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## A Precursor of Christ or a Jewish Impostor?

Petrus Serrarius and Jean de Labadie on the  
Jewish Messianic Movement around Sabbatai Sevi

The present article considers the relationship between Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism by examining two Christian responses to one of the most remarkable episodes in seventeenth-century Jewish history: the Sabbatian movement. The reactions of Petrus Serrarius and Jean de Labadie to this Jewish messianic revival may provide valuable insight into the extent of seventeenth-century philojudaeistic millenarianism and into the attempts made at that time to synthesize Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism, resulting in a phenomenon which may be labelled as „Christian Sabbatianism“.

In the mid-1660s the Jewish world was profoundly shaken by the outbreak of messianic frenzy around a rabbinic scholar from Smyrna, Sabbatai Sevi.<sup>1</sup> From 1648 onwards Sabbatai Sevi had repeatedly claimed to be the Messiah, but since he was known to be mentally afflicted at times – in present-day psychological terms he is called „an extreme case of manic-depressive psychosis“<sup>2</sup> – no attention had been paid to his messianic claims. In 1665, however, this would change dramatically. Being in great spiritual despair and seeking help, Sabbatai travelled to Gaza in order to visit Rabbi Nathan, a brilliant young kabbalist who had acquired great fame for his capacities to cure the mentally ill. In Sabbatai's case, however, Nathan did much more than only cure him: having had a vision of Sabbatai as the Messiah, he knew to convince the latter of his messianic destiny. On 31 May 1665 Sabbatai proclaimed himself Messiah and now, in sharp contrast with his earlier proclamations, the effect of this announcement was unexpectedly strong, occasioning a frenzy which immediately spread to Jewish communities throughout the diaspora. Everywhere Jews were seized by an extraordinary messianic enthusiasm, being confident that the time of redemption was at hand. It was a mass movement and, believers' (as Sabbatai's adherents were called) came from all classes of society. The movement

<sup>1</sup> On Sabbatai Sevi and the revival around him, see the leading work on the subject by G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676*, London 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* s. v. Sabbatai Sevi, 1222.

derived its strength from the call to repentance: both ,king‘ Sabbatai and his ,prophet‘ Nathan strongly emphasized individual repentance as a means to hasten the advent of redemption. Penitential exercises, fasts, immersion baths, and almsgiving became the order of the day. Daily life was disrupted by this penitential awakening: in many countries Jews made preparations to sell their properties in order to be ready when the Messiah’s call to go to Palestine would come. Commercial activities came to a standstill, a situation viewed with anxiety by Christian merchants since the Jews played such an important role in international trade. Of course, not all Jews were swept up in the fervour; however, the ,infidels‘, such as Jacob Sasportas in Hamburg and Isaac Orobio de Castro in Amsterdam, were in the minority.

Sabbatai’s announcement to seize the crown from the „Great Turk“ and to reconstitute the Jewish state in Palestine, though without war, created a political problem. In order to solve this problem the Turkish authorities did, however, not execute him, as was their usual way of handling rebels, but instead had him arrested and put into prison in Constantinople in the beginning of 1666. By Sabbatai’s followers this act of leniency on the sultan’s part was interpreted as a sign of his messianism. Moreover, when Sabbatai was transferred to the castle prison in Gallipoli where he lived in rather pleasant surroundings, holding a kind of royal court, this was regarded as a confirmation of the positive Turkish attitude towards Sabbatai and of their willingness to hand him over the crown of Palestine. However, in September 1666 the sultan grew weary of the whole affair and, wanting to put an end to it, he presented Sabbatai with the choice between death and conversion to Islam. When Sabbatai not unrealistically chose the latter, the effect of his choice among his followers was initially unbelief, then total shock. Before long the majority of the ,believers‘ became deeply ashamed of having so unreservedly believed in his pretensions and liked to forget the episode as soon as possible. In the Amsterdam Jewish congregation, for instance, an official ban was imposed on pronouncing Sabbatai’s name and Sabbatian prayer books were confiscated. But surprisingly enough the Sabbatian movement did not die out immediately. Some ,believers‘, inspired by Nathan’s preaching and by the ideas of the prominent Sabbatian Abraham Miguel Cardoso, clung to a kabbalistic interpretation of Sabbatai’s conversion, which allowed them to continue to believe in his messianism. His apostasy was explained as part of the necessary fulfilment of his messianic destiny. Even Sabbatai’s death (in 1676) did nothing to shake this belief. And so during the later decades of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century many Sabbatian prophets and visionaries, some notable figures among them, preached the message of the return of their ,king‘.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See *Scholem*, Sabbatai Sevi, 781 ff.; *L. Fuks*, „Sabatianisme in Amsterdam in het begin vande 18e eeuw. Enkele beschouwingen over Reb Leib Ozer en zijn werk“, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 14 (1980), 20–28; *J. Meijer*, „Sabetai Rephael in Hamburg. Korte bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van de joodse wereld na Sabetai Tswi“, in: *Weerklank op het werk van Jan Romein*, Amsterdam –

How did the Christian world react to the Sabbatian movement? On the whole, the attitude of the European Christian world, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, was far from positive, at times even hostile. In most Christian pamphlets and broadsheets Sabbatai's pretensions were derided and regarded as proof of the blindness of the Jews. Sabbatai was classed with the many impostors Jewish history had known up till his day. Time and again it was stressed that this was not the first time that the credulous Jews were led hopelessly astray by an impostor. The Messianic pretender was called „a Turkish or Jewish Quaker“: Sabbatai was regarded as the Jewish James Naylor, the Quaker who in 1656 had entered Bristol, seated on a donkey, proclaiming himself the Messiah.<sup>4</sup> According to one of the Dutch newspapers, the *Opregte Haerlemse Courant*, a journal which published detailed reports of the events in the Levant in a remarkably matter-of-fact manner, there were also some Christians who wanted to defer their judgment or who said that, though they could not agree with such Jewish expectations, they did not condemn these messianic ideas.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, many Christians saw the Sabbatian movement as a favourable opportunity of converting the Jews to the true Messiah, especially after Sabbatai's apostasy, and it seems that this hope was partly fulfilled: there have been many hundreds of Jews who in the aftermath of the Sabbatian fiasco embraced Christianity.

