



# Witnesses to History: Shabbetai Zvi - False Messiah

If the martyr's death of Molcho in 1532 was a personal tragedy, the apostasy of the messianic-pretender, Shabbetai Zvi in 1666, was a national calamity. Born in Smyrna in 1626, he showed early promise as a Talmudic scholar, and even more as a student and devotee of [Kabbalah](#). More pronounced than his scholarship were his strange mystical speculations and religious ecstasies. He traveled to various cities, his strong personality and his alternately ascetic and self-indulgent behavior attracting and repelling rabbis and populace alike. He was expelled from Salonica by its rabbis for having staged a wedding service with himself as bridegroom and the Torah as bride. His erratic behavior continued. For long periods, he was a respected student and teacher of [Kabbalah](#); at other times, he was given to messianic fantasies and bizarre acts. At one point, living in [Jerusalem](#) seeking "peace for his soul," he sought out a self-proclaimed "man of God," Nathan of Gaza, who declared Shabbetai Zvi to be the [Messiah](#). Then Shabbetai Zvi began to act the part, as Gershom Scholem describes:

Riding around on horseback in majestic state [he] summoned a group of his followers, appointing them as apostles or representatives of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The messianic news spread like wildfire to other communities in [Palestine](#) ... First reports about Shabbetai Zvi reached Europe early in October 1665 ... detailed accounts, deeply involved with legendary material, arrived in Italy, Holland, Germany and Poland.

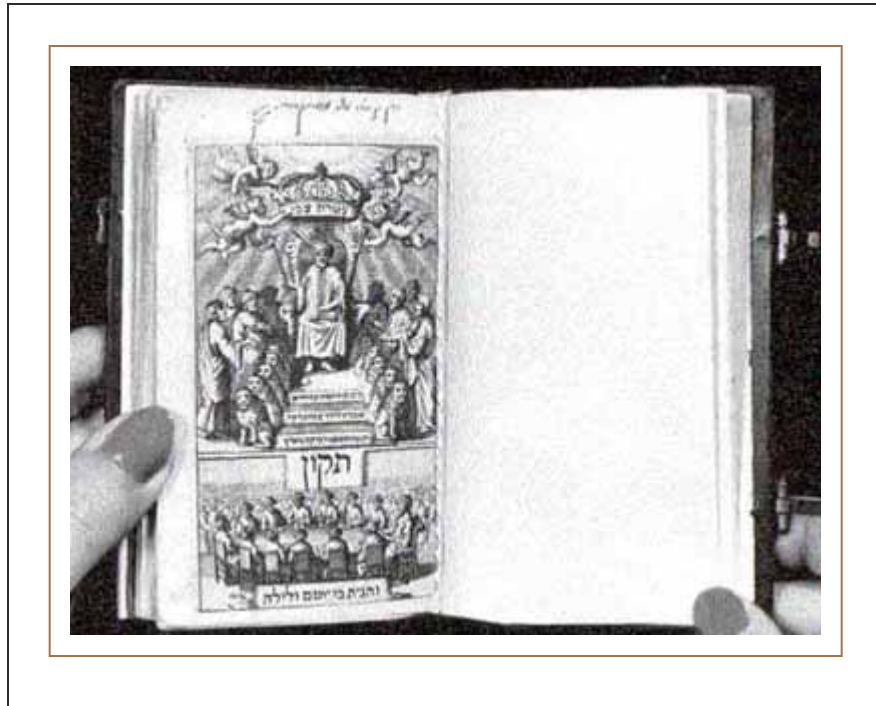
Messianic fervor took hold of communities that had no immediate experience of persecution and bloodshed as well as those which had.... Repentance alternating with public manifestations of joy and enthusiasm was the order of the day.

From many places delegations left bearing parchments signed by the leaders of the community which acknowledged him as the Messiah and king of Israel.

Not only did Shabbetai Zvi gain militant adherents in his native Turkey and in the Near East, but even in such cosmopolitan European cities as Venice, Livorno, and Amsterdam leading rabbis and sophisticated men of affairs were caught up in the messianic frenzy.

**The engraved title page of this collection of prayers to be said for the "King Messiah," Shabbetai Zvi, depicts him sitting on a throne, a crown on his head, holding a scepter, guarded by twelve lions and eight disciples. Four putti angels support the crown of**

dominion above his head, the "Crown of Zvi." Below, he is seated at a table with his twelve disciples; in the background is the multitude of his followers. The chronogram on the printed title page uses a biblical verse of messianic promise, *Tikkun K'riah* (Penitential Prayers for Night and Day), Amsterdam, 1666. Hebraic Section,, [Library of Congress Photo](#)).



