jewish religion in late antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times. He published about 40 volumes and nearly 700 articles, covering all aspects of Jewish mysticism, but also presenting new, profound insights concerning the nature of the mystical experience, the role of the mystic in society, and the relationship between religious authority and mysticism, which contributed to our modern understanding of the religious phenomenon as a whole.

Scholem was born in 1897 in Berlin, to a family of assimilated Jews in which the Hebrew language and Jewish culture were almost unknown. He began to study Hebrew, the bible and the talmud on his own, and became a devoted Zionist. His Ph.D. thesis was the first scholarly project in the field of Jewish mysticism which he undertook: A translation into German, with commentary and notes, of the first book of the kabbalah – the Book Bahir (“The Book of Light”, published in Leipzig in 1923). Scholem recognized this book to be a 12th-century work, which included the basic symbols later used by all the schools of the kabbalah, up to and including the modern Hasidic movement. Scholem’s careful philological analysis of the historical setting of this enigmatic treatise was the beginning of the modern scholarly study of the texts of Jewish mysticism, which were neglected by previous scholars.

Gershom Scholem left Germany and settled in Jerusalem in 1923, where he joined the group of librarians who founded the National and University Library. In 1924 he delivered the opening lecture of the Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, which was the first unit of the Hebrew University, which was opened officially a year later. Since then Scholem was active in all the aspects of the establishment of the Hebrew University and its development. He served as a professor of kabbalah at the university until his retirement in 1964, but continued to teach seminars after that. Many of his students and his students’ students currently continue to develop the field of history of Jewish mysticism in the Department of Jewish Thought of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In the first fifteen years of his scholarly activity Scholem concentrated his efforts in clarifying many basic bibliographical, biographical and historical problems con-

cerning the development of the mystical literature in Judaism, and published series of papers and books in which the main emphasis was on bibliography and textual analysis. At the same time he collected a comprehensive private library, which is exhaustive in the field. This library he bequeathed to the National and University Library in Jerusalem, and it will be opened to the public in a special hall in 1985.

In 1937 Scholem published a major article in Hebrew, entitled: "Redemption Through Sin: Towards an Understanding of the Sabbatian Movement". This article had a profound influence on Jewish historiography. In it, for the first time, the power of mystical symbols to shape the history and culture of a whole nation was demonstrated. Scholem proved that the Sabbatian messianic movement in the 17th century, based on the personality of the "messiah" Shabbatai Zevi and the visions of his prophet, Nathan of Gaza, employed kabbalistic symbolism which had an impact on Jews in all the countries of their residence, and the power of these symbols did not diminish when Shabbatai Zevi was converted to Islam in 1666 – the movement continued to develop as a heretical "underground" messianic force, and it had a role in the emergence of modern Jewish mystical movements, especially the Hasidism of the 18th century.

Since the publication of this paper the role of Jewish mysticism in the development of Jewish culture became the main subject of Gershom Scholem's scholarly activity. In 1941 he published, in English, the first comprehensive description of Jewish mysticism and its impact on Jewish religious life – "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism", which was translated to many other languages. In this book he outlined the great Jewish mystical tradition from its early beginnings in Talmudic times, the Hekhalot and Merkabah mysticism of late antiquity, through the mystical and pietistic ideas of the Ashkenazi Hasidim – the Jewish pietists in medieval Germany, the "prophetic" mysticism of Abulafia in the 13th century, the composition of the Zohar, the central and most important work of the kabbalah at the end of that century, and then the later phases of the development of Jewish mysticism – the kabbalah of Rabbi Issac Luria in 16th century Safed, the Sabbatian movement and the Hasidic movement. This was the first presentation of Jewish mysticism as an organic product of Jewish culture throughout the ages, its history and ideas completely interwoven with other aspects of Jewish religious life, and a demonstration of the enormous impact which the forceful symbols of the kabbalists had on Jewish thought and literature as a whole.

At the same time Scholem dedicated great effort to the study of the early kabbalah in the 12th and 13th centuries. The results of his studies were published in a short book in Hebrew in 1948 and in a more detailed form in German in 1962 – "Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala". In this period, after the second World War, Scholem presented papers in the annual meetings of the Eranos society, papers which usually were detailed analyses of specific subjects in Jewish mysticism: Good and Evil, the Shekhinah, the Golem, the Zelem, the Zaddik, etc., and some more general discussions of the role of mysticism in religion as revealed by the history of the kabbalah. These papers were published in the annual of the Eranos society and then collected in several volumes in German, English and Hebrew.

In 1957 Scholem published in Hebrew the two-volume history of the Sabbatian movement during the life of Shabbatai Zevi, a detailed historical analysis which is regarded as the finest example of Jewish historiography of our time. The book was

translated into English by R.J.Z. Werblowsky (“Sabbatai Sevi – The Mystical Messiah”, Princeton 1977). This was followed by a series of studies and books which outlined the history of the Sabbatian movement in the more than a hundred years of its existence after the death of its founders.

Scholem was active in Jewish contemporary intellectual life, and published several articles dealing with the current problems facing modern Judaism. He is regarded as one of the most profound modern Jewish thinkers, and his influence on young thinkers, in Israel and in the United States, is considerable. Today kabbalah is studied in scores of universities all over the world according to the basic outlines drawn by him. His scholarly work is regarded as an example for other fields and aspects of Jewish culture and religion. The force of his personality, his erudition, his strict philological and historical approach, and profound empathy with the texts under examination, made him the most outstanding figure in modern Jewish scholarship.