The hope that the Sabbatian awakening would be the prelude to the conversion of the Jews was also cherished by a handful of Christians who did not share the general mood of rejection and ridicule prevailing among their fellow Christians, but who showed themselves genuinely sympathetic towards the Jewish revival. It is no surprise that these Christians were mainly to be found in the circle of the millenarians. It has to be added that millenarianism as such did not lead to philojudaism, let alone to sympathy for the Jewish revival around Sabbatai Sevi, as we shall see below. Confining myself to the sympathetic Christian reactions to Sabbatianism, I shall deal with the responses of two prominent millenarians, Petrus Serrarius and Jean de Labadie. Both of them, though the first to a larger extent than the latter, gave evidence of being interested in Sabbatai Sevi and his role in the millenarian scenario.

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Antwerpen 1953, 103–108. On the factors which played a role in the continued existence of Sabbatianism, see *W. P. Zenner*, „The Case of the Apostate Messiah. A Reconsideration of the ‚Failure of Prophecy““, *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 21 (1966), 111–118. Some ‚believers‘ followed Sabbatai into Islam and constituted the crypto-Jewish sect of the Dönmech.

<sup>4</sup> See the portrait in *J. F. Corvinus*, *Anabaptisticon Pantheon* (1702), where Sabbatai Sevi and James Naylor appear together. In John Evelyn's *History of the Three Late Famous Impostors* (1669) the biography of James Naylor appears next to that of the Jewish Messiah (*Scholem*, Sabbatai Sevi, 548).

<sup>5</sup> For the reports in the *Opregte Haerlemse Courant*, see *J. Meijer*, „Soo wort men van dromen wacker“. *Nederlandse bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Sabbatai Tswi, drie eeuwen na diens optreden 1666–1966*, Haarlem 1967.

Petrus Serrarius, an Anglo-Dutch theologian of Walloon descent, may be called Sabbatai Sevi's most enthusiastic follower in contemporary Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Being an indefatigable correspondent, he was largely responsible for disseminating Sabbatian news to Christian friends and acquaintances all over Europe. For England he probably was the „one root“, as the poet George Wither said, from which all Sabbatian reports came.<sup>7</sup> Among those in England who were kept informed by him were the well-known millenarian and correspondent of Menasseh ben Israel, Nathaniel Homes, who published several documents about the Sabbatian movement, the secretary of the Royal Society Henry Oldenburg, and the Congregationalist and historian Joshua Sprigge; furthermore the Baptist minister Anthony Grey (a good friend of the philo-judaist and Fifth Monarchist Henry Jessey), Michael Bruce (author of a treatise entitled *The Rattling of the Dry Bones*), and last, but not least, an English Lady whose identity unfortunately is unknown to us. The millenarian irenicist John Durie was in Switzerland at the time, where he received letters by Serrarius every week. In the Dutch Republic Serrarius passed the news on to his good friend, the Bohemian bishop, pedagogue and millenarian Jan Amos Comenius; to the Utrecht Professor of Theology Andreas Essenius, whose *Heilzaam bericht en troost aen de joden* (A Salutary Message to . . . the Jews'), published in 1667, dealt with the Sabbatian events; and, as we shall see, to Jean de Labadie.<sup>8</sup> In their turn, his correspondents passed Serrarius' news on to others interested in the Jewish awakening. Thus the Zürich Professors of Theology Johann Heinrich Hottinger and Johann Jakob Ulrich were kept informed by Durie.<sup>9</sup> The English Lady friend forwarded Serrarius' letters to the Fifth Monarchist Thomas Chappell, who then sent them on to his friend James Fitton, Jessey's successor in the London Baptist congregation.<sup>10</sup> Oldenburg referred to Serrarius' reports in his correspondence with Robert Boyle, Lord Brereton, and Secretary of State

<sup>6</sup> For Petrus Serrarius (1600–1669), see *E. G. E. van der Wall*, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius (1600–1669) en zijn wereld*, Leiden 1987 (diss.).

<sup>7</sup> See *M. McKeon*, „Sabbatai Sevi in England“, *Newsletter Association for Jewish Studies Review* 1 (1976), 140. According to *Scholem*, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 333, Serrarius „was more active than anyone else in spreading the first news both of the lost tribes and of Sabbatai Sevi among his Christian co-religionists“.

<sup>8</sup> For these friends and correspondents, see *Van der Wall*, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius*, ch. 10 and *passim*. The writer of a letter of November 5, 1666 with Sabbatian news, in which Serrarius is mentioned, is not, as McKeon says in his above-mentioned article, p. 158 n. 86, J. Spray, but Joshua Sprigge.

<sup>9</sup> Durie's letters to Hottinger have been preserved in the *Thesaurus Hottingeriana* in the Zentralbibliothek in Zürich. His letters to Ulrich are i. a. to be found in the Zürich Staatsarchiv (E II 457 e).

