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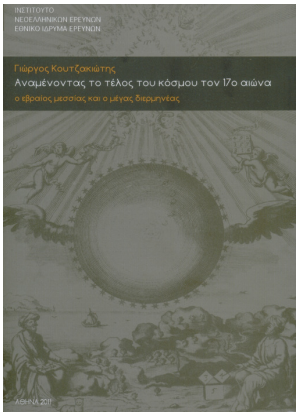

George Koutzakiotis

[Awaiting the End of the World in the 17th Century. The Jewish Messiah and the Great Interpreter]

Αναμένοντας το τέλος του κόσμου τον 17ο αιώνα. Ο εβραίος μεσσίας και ο μέγας διερμηνέας

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This study is concerned with the reception of the messianic movement of the Jewish mystic Sabbatai Sevi (1626-1676) by Greek scholars of his time. A survey of earlier historiography dealing with this movement reveals that the only sources that have not been explored are the Greek ones. Moreover, while the movement's reception by Protestant intellectuals has been thoroughly examined, little mention has been made of the Orthodox Christians who constituted the largest Christian community in the Ottoman Empire.

The Sabbatean movement was, above all, a product of its time, in an age that was dominated by eschatological and messianic ideas. Part One of the study discusses the factors that favoured the creation of the eschatological and messianic movements in Europe and the Mediterranean on the eve of the appearance of Sabbatai Sevi. The period's historical climate can only be understood by adopting the prevailing perspective of the people of that time, by putting forward and deciphering the signs they saw in their space and time. These signs in heaven and on earth, in dates and sacred texts, in words and numbers, interconnected harmoniously, composing the words and phrases of a great open book of prophesies.

The Sabbatean movement, the most significant Jewish messianic movement since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, shook the Jewish communities around the world, and could not possibly have gone unnoticed in contemporary Greek sources. All the more so, since the main events took place within the Ottoman territory.

Part Two of the study examines the Greek accounts of Sabbatai and his movement, and relates them to the information found in existing historiography.

Sabbatai's provenance, his messianic peregrination, certain aspects of his movement, his conversion to Islam, the subsequent stance he took and then his exile, are all mentioned in Greek chronicles and historiographic works written between the late 17th and late 18th century. In addition to these works, a Greek text, which would seem to be Sabbatai's messianic encyclical, is transmitted by Orthodox ecclesiastical codices of this period. The text is authentic and is the actual translation of one of Sabbatai's encyclicals, the Hebrew original has been lost. Since the Armenian, Turkish and possibly one of the Italian translations of this encyclical were based on the Greek version rather than the Hebrew original, this document clearly played the primary role in its diffusion beyond Jewish communities. The Greek translation also helped to communicate the messianic pronouncements of a Jewish mystic to other ethnoreligious communities, and possibly to reignite the eschatological fears and messianic hopes of the scholarly circles of the Empire.

The original Hebrew text was translated into Greek by Panagiotis Nikousios, who is considered to be the first Christian Great Dragoman of the Sublime Porte. One may wonder what kind of concerns drove Nikousios to translate the Jewish messiah's encyclical into Greek. The answer emerges easily from the historic survey in Part Three of the study that sketches out the Great Interpreter's world. This was a world imbued with mystic interpretations, which revolved around one main axis, namely the multiple readings of the present aiming at predicting the future of Christianity. Nikousios' field of observations was exceptionally wide and ranged from the heavenly firmament to ancient and sacred texts. For the Great Interpreter of the Sultan, the planets and heavenly constellations, the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'an and the hieroglyphs on the ancient Egyptian obelisks, were more than fields of meaning to which he applied his learning. They made up the mystical sphere that "preached" the Christian truth and predicted the Second Coming.

Finally, the epilogue examines the use of identical or similar symbols by both Sabbatai Sevi and Panagiotis Nikousios.