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**THE IDEA OF TIME AND THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORY.
THOUGHTS ON A DIALECTIC IN SPANISH MEDIEVAL JUDAISM**

***CONCEPCIÓN DEL TIEMPO Y EVOLUCIÓN DE LA HISTORIA. IDEAS
SOBRE UNA DIALÉCTICA EN EL JUDAÍSMO MEDIEVAL ESPAÑOL***

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ABSTRACT

From its origin, Israel has been determined by history. The Jewish people was shaped historically as such around the Torah. However, Jewish history itself witnessed in its bosom the birth of spiritual experiences that go beyond historical and chronological boundaries. Aside from history and temporality, some experiences, paradoxical to its collective existence, appear continuously in Jewish history throughout time. In the present article we will analyze, from the perspective of philosophy and theology of history, this duality in a time and place that are key to its understanding: The Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula. Our research is a transversal outlook in which this topic is addressed from a broad analysis ranging from tradition and scripture, to mystique, philosophy and eschatology.

Keywords: Judaism, Sepharad, Time, Philosophy, History.

RESUMEN

Desde su origen, Israel se ha configurado en torno a la historia. El pueblo judío se cohesionó históricamente como tal vinculado a la Torá. Sin embargo, la propia historia judía fue desde sus orígenes testigo del nacimiento en su seno de experiencias espirituales más allá de los límites históricos y cronológicos. Junto a la conciencia histórica y la vivencia de la temporalidad, experiencias temporalmente paradójicas brotan en la historia judía a lo largo del tiempo de forma continuada. En el presente artículo analizaremos, desde la perspectiva de la filosofía y la teología de la historia, esta dualidad en un tiempo y lugar que son claves para su comprensión: La Edad Media en la Península Ibérica. Nuestra investigación quiere ser una mirada transversal en la que esta cuestión es abordada desde un amplio análisis que va desde la tradición y la escritura, hasta la mística, la filosofía y la escatología.

Palabras clave: Judaísmo, Sefarad, Tiempo, Filosofía, Historia.

I. INTRODUCCIÓN

The Jewish religion provided in its beginnings a very effective means to reduce complexity, as it generated *sense* out of the chaos of the incomprehensible. Everyday worries were set aside, in the background, thanks to the consecration of time, and attention was focused on a primal *principle*, origin of everything. Private cares, the empiric world, facts as a whole, were trapped in history, “structured by sense”¹. In the Bible, history has a clear aim: it recalls Yahweh’s interventions, it shows God as revealed in history, not a complete history of Israel. On the blurred line between legend and history, a community in the making judges events critically. This judgement is so deep that it goes beyond the events and is able to reflect on the problematic nature of the act of narrating. With surprising self-assuredness, Israel started to scrutinize its existence in relation to God’s will very early on. As a result, the course of history, pushed by some processes that ran deep, favored a collective self-assessment full of historicity. A highly distinctive singularity is attached to Judaism from its origin. Throughout its particular and hazardous history, some radical collective circumstances and experiences formed a rather troublesome identity along time. Although this people is determined by history, Jewish history itself rejects any attempts at being interpreted within a general and all-encompassing discourse. As

1 Walter Burkett, *Creation of the Sacred* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 52.

a matter of fact, every attempt at substantiating a “theory of time” or a “philosophy of history” in the Scriptures is an endeavor tinted with the paradoxical, with contradiction and complexity. This extremely ambivalent history holds in its bosom powers that curtail its own idea of continuity, or that filter this continuity within a cyclical, recurring scope, that question the temporal sequence of chronology, or turn this sequence into a ritualized process that suspends the very nature of historical time. However, it is not only time and chronology—backbone elements of common history—the ones that can modify their appearance so far as to become unrecognizable. Beside this, we see that something we could call “alternative time states” come about and overflow: messianism, apocalypics, metahistory, ahistorical mysticism, all of them paradoxical experiences of collective existence in time. The Middle Ages and the Iberian Peninsula are the setting where all of these experiences developed in a striking ceremony of human spirit overflow. Having already addressed these issues in an introductory way in previous work², the main aim of this article is to show this duality and to reflect on its boundaries and contributions, to present the fascinating concurrence of all these power lines in medieval Judaism which make the experience of Israel gravitate, be suspended, or projected throughout time and history. Our secondary objective is also to relate that singular experience of vertigo or temporal stillness, of historical contingency or mystical ecstasy to the richness and singularity of Judaism in Sepharad.