<sup>10</sup> James Fitton carried Chappell's letter with Serrarius' news with him, when in 1666 he was arrested by Sir Geoffrey Shakerley for his involvement in the Fifth Monarchy Plot of 1663. Shakerley sent this letter on to Joseph Williamson, Secretary of State. See *R. L. Greaves & R. Zaller*, *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the 17th Century I*, Brighton 1982, 287.

Joseph Williamson. To all probability Oldenburg's inquiry with Spinoza concerning the latter's opinion on the Sabbatian news was also inspired by information delivered by Serrarius. Boyle passed on the news to Edward Pococke, Professor of Oriental languages in Oxford. Evidence of the fact that Serrarius' letters also circulated in wider circles in England is confirmed by the astrologer Samuel Jeake, who copied some of Serrarius' letters in his diary; he probably obtained these letters through John Allin, at first minister in Rye, then medical practitioner in London.<sup>11</sup> Several of Serrarius' letters were published in England in pamphlets such as *The Restauration of the Jewes*, *The Last Letters to the London Merchants and Faithful Ministers*, and *The Jewes Message to their Brethren in Holland*, which were published in the last months of 1665, while in 1666 there appeared *Several New Letters concerning the Jews*, *A New Letter concerning the Jewes, Gods Love to his People Israel*, and *The Wonder of all Christendom*.<sup>12</sup>

Serrarius' letters are important sources of information, as they are summaries of reports from North Africa, the Levant and Italy that are no longer extant. According to Scholem the information was faithfully reproduced by Serrarius.<sup>13</sup> He had obtained these reports either directly or indirectly, from Christian merchants as well as from his many Jewish friends in Amsterdam, among whom was Isaac de Rocamora, who, like Serrarius himself, had been a friend of Menasseh ben Israel.<sup>14</sup> Serrarius attended the services in the synagogue when letters with Sabbatian news were read from the pulpit. His correspondence also allows us insight into the reactions of the Amsterdam Jews to the Sabbatian news, showing that there was a group, mainly consisting of rich Jews, who at first obstinately refused to accept the news about the appearance of the lost tribes, but who – still according to Serrarius – had to give in after more letters from the Near East had arrived.<sup>15</sup>

Proof of Serrarius' commitment to the Sabbatian movement is also his plan to make a translation of one of the devotional manuals composed by Nathan, the so-called *tikkunim*. He himself possessed a Spanish version of such a manual, entitled *Orden de lo quese deve leer cadia dia y noche*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I thank Dr. M. Hunter (Birkbeck College, University of London) for drawing my notice to the copies of Serrarius' letters in Samuel Jeakes' diary. A publication of this diary is being prepared by M. Hunter and A. Gregory.

<sup>12</sup> Some of these pamphlets are reprinted by M. Vilensky in his article „Four English Pamphlets on the Sabbataian Movement, Published in 1665–1666“, *Zion* 17 (1952), 160–164. Parts of these pamphlets are reprinted by C. Roth in his *Anglo-Jewish Letters 1158–1917*, London 1938, 70–74. On Serrarius' part in spreading Sabbatian news to England, see also McKeon, „Sabbatai Sevi in England“.

<sup>13</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 334, 344, 470–471.

<sup>14</sup> On the friendly relationship between Serrarius and Menasseh ben Israel, see E. G. E. van der Wall, „Petrus Serrarius (1600–1669): an Amsterdam millenarian friend of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel“ (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> See Van der Wall, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius*, 420–422.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Essenius also knew of these devotional manuals: he had been shown a *tikkun* by a Jew (Heilzaem bericht, 56–57). On these *tikkunim*, see L. & R. Fuks, „Hebreeuwse boek-

It goes without saying that Serrarius' enthusiasm for the Jewish messianic revival was closely connected with his millenarianism. Being strongly aware of living in the last times and believing in the imminent conversion of the Jews as well as their restoration to their homeland, he could not but welcome wholeheartedly any tidings that seemed to confirm his expectations. The happy coincidence of the Sabbatian news with the millenarian expectations concerning the year 1666 did much to enhance his enthusiasm. For him, like for so many other Christian millenarians, 1666 was a year of special significance: then the downfall of the beast or Antichrist would finally take place, to be followed immediately by the calling of the Jews, the lost ten tribes included. Through his friendship with Rabbi Nathan Shapira, who believed in the return of the tribes and whose book *Tub ha'Ares* had influenced many of Nathan of Gaza's ideas, Serrarius might have been prepared for such tidings as arrived in Europe in the autumn of 1665.<sup>17</sup>

Now, surprisingly enough, the first reports that reached Europe did not refer to Sabbatai Sevi and his prophet, but dealt with news about the return of the ten tribes, who were said to have been seen in different places, for example in the African desert, marching toward Palestine. During 1665 and 1666 the reports about the lost tribes played an important part in heightening the messianic atmosphere and so, when we talk about the Sabbatian movement, this aspect should be taken well into account. It is well-known that the discovery of the lost tribes was a popular object of debate in the mid-seventeenth century Jewish world. One has only to bring to mind the immediate and widespread success of Menasseh ben Israel's *The Hope of Israel* (1650), a tract that was also avidly read by Christian millenarians. Menasseh himself believed in the existence of the legendary river Sambatyon, behind which some of the tribes were said to be living. This river was also mentioned in the Sabbatian stories. Thus it was foretold that two ambassadors would come to Gaza „from the *Hebrews*, beyond the *Sabatalian River*, who should acquaint them the *Messias* was come“.<sup>18</sup>

„From Jerusalem we have received very good news“, Serrarius wrote to Nathaniel Homes in the autumn of 1665, referring to the story about the conquest of Mecca by a great multitude of Israelites who said to be the fore-runners of the ten tribes.<sup>19</sup> Besides being physically attractive – „they are

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drukkunst in Nederland“, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 14 (1980), 200–204; E. N. Adler, „The Romance of Hebrew Printing“, in: E. N. Adler, *About Hebrew Manuscripts*, London 1905 (New York 1970), 125–126.