Mute witnesses to all this are two books in the Library's collections, published in Amsterdam in 1666. The first is a small prayer book of daily readings, called a Tikkun, whose title page *is* framed by the prayer:

Do thou, oh Lord our God, raise up the horn of David thy servant  
And the radiance of the son of Jesse, thy Messiah.  
May his majesty be exalted  
And his dominion established over all the earth.

On the engraved frontispiece, Shabbetai Zvi, seated on a throne, holds a scepter. Four cherubs hold aloft a large crown marked "the crown of Zvi," and the throne *is* guarded by twelve lions, surrounded by eight worshipful disciples. On the steps which elevate the throne is inscribed:

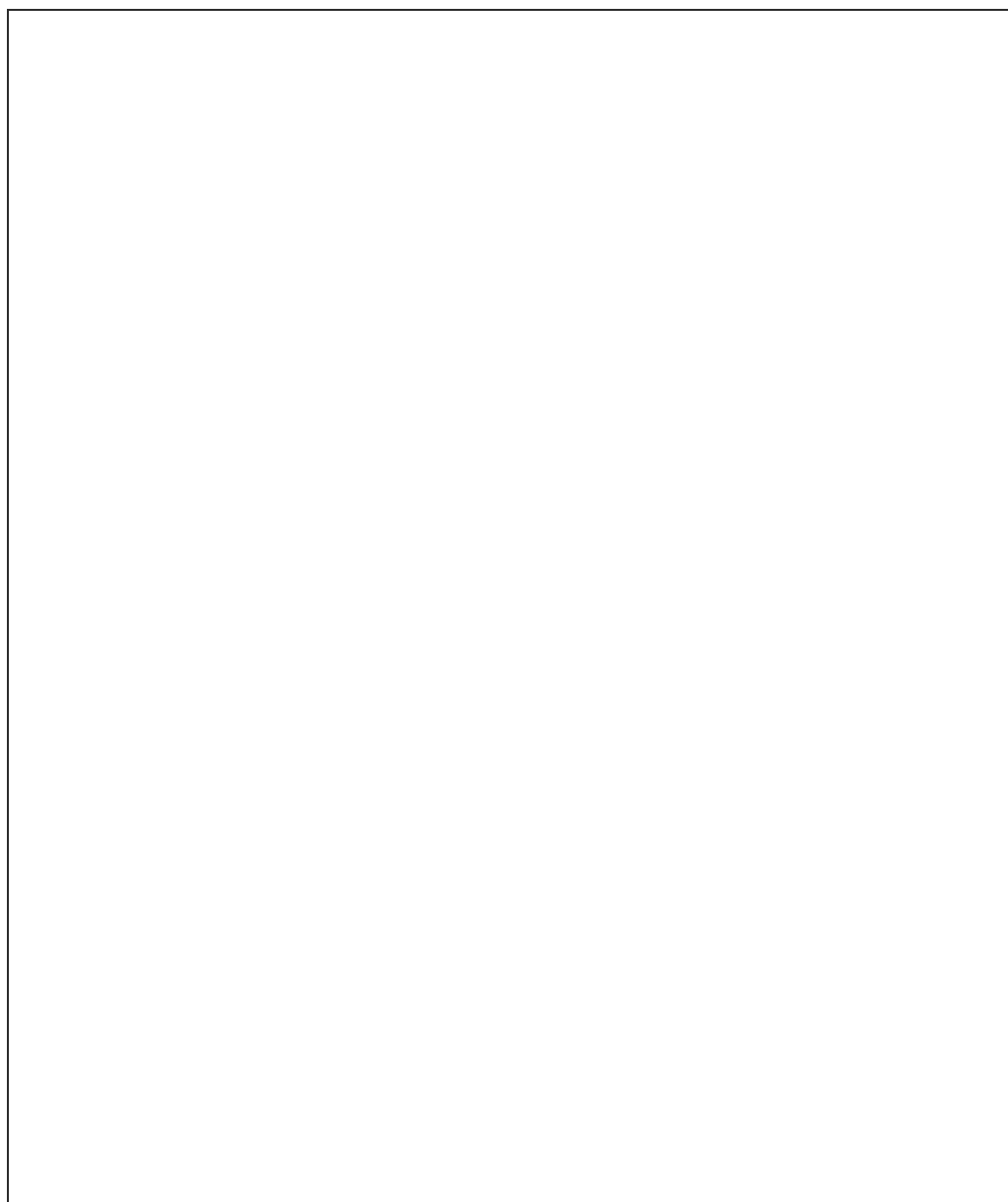
In those days and at this time,  
I will cause a shoot of righteousness to grow up unto David;

And he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Jeremiah, 33:15

Below is a panel depicting a larger than life Shabbetai Zvi seated at a round table with twelve apostles, books in hand, against a background of a crowd of people. In the same year an edition of *Nahalat Shiv'ah*, a collection of legal documents, was published in Amsterdam. Its chronogram reads, "Messiah the son of David has come."