II. TIME AND HISTORY

Judaism bound the historical to the transcendental from its very beginning as a people: human history reveals God’s will. This process underwent a subtle modification along the centuries: the historical experiences made up levels from which a dialectic between divine actions and Man’s answers expresses itself. In this dialectic, the temporal history of the Jewish man is embedded in the “history of salvation”, so that the mythical archetypes of the origin become the true history. Later on, in a “return of the same”, this true history is mythologized through a process of ritual repetition of the holy and liturgical time. We mark the absence of the unambiguous concept of biblical “time” in the genesis of this ambivalent complexity, so reluctant to a precise conceptualization³. Apart from

2 José A. Fernández López, “Vértigo y éxtasis. Mística e historia en el judaísmo medieval español”, *Anuario del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 34, n° 3 (2017): 571-586.

3 See Tamar Rudavsky, *Time Matters: Time, Creation, and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1-3.

all periodization, the real difficulty when it comes to theorizing about the nature of time in Judaism from biblical archetypes lies in the distinction and relation between linear and cyclical time. According to some interpretation, whereas for some Greek philosophers time was never perceived as reality, or at the most, they developed an abstract notion of linear time, Semitic peoples, nomadic and migrant, with a troubled history, promptly became aware of the divergent functions of time and space⁴. Faced with the idea of a static reality, foreign to mutation and orderly à la Greek, time is ontologically futile. On the other hand, the Jews introduced an ontology of time in the West through the Scriptures via a dynamic re-interpretation of their own existential development as a people tightly linked to history and their relationship to the surrounding world.

To J. Barr's credit, he looked critically into this dichotomous characterization of the idea of time, which confronts what we could call the Athens model to the Jerusalem one, as well as its more moderate versions⁵. According to Barr, beyond the usual clichés, there is a semantic gap between the Attic and Semitic mentality concerning cyclicity and linearity, besides an impossibility to deduce a philosophy of time or a vision of time from their respective verbal time systems in either Greek or Hebrew culture⁶. In Hebrew thought, the alleged absence of cyclical vision can be interpreted as rejection of the idea of events happening again, as a way to stress that history is the expression of an intentional push towards a goal. On the other hand, in the Greek view, the cyclical time lies aside from history, in cosmological perspective, as an expression of the iterative order of the movements of the Celestial Spheres⁷. Therefore, in the light of this difference between the sense level and the conceptual reference one, it is incredibly hard to justify a substantial comparison between both perceptions. Despite this circumstance and the almost complete lack of a metaphysical speculation in biblical literature concerning time—with the exception of the Book of Ecclesiastes—there is a suggestive linear temporality associated to historicity in the Scriptures via two great founding moments: the Creation, the instant when God pushed temporality towards the future; this ongoing linearity protects God's choice of

4 André Neher, "The View of Time and History in Jewish Culture, in *Cultures and Time*, ed. Louis Gardet (Paris: The Unesco Press, 1976), 150.

5 A synthesis in Rudavsky, *Times Matter*, 2.

6 James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville: SCM Press, 1969), 136-137.

7 See Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York, 1970), 17-21.

Israel and it is eschatologically approved of by the prophets, a eschatology whose future culmination of past and present is the Kingdom of Heaven⁸.

We can find a metaphysical counterpoint to the idea of pure linearity and the projection towards the future of history in Ecclesiastes. As can be read in Chapter 3, events appear to have a double sequence, internal and external, that repeats itself on a cyclical basis that reinforces the cause of time as a recurrence. Regarded from this repetitiveness, and bound to the idea of death, time is not only the order within which human beings are sent off and pushed, but a cruel means through which they are expelled from this order. With its repetitiveness, Ecclesiastes stresses the futility of temporal succession and chronology⁹. Together with this metaphysical pole, and beyond incompatible dualisms, some sort of creative complicity has been suggested in the Bible between linear and historical time, and a kind of mythical time that possesses a cyclical nature. Although the historical linearity reaches an extreme of eschatological vertigo in the prophetic notion of time, it is also true that the awareness of historical time is reinforced, too, by the early cult under the idea of liturgical and cyclical repetition¹⁰. The liturgical cycle that settles the ritual and religious practice outlines the time and comprises the chronological nature of time within a mythical narratology. Therefore, since Judaism is such a strongly ritualized religion, it comes as no surprise that marking the time in the rabbinic period carries such hefty weight¹¹.