<sup>17</sup> On Serrarius' friendship with Rabbi Shapira, see *Van der Wall*, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius*, 176–184. See also R. H. Popkin, „Rabbi Nathan Shapira's visit to Amsterdam in 1657“, in: J. Michman & T. Levie (eds.), *Dutch Jewish History*, Jerusalem 1984, 185–205. On the influence of Shapira's tract on Nathan of Gaza, see *Scholem*, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 365.

<sup>18</sup> See *Several New Letters concerning the Jews*, reprinted in *Vilenski*, „Four English Pamphlets“, 166. On Menasseh ben Israel and his tract, see *H. Méchoulan & G. Nahon*, *Menasseh ben Israel. Espérance d'Israel*, Paris 1979.

<sup>19</sup> *The Restauration of the Jewes or a True Relation of their Progress and Proceedings in order*

people of a middle stature, their bodies comely, their complexions fair“, which only seems to refer to the masculine part of the tribes: there was no woman seen among them –, these Israelites were invincible. The Turks, who had begun to fight with them, soon fled home, crying out: „Who is able to fight with these people, seeing our arrows and shots return back upon our selves.“ The Israelites intended to remain at Mecca till the rest of their brethren arrived, since, as they had said, „the time was now come, that they should return into their own land of their fore-fathers, which others had usurped and taken from them“.<sup>20</sup>

Although Serrarius had rejoiced at the „very good news“, because, as he wrote to Durie and others, the return of the tribes marked the beginning of the reconciliation of all the nations of the world and the instauration of Christ's reign on earth, he had not accepted it without some hesitation, being afraid that the reunion of the Jews and Christians might go wrong: he feared that the Jews might think the Christians would be converted to Judaism, while they did not realize that they themselves had to be converted to Christianity. These Israelites,

„being in a spirit of *Judaism*, in great power, led by a holy man, doing great miracles, and all things answering the description of the Messiah. . . may expect that it would be a testimony that the Christians and other people and nations should be gathered into the *Jews*, and not the *Jews* into Christ.“<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately Serrarius had been reassured by one of his informants that these people had given up their idolatry and lived according to the purity and perfection of the Law, „from whence they would be raised to the knowledge of Christ“. They would be a nation that would be born in one day, their conversion being their birth. They did not belong to the posterity of those that had crucified Christ. They would not join the existing Christian churches, since „all the churches called by the name of Christians are full of vanity“. Those to whom Christ would teach his truth must be purified „and from them shall run a stream overflowing the whole world, whereby the powers of the world shall be overthrown, and the right of Christ in and with his saints shall then begin to be established“.<sup>22</sup>

Although, as said above, in Serrarius' first letters no mention was made of Sabbatai and Nathan, yet one may detect references to the king and his prophet – who in the first tidings were considered as one person – in the passage just quoted as well as in other descriptions of the leader of the tribes as „a holy man who understandeth all languages“, and being „of an extraor-

to the Regaining of their Ancient Kingdom, Being the Substance of Several Letters viz. from Antwerp, Legorn, Florence etc., published by R. R., London 1665, 1–2. On 17 December 1665 this pamphlet was translated into Dutch by *L. van Bos* under the title *Herstelling van de joden*, Dordrecht 1665.

<sup>20</sup> The Restauration of the Jewes, 5.

<sup>21</sup> The Restauration of the Jewes, 2.

<sup>22</sup> The Restauration of the Jewes, 3.

dinary discerning spirit for no sooner doth he see a man, but he knows his mind, and the thoughts of his heart . . .".<sup>23</sup> It was only in December 1665 that Sabbatai and Nathan appeared in the letters. From that time onwards Serrarius' correspondence abounds with all kinds of miracle stories, merged with factual reports, about the king and his prophet. From these letters we receive a good impression of Serrarius' views about the Jewish Messiah. Besides his correspondence, there is also a work in which he touched upon the Sabbatian news. In a commentary on the first fourteen chapters of Isaiah Serrarius showed himself deeply impressed by the recent events in the Near East.<sup>24</sup> It is in the preface to this work, dated 22 January 1666, that he talks explicitly about the king and his prophet. What is the role assigned by him to Sabbatai Sevi and the Jewish revival?

It is significant that Serrarius starts with pointing to the great penitential awakening among the Jews. He urges his fellow Christians to follow the example set by the Jews. By acknowledging their own apostate situation the Christians may have a chance that, like the Jews, they will be 'restored' in the near future. The Jewish penitential enthusiasm stands in marked contrast to the utterly despicable state of contemporary Christianity, which is torn by strife and war. Both the penitence of the Jews and the apostasy of the Christians are unmistakable signs of the coming judgment of Babylon and the redemption of the Jews. In his letters, too, this is emphasized by Serrarius, as may be seen from his words written to Durie:

„Pendant que les Juifs se rangent par tout à la pénitence, à jeusnes, prières et ausmones, nos gens s'exhaussent de plus en plus à la guerre, à la division et aux ravages. Quand il n'y auroit autre signe du jugement de Babylone et de la delivrance d'Israel que ce feu de division et de confusion parmy les Chrestiens, et ce zèle de penitence parmy les Juifs, cela seul nous deubroit réveiller."<sup>25</sup>

Since the restoration of the Jews is closely linked with the fall of Babylon, Serrarius admonishes his fellow Christians to leave Babylon, reminding them of the angel's voice from heaven in Revelation 18:5. But, one might ask, where should one go to? Serrarius' answer is most interesting: he suggests that the best thing to do is to join the Jews in the Holy Land. Why, if the Jews from all over the world go to Palestine, would the Christians not do the same? Of course, he is perfectly aware of objections that may be raised against his proposal by his fellow Christians. Why should they leave their countries to join the Jews in Palestine so long as the latter refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Messiah? Certainly, these Christians argue, it

<sup>23</sup> The Jewes Message to their Brethren in Holland, 1665, 6; The Last Letters to the London Merchants and Faithful Ministers, 1665, 6.

<sup>24</sup> His exposition is entitled *Verklaringe over des propheten Jesaia veertien eerste capittelen*, Amsterdam 1666.

<sup>25</sup> Serrarius to Durie, 23. VII. 1666, quoted in Durie's letter to J. H. Hottinger, *Thes. Hott.* 30f65, f. 349/r, v. See also Durie's letter to J. J. Ulrich, E II 457 esf. 995.



cannot be denied that the Jews speak about a Messiah, but they don't know yet the „true Messiah“ of the Christians. Christians who follow this line of argument will, according to Serrarius, stay in Babylon and be destroyed together with it.<sup>26</sup>

According to Serrarius, at the heart of the refusal of these ‚carnal‘ Christians to join the Jews lie their wrong notions about Christ's second coming. In the first place, they cannot believe that there will ever be a general conversion of the Jews, and so, when they now learn that the Jews are in a penitent mood although Christ is not yet mentioned by them, these Christians do not understand how to interpret this news and therefore they deride it. Secondly, it is denied by them that the lost tribes will ever return and, moreover, that the two tribes will be reunited again, and therefore, when tidings arrive about the reappearance of the ten tribes and of the revival of the dry bones of the house of Judah, they regard these only as ‚mere dreams and Jewish fables‘. Thirdly, it is their conviction that there will never arise a prophet or a leader among the Jews before these have been converted to Christianity. So, when they hear about a king and a prophet, they think this news just as strange as the Jews thought it strange when they heard about Jesus Christ. Lastly, these carnal Christians imagine that the Law, the Temple and Jerusalem will never be restored again and therefore, when reports arrive about such a possible restoration, they raise as many objections, derived from the Pauline Epistles, against such tidings as the Jews raised against Christ, on the grounds of the Books of Moses. How great is the difference between these carnal Christians and their regenerate brethren, Serrarius exclaims. The latter will be most willing to join the Jews in the Holy Land, although Christ is not yet acknowledged by the Jews as the true Messiah. For the time being these Christians are satisfied with the fact that the Jews are in a penitent mood. Serrarius is convinced that in similar circumstances the apostles would not have hesitated one moment to go to Palestine.<sup>27</sup> Whether Serrarius himself intended to leave Amsterdam for the Holy Land, as may be inferred from his words, is not sure. It was rumoured that he had persuaded some fifty families in Amsterdam and elsewhere to leave for Palestine.

Unquestionably Serrarius took the claims of Sabbatai and Nathan very seriously. Most remarkable is his insistence on the similarity between the Jewish negative reaction to Jesus Christ and the Christian negative reaction to Sabbatai Sevi. But how far does this analogy go? Of course, as a Christian he could not place Sabbatai on the same level as Christ. He does not deny, however, that Sabbatai is a king but, as he writes in one of his letters, he is a king who will submit to the King of Glory, Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> In another letter

<sup>26</sup> Verklaringe [\*9/v].

<sup>27</sup> Verklaringe [\*10-11].

<sup>28</sup> See *Gods Love to His People Israel*, London 1666, published by *Vilenski*, „Four English Pamphlets“, 172.

he quotes a report from Paris according to which Sabbatai would not have proclaimed himself Messiah, but would have declared to have been roused by divine revelation in order to recollect all Jews and „to teach them to know the Messiah to come, which hitherto they have not known“. „It's said“, still according to the Parisian letter, „that something of God appears in him“.<sup>29</sup> In this light Serrarius must have seen Sabbatai's role: he was a king, indeed, but a minor one in comparison with the one and only King, as he was the man who would bring the Jews to the knowledge of this true King. This characterization of Sabbatai was repeated not only in several pamphlets, but also in Essenius' *Heilzaem bericht* as well as in one of Oldenburg's letters to Boyle: „The pretended king... is said not to assume the dignity and office of the Messiah, but to lead them...“<sup>30</sup>

In passing it may be mentioned that Serrarius seems to have shared the optimistic interpretation of Sabbatai's imprisonment, which was current in Jewish circles. Obviously he was very pleased to report tidings about the almost unrestricted freedom the king was said to enjoy in Gallipoli and he relished to tell stories about miracles happening in Sabbatai's prison. According to him these miracles were a sure sign that „the summer was at hand“.<sup>31</sup>

How did Serrarius react to the news about Sabbatai's conversion to Islam? Maybe his response to the Messiah's apostasy is the most remarkable expression of his „Sabbatianism“. At first he refused to believe the reports which started to arrive in Europe in the autumn of 1666. He could not accept the news that the king of the Jews had turned Turk. Like the Jewish believers he rested confident that Sabbatai's work would go on, that what had happened was a fulfilment of prophecies made by the king himself. Had, as Serrarius wrote to Durie, Sabbatai not foretold the Jews that they would have to suffer because of him during 14 or 40 days, but that after that period Israel's redemption would begin? Had the king not prophesied that he was to retire for a season and that in the meantime the sultan would search for him, but that no hurt would befall him or any of the Jews; that about the time of Passover he would appear again and that then the redemption of the Jews would be achieved?<sup>32</sup>

In February 1667, Serrarius was glad to report to Durie as well as to his English friend, the unknown Lady, that letters had arrived from the East which unanimously said that Sabbatai had not embraced Islam at all. That

<sup>29</sup> See A New Letter concerning the Jewes, London 1666, published by *Vilenski*, „Four English Pamphlets“, 167.

<sup>30</sup> Oldenburg to Boyle, 13. III. 1666, *A. R. Hall & M. B. Hall* (eds.), *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg*, Madison etc. III, 59. See also *Den gewaenden joodsche Messias Sabatha Sebi ontdeckt*, 10; *Historis verhael*, 7; and *Essenius*, *Heilzaem bericht*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Serrarius to Lady?, 14. V. 1666, Gifford MSS, vol. I (Bristol Baptist College, Bristol). I thank Dr. G. F. Nuttall (Birmingham) who brought these letters to my notice.

<sup>32</sup> Serrarius to Durie, 23. XI. 1666, quoted by Durie in his letter to J. H. Hottinger, *Thes. Hott.* 30F65, f. 350/r. See also Durie's letter to Ulrich, E II 457/e, f. 1153/v.

news was based, Serrarius remarked, on a false interpretation of the fact that Sabbatai was wearing a white turban, which only had to be seen as a token of the sultan's high esteem for the Jewish king. The multitude, however, „did not conceive the Turk ever would have honoured a Jew with such an eminent badge of honour“. More examples of the Turkish respect for Sabbatai could be mentioned.<sup>33</sup> In March 1667, he wrote to his English Lady friend that only a few months before Nathan had assured the Jews that their redemption was at hand, although he could not assign the precise day, and that he had urged the Jews to continue to do penance.

Serrarius was deeply disappointed about the eagerness of his fellow Christians to welcome any news about Sabbatai's apostasy, and he criticized their reluctance to believe in the coming redemption of the Jews. „I wonder why Christians are so slow to beleeve this“, he wrote,

„and so ready to take up any contrary rumour! I perceive God wil surprise carnal professors now as He did at His first coming. Then the Jews stumbled at Him because He came in such a low condition, and now the Christians are offended at Him because He comes unto poore despised Zion whilst she lies yet in her [own] bloud and is not yet cleansed and washed from her iniquity; not understanding that He must first come to them, as He came to us gentils, whilst they are yet in their old rags, to prevent them with His kindness and beneficence and so to win and convince their hearts, dealing with them as the father of the prodigal sonne dealt with his sonne, and all this that no [man] may glory in His sight.“<sup>34</sup>

His belief in Sabbatai remained unshaken. A few months later, in July 1667, he wrote to Oldenburg that Jews at Adrianople had affirmed to have spoken with Sabbatai „and found him not turned Turck, but a Jew as ever in the same hope and expectation as before“. This news had caused some Amsterdam Jews to return to their fasting and praying.<sup>35</sup>

So even after Sabbatai's apostasy Serrarius persevered in his faith that Sabbatai was the inaugurator of Israel's redemption. He sustained this belief in the ‚apostate Messiah‘ till his death in September 1669, and thus he may be regarded as one of the very few Christian ‚believers‘, if not the only one. That he upheld this conviction may be inferred from his quarrel with the French mystic Antoinette Bourignon, in which the Sabbatian affair played an important role. Much to Serrarius' anger and disappointment, Bourignon considered Sabbatai an impostor. His attempts to convince her that she was absolutely wrong were unsuccessful and this was one of the reasons why he broke with her. Bourignon, then, is proof of the fact that Christian

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<sup>33</sup> Serrarius to Durie, 21. II. 1667, quoted by Durie in his letter to Hottinger, Thes.Hott. 30F65, f. 345/r,v. See *Scholem*, Sabbatai Sevi, 760, 762.

<sup>34</sup> Serrarius to Lady?, 4. III. 1667, Gifford MSS, vol. I.

<sup>35</sup> Serrarius to Oldenburg, 5. VII. 2667, The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg III, 446-447.

millenarianism did not necessarily imply belief in Jewish messianism.<sup>36</sup> But Serrarius' Sabbatianism is even more apparent in his correspondence with the Lithuanian scholar Henning Witte. In a letter to Witte Serrarius referred to Cardoso's Sabbatian theories, arguing that Sabbatai was preparing the universal conversion of the Jews and, furthermore, that the Messiah first had to suffer and be rejected by the Israelite people before he would reveal himself again.<sup>37</sup> It is most remarkable that a Christian like Serrarius attempted to propagate such pro-Sabbatian arguments.

In order to see Serrarius' Sabbatianism in the proper perspective his views may be compared with those of one of his friends, Jean de Labadie.<sup>38</sup> In the summer of 1666 the French ex-Jesuit De Labadie had come to the Dutch Republic to serve the Walloon congregation of Middelburg (in the province of Zeeland) as a minister. Serrarius, who had met De Labadie in Amsterdam and travelled with him and his company to Haarlem where they stayed for several days with the well-known Boemhist publisher Hendrick Beets (Betkuis), was „as much edified by his conversation as by his preaching“. De Labadie was „a minister of singulare parts and of a convincing spirit“, as Serrarius informed his English Lady friend.<sup>39</sup> And he wrote to Durie that he rejoiced at hearing De Labadie announce the imminence of Christ's reign on earth.<sup>40</sup> Because of his millenarian views De Labadie soon got into trouble with the Walloon churches, by whom he was forbidden to proclaim these views any longer. This did not hinder him, however, from publishing several millenarian treatises, among them a tract entitled *Jugement charitable et juste sur l'état présent des Juifs*. This treatise, which appeared in 1667, was entirely devoted to Sabbatai Sevi and the Jewish revival caused by the ‚king‘.

Up till now the *Jugement charitable*, which according to a Jewish historian is unique among seventeenth-century Christian treatises because of its tolerant character<sup>41</sup>, has not received much attention.<sup>42</sup> It is dedicated to Serrarius and two of his brothers, Louis and Joseph Serrurier. De Labadie gave three

<sup>36</sup> On the relationship between Antoinette Bourignon and Serrarius, see *Van der Wall*, *De mystieke chiliast Petrus Serrarius*, 514–535.

<sup>37</sup> Serrarius' letter is quoted by Witte in a letter to J. Thomasius, see *B. G. Struve*, *Collectanea Excerpta VII*, Ienae 1710, 65–66 as well as *J. C. Wolf*, *Bibliotheca hebraea III*, 1010.

<sup>38</sup> For Jean de Labadie (1610–1674), see i. a. *Biografisch lexikon voor de geschiedenis van het protestantisme 2*, Kampen 1983 (containing a bibliography of De Labadie's works); *W. Goeters*, *Die Vorbereitung des Pietismus in der reformierten Kirche der Niederlande bis zur labadistischen Krisis 1670*, Leipzig 1911 (Amsterdam 1974); *T. J. Saxby*, *The quest for the New Jerusalem. Jean de Labadie and the Labadists, 1610–1744*, Dordrecht – Boston – Lancaster 1987.

<sup>39</sup> Serrarius to Lady?, 22. VII. 1666.

<sup>40</sup> Serrarius to Durie, 23. VII. 1666, quoted by Durie in his letter to J. H. Hottinger, *Thes. Hott.* 30F65, f. 349/r. See also Durie's letter to Ulrich, E II 457 c, f. 995.

<sup>41</sup> See *H. Bovenkerk*, „Nederlandse schrijvers tijdens de Republiek over de joden“, in: *H. Brugmans & A. Frank* (eds.), *Geschiedenis der joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1940, 731–732.

<sup>42</sup> Neither Goeters nor Saxby give much attention to the *Jugement*. A fuller exposition of

reasons for this dedication: first of all, because of the great love shown by the Serruriers to the Jews, in which they resembled the apostle Paul; secondly, because of their spiritual as well as material support of the Jews, and, thirdly, because Serrarius had kept him informed of the news from the East. Apparently Serrarius had sent the reports about the king and his prophet also to his friend in Zeeland. Hitherto it has been overlooked that the *Jugement* is not only dedicated to Serrarius, but that the work itself is also addressed to him. On De Labadie's request the tract was translated into Dutch by Serrarius under the title *Oordeel der liefde en gerechtigheyt over den jegenwoordigen toestandt der joden*.<sup>43</sup> With this translation the author hoped to reach a wider audience, especially the Dutch Jews. In 1669 there also appeared a German translation of the *Jugement charitable*.<sup>44</sup>

Although it cannot be denied that De Labadie was close in spirit with Serrarius, there are obvious differences between them in their involvement in the Sabbatian movement. If we compare, for example, De Labadie's reaction to the first reports from the Near East with that of Serrarius, the difference between them immediately comes to the fore. Right at the beginning of the *Jugement charitable* De Labadie confesses that at first he had paid little or no attention to the reports from the Near East, being under the impression that this news did not concern him in the least.<sup>45</sup> This is quite different from Serrarius' first reaction, who immediately was of the opinion that the news did very much concern him. De Labadie had only become interested when he realized that the „poor“ Jews considered Sabbatai Sevi as their Messiah. This implies that the issue of the return of the lost tribes did not interest De Labadie in the least, and it is significant that he had nothing at all to say on the tribes; again a marked difference with Serrarius. De Labadie had only wanted to give his opinion because he had felt obliged to maintain Christ's honour, not by converting the Jews to Christ in a violent way but by attempting to lead them to Him in a gentle manner. He had called his *Jugement* „charitable“ as well as „juste“ because on the one hand he wanted to speak to the Jews in a spirit of love as their redemption was imminent, on the other hand he would not refrain from warning them severely not to be led astray again.<sup>46</sup>

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this tract will be given in my „*Jugement charitable et juste sur l'état présent des Juifs* (1667): Jean de Labadie on Sabbatai Sevi“ (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> *Oordeel der liefde en gerechtigheyt over den jegenwoordigen toestandt der joden, vervattende een soete voorstel van twaelf gewichtige hoofdstucken, meest alle nieuw, welcken sy gebeden worden na te dencken*, Amsterdam 1667. In the following I will refer to this translation.

<sup>44</sup> The German translation is entitled *Urtheil der Liebe und Gerechtigkeit über den gegenwärtigen Zustand der Juden, ihren König und Messiam betreffend, abgefast in eine anmütige Vorstellung von 12. wichtigen Hauptpuncten so mehrentheils new denen sie gebeten werden fleissig nachzusinnen . . .*, 1669 (Württemberg. Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart).

<sup>45</sup> *Oordeel der liefde*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Oordeel der liefde*, 2–3.

Like Serrarius De Labadie had also been very much impressed by the Jewish penitential enthusiasm but, unlike Serrarius, he feared that this penitential awakening might only be an external affair, which had nothing to do with 'true renewal'. From what Serrarius had written to him he had received a strong impression that this Jewish revival was characterized by external splendour.

Not surprisingly, De Labadie's central message to the Jews is that Christ is the true Messiah. In what light then does he see Sabbatai Sevi's claims? He does not rule out the possibility that Sabbatai may be the one to lead the Jews to Christ, that he is God's instrument to prepare the establishment of Christ's reign among the Jews and that as such he may be called a „stadtholder of the Lord“ or „Christ's lieutenant“. If Sabbatai were indeed a pious man, neither blaspheming Jesus Christ nor wanting to take His place, then, De Labadie says, he is willing to confer on him the title of 'Redeemer of Israel', even that of 'Messiah' though only, as he strongly emphasizes, in a restricted sense: Jesus Christ is the universal, absolute Messiah. Like Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, to whom this title has been granted in the Scriptures in view of some physical salvation and temporary redemption, Sabbatai Sevi may also serve as a model of the Messiah. Moreover, in view of the fact that in the Old Testament two wicked kings, the one Jewish, the other gentile, and no great redeemers at all, Saul and Cyrus, are called 'anointed', De Labadie does not see any reason why the Jews would not be allowed to grant this title to one of their kings who might deliver them from their greatest and longest suffering.<sup>47</sup>

From the tone of the *Jugement* it is clear that De Labadie seriously reckons with the possibility that Sabbatai is an impostor, that he is an instrument not of the Lord, but of the devil, who, knowing his time is running out, wants to substitute a false Christ for the true Christ.<sup>48</sup> Therefore De Labadie adopts a much more reserved attitude towards Sabbatai Sevi than Serrarius. It seems unlikely that De Labadie would ever embrace the pro-Sabbatian ideas of Nathan, Cardoso and other Sabbatians about the 'apostate' Messiah. Although, of course, on the one hand his willingness to regard Sabbatai as an instrument of the Lord contrasts strongly with the polemical and sometimes even hostile attitude of most of his fellow Christians, on the other hand, compared with Serrarius, he is much less a representative of 'Christian Sabbatianism' than the Amsterdam millenarian.

In conclusion we may say that the philojudaism of Christian millenarians had its obvious limits, which are clearly revealed in the fact that both Serrarius and De Labadie attributed a Christian significance to the Sabbatian movement. However this may be, Serrarius' pro-Sabbatian attitude stands out as one of the most philojudaistic expressions of seventeenth-century

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<sup>47</sup> Oordeel der liefde, 9–16, 19, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Oordeel der liefde, 27 ff.

Christian millenarianism. He probably was unique in his enthusiasm for the Sabbatian movement. We know that his close friends Durie and Comenius were keenly interested in the Jewish messianic revival. Durie, for instance, remarked that if the reports about the ten tribes should prove to be true, then manifestly the face of the earth would soon be renewed<sup>49</sup>, and at first he also refused to believe that Sabbatai had turned Turk.<sup>50</sup> Comenius is said to have „embraced the mad ideas of Sabbatai“<sup>51</sup>, and it is known that in December 1665 he intended to have the New Testament translated into Hebrew, a plan that was undoubtedly inspired by the news from the Levant.<sup>52</sup> But, as far as I can see, neither of them was as enthusiastic about the Sabbatian affair as Serrarius was.

Do these examples of ‚Christian Sabbatianism‘ contribute anything to solving the question about the connection between Christian millenarianism and Sabbatianism, which is a matter of debate among historians of the Sabbatian movement? Scholem’s hypothesis that „there is no causal connection between the Sabbatian movement and certain millenarian movements in the contemporaneous Christian world“, but that „the messianic awakening was nourished from internal sources“, is well-known. He does not deny, however, that the Christian newsletters played their part, albeit a minor one, in spreading the movement, but he emphasizes that „chiliasm influence on the Sabbatian movement should not be exaggerated.“<sup>53</sup> Probably this last observation is correct: a pro-Sabbatian attitude among Christian millenarians like Serrarius tells us more about Christian millenarianism than about any influence of millenarianism on Jewish messianism. One cannot imagine that letters like those that were sent by Serrarius to his Christian friends did much to enhance the messianic fervour among the Jews. Nor is it likely that this widespread Jewish revival can be explained in terms of Christian eschatological expectations. A reference to any influence of Christian millenarian thought on Sabbatai Sevi is clearly not enough. Nevertheless, the synchronism of the Jewish messianic movement and the expectations of Christian millenarians is remarkable; whether it was entirely accidental, as is asserted by Scholem, remains a moot point. There are still many questions to be answered, for example: how close were the personal contacts between Jews and Christian millenarians? Did they talk about their eschatological expectations? We know that Christian millenarians were interested in Jewish messianism, but did Jews, apart from Menasseh ben Israel, read any Christian millenarian literature? Further investigation is needed before we can say

<sup>49</sup> Durie to Ulrich, 28. X. 1665, Thes. Hott. 29F64, f. 552.

<sup>50</sup> Durie to Ulrich, 2. II. 1667, E II 4572, ff. 747–749.

<sup>51</sup> For the remark on Comenius’ Sabbatianism, see the letter by Jean d’Aillé jr. to Johann Heinrich Ott, 24. X. 1668, quoted by L. Forster, „Unpublished Comeniana“, *The Slavonic Review* 32 (1953–54), 479.

<sup>52</sup> See his *Clamores Eliae*, ed. by Julie Nováková, Kastellaun/Hunsrück 1977, 124.

<sup>53</sup> Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 101–102.

anything about Christian millenarian influence on Jewish messianic thought in the seventeenth century. However, without affirming any direct influences of Christian eschatological expectations on Sabbatianism, it may be concluded that neither before nor after the Jewish revival around Sabbatai Sevi and Nathan of Gaza Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism came as close as in Sabbatianism.