The chronogram on the title page of this compendium of Jewish legal documents, *Nahalat Shiv'ah*, which proclaims, "Messiah, the son of David has come," dated 5426, i.e. 1666, the year of its publication in Amsterdam. The reference is to the pseudo-Messiah, Shabbetai Zvi, who was heralded to assume dominion in that year-the year in which he became a convert to Islam, *Nahalat Shiv'ah*, Amsterdam, 1666. Hebraic Section, [Library of Congress Photo](#)).





On September 15, 1666, Shabbetai Zvi, brought before the Sultan and given the choice of death or apostasy, prudently chose the latter, setting a turban on his head to signify his conversion to Islam, for which he was rewarded with the honorary title "Keeper of the Palace Gates" and a pension of 150 piasters a day.

The apostasy shocked the Jewish world. Leaders and followers alike refused to believe it. Many continued to anticipate a second coming, and faith in false messiahs continued through the eighteenth century. In the vast majority of believers revulsion and remorse set in and there was an active endeavor to



erase all evidence, even mention of the pseudo messiah. Pages were removed from communal registers, and documents were destroyed. Few copies of the books that celebrated Shabbetai Zvi survived, and those that did have become rarities much sought after by libraries and collectors.

Two centuries later another pseudo-Messiah emerged in the Yemen, the southwestern corner of the Arabian peninsula which harbored an ancient Jewish community not often in contact with other Jewish communities. Over the centuries the Yemenite Jews produced an indigenous culture, with a distinctive liturgy rich in religious poetry. For almost all its existence this community lived in great poverty and even greater piety. Consequently, and because its neighbors were Zaydi Muslims who awaited the imminent appearance of an imam-redeemer, the Jews of Yemen experienced more messianic claimants than any other Jewish community. In the 1860s, it was one Judah ben Sholom, known as Shukr Kuhayl, who appeared in San'a, the site of Yemen's largest Jewish community, and declared that the prophet [Elijah](#) had appeared to him in a vision, and proclaimed him [Messiah](#). In 1862-64, Shukr Kuhayl traveled about Yemen, performing "signs and miracles," which won him many adherents in the Jewish community, and some in the Muslim as well. His success with the latter led to his assassination, but he had earlier promised his followers that he would rise again.

Three years after his death, one claiming to be the risen Shukr appeared and sent letters to the Jewish communities of Yemen and neighboring countries announcing his return. When this came to the attention of [Jacob Saphir](#), the scribe of the [Ashkenazi](#) community in Jerusalem, he alerted the rabbinate of that city, both Sefardi and Ashkenazi, to the danger such a pseudo-Messiah represented. On their behalf he sent an epistle to the Jews of Yemen, warning them of the threatening calamity. Saphir had earlier traveled in the Oriental countries to collect funds for the construction of a great synagogue in Jerusalem. He was the first emissary, indeed the first Jew in modern times, to visit the Yemenite Jews for a protracted period of time. He described their life and culture in his two-volume *Even Sapir*. During his stay, he became acquainted with Yemenite rabbis and communal leaders and he now addressed his epistle to them. In the printed copy, preserved among the rare books in the Library's Hebraic Section, we read his measured, reasoned appeal. Saphir reminds them of the debacles caused by the Molcho and Zvi messianic movements, outlines the guidance tradition offers for testing messianic claimants, and warns of the dangers inherent in the anger which messianic movements evoke in governmental authorities and among religious leaders of Islam, the dominant faith. Saphir also pleads with them that the exposure of yet another false [Messiah](#) would cause Jews in other lands, already wavering in their [piety](#), to lose all faith in the coming of the true [Messiah](#). On the last page of the epistle, the leading rabbis of [Jerusalem](#) confirm the truth of Saphir's argument and the cogency of his cautions.

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**Sources:** [Abraham J. Karp](#), *From the Ends of the Earth: Judaic Treasures of the Library of Congress*, (DC: [Library of Congress](#), 1991).