The Bible is a monument raised to the inexhaustible need to remember¹². It expresses the anamnethical element of the Jewish believer. It is fascinating to watch in the Bible how a process of large-scale historical transformation of the events takes preeminence, whereas the theological discourse is relegated to a second place. History is a great theophany and a chronology that takes in fictions, myths, and just about any poetics of divine action. And yet, whereas the meaning of the revealed history and the need to recall are consigned in writing in the Holy Scriptures so that they are permanently intertwined, the rabbinic world that arises in Yavne and goes on until the Middle Ages seems to justify the absence

8 See Peter Steensgaard, "Time in Judaism", in *Religion and Time*, ed. Anindita Niyogi Baslev-Jitendra H. Mohanty (Brill: Leiden, 1993), 73-79. Steensgaard rejects the notion of sacred time in Judaism as repetitive.

9 Rudavsky, *Times Matter*, 3.

10 Steensgaard, "Time in Judaism", 65.

11 See Anne Higgins, "Medieval Notions", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 19 (1989): 232-235.

12 Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 15. An analysis of this topic in Jonathan Weber, "Lest We Forget", in *Modern Jewish Mythologies*, ed. Glenda Abramson (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1999), 107-113.

of historical writings in Judaism. Besides reflection on time? Whereas in the Bible there is a sense of chronology, of historical flowing, rabbinic texts seem to play with time, expanding and adjourning it at will¹³. The ordinary chronological time bars/barriers get cancelled by the ritualized and recurring interpretation of the Scriptures. Temporality becomes atemporal in a time ceremony where the temporal flow spreads beyond the chronological boundary and all eras interact with one another¹⁴. The cyclicity of particular temporal events is stressed in its regular repetition. In it, the nature of chronological repetition becomes atemporal thanks to the action of the rite turning mythical. The cyclical repetition of the rituals allows time regeneration¹⁵. In the same way the creative acts and primal facts get re-updated, the ritual repetition set by liturgic calendars makes man contemporary with cosmogony, anthropogony, and mythical history, and pours his existence into the sea of sacred time. It provides time with the meaning from its rational description that allows the world's disorder to be given a conceptual order. In the Mishnah, linked to this dynamic due to its own notion of the religious experience, historical times seem to play no role. As a moral universe made explicit, it is a theory of human sanctification suspended in time, ontologically eternal, completely different from the sanctification achieved or caused by the inrush of an event, a natural or supernatural phenomenon, which is expression of God's plans¹⁶.

As the Middle Ages move forward, the theological tradition represented by rabbinism –orthopraxis and orthodoxy– poses an important change of perspective in the way the Jewish people assess historical time. Ahistoricity and conscious anachronism replace history, the historical events are substituted by indefatigable and infinite hermeneutics. Contemporary scholars point out that whereas the biblical chroniclers worked within a chronological frame –with only minor concessions to anachronism– the Jewish ghetto believed or chose to believe that Judaism had already been foreshadowed in its own time by Abraham, both in its normative structure and its spiritual praxis. The Talmudic perspective, which provides Judaism with a rationality valid in any past or future period of

13 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 17.

14 Rudavsky, *Time Matters*, 9.

15 See Mircea Eliade, *El mito del eterno retorno* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1972), 82-88.

16 Jacob Neusner, *Mishnaic Law, History of the Mishnaic Law of an Appointed Times*, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1981-1983), XV.

Jewish history, established itself in the Middle Ages, based on the certainty that Judaic ethics and rites have stayed unalterable since the patriarchal past¹⁷.

III. SEPHARAD TIME

Historians like Yitzhak Baer and H. H. Ben Sasson, and more recently Haim Beinart or Jane Gerber have stressed the worth and richness of medieval Judaism at large, and Sephardic in particular¹⁸. This renewed appraisal of medieval Jewish life enabled the rediscovery of not so waste a time, and of some communities full of spiritual and cultural life. Spanish Jews came to embody, due to their acts and achievements, a kind of quintessence of Jewish historical identity. Hopeful for a better future that did not seem to ever come, or reaching out in their search for absolute knowledge, immersed in holiness, or at the mercy of history's wild tide, Sephardic Judaism weaved the idea of general Jewish history based on their own experiences. They "carried", so to say, the weight of the rough gentile history, while living "their own history". Full of the common worries inherent in human nature, this Jewish history possesses a special power, some sort of atavistic quality that emerges from a symbol-laden universe, and that will become a deeply spiritual phenomenon.

The medieval Sephardic Jew, like his co-religionists in the Christian North, is a *homo religiosus*. Profane history is a cover that envelops the true history, the sacred history. Placed in between both, exile is the element that generates the permanent drive, varying in intensity along time, that pushes the history of Israel full of hope towards its culmination. The *Book of Tradition* (1160) by Abraham Ibn Daud, for example, expresses this duality, and sketches a bridge over the gap between universal history and the history of Israel. Its foundation, the link between both histories, is Sepharad, the Iberian Peninsula, a land of mediation where Ibn Daud thinks, like some of his contemporaries, that he perceives the signs of a long-awaited future. The Almohad invasion meant the end of the splendor of Andalusian Jewry and the beginning of a new Jewish time within Christian Spain. Amidst this process of change, the Iberian Judaism be-

17 See Jacob Katz, "Rabbinical Authority and Authorization in the Middle Ages", in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 40-49.

18 See Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992); Haim Ben Sasson, *A History of the Jewish People*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Haim Beinart, *The Sephardi Legacy* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992); Jane Gerber, *The Jews of Spain. A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

came a wonderful laboratory of ideas which fostered some of the most outstanding medieval spiritual figures without whom it is impossible to understand the genesis of modern time philosophic, theological and political thought. Suffice it to mention the *Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides, the kabbalah in the *Book of Splendor*, the *Cuzary* by Yehudah ha-Levi, the *Fons Vitae* by Ibn Gabirol, or the above mentioned *Sefer-ha-Qabbalah* by Abraham Ibn Daud.

Yerushalami's thesis that medieval Judaism ignores historiography is questionable to some extent. This thesis makes *Sefer Josippon* and *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, for example, notable exceptions. On the whole, this criticism is a clarification rather than a real alternative interpretation: Jews did not shun history; under Christianity and Islam they used history and created their own. From this view, it is stated that medieval Jew wrote general, local and family "histories", thus providing their Talmudic, and their personal and community writings with a historical perspective. This expression of "historical awareness", albeit not historiographic, allows us to regard the rabbinical commentaries written in Sepharad as a genuine history of medieval Hispanic Jews¹⁹. It seems to us that the distinguishing subtlety of this interpretations is not important. Either acting as historiographers or possessing historical awareness, what is undeniable is that the historical-temporal experience is a determining factor in Judaism. A different matter would be to determine, as we saw before while dealing with rabbinism, what notion of time ontology and the history of nature these Jews had. And to what extent this view is biased by the development of gentile history, and its interaction with Jewish life and intrahistory. As for this, the inrush of a renewed way of Jewish mythical awareness in the Middle Ages, developed in all the Jewish communities throughout Europe around XIIth century is undeniable²⁰. Both in Ashkenaz and in Sepharad, the social and cultural changes at the time will prompt a fresh look at time and history in the form of mythologemes developed around the re-reading of past narratives. In them, the history of Israel recorded in the Scriptures, the remote original and founding past, is reassessed in the light of the recent past so that new foundational myths take shape. Thus, as we read in Ibn Daud, for instance, the moving of the academies from East to West, or the uninterrupted continuity of the chain of Tradition, are re-interpreted by Spanish Judaism in the late XIIth century as a founding myth of Sephardic Judaism and cast back towards the legendary past in order to justify the Davidic lineage of the leaders in the Spanish communities. In any case, to reduce the

19 Thus, for example, Isaiah M. Gafni, *Jews and Judaism in the Rabbinic Era* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 43-133.

20 See Ram Ben-Shalom, "Medieval Jewry in Christendom", in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 159.

historical substance of the present time to the hope for a long-awaited future is to channel that historical hope towards the future; to emphasize the legendary past as the “determining origin” of everything that is currently happening, inevitably shapes what is to come according to a historical mold²¹. It is from the future pole and the culmination of history that Funkenstein interprets the fascinating variability of the Jewish notions of time and the perception of historical occurrence. This history philosophy, understood as a theology, can be taken back to the founding periods of western monotheism, and more precisely, to the Jewish prophets. It is thanks to them that the historical feeling was really born. In the warnings and promises of these figures of Hebrew apocalypics one can find a detailed temporal imagination that, later on, will allow the very notion of history as the presumed development of time towards a final stage. Every history is a future history which states that the fascination with historical time and its structure is, in fact, “The important contribution of the apocalyptic mentality to the Western sense of History. The apocalyptician grasped all of History as a structured, well-articulated meaningful unity”²².

Decades before this debate, Hayim Hillel Ben Sasson, who had looked into the causes for this lack of relevant medieval Hebrew historiography, pointed at a thought-provoking theological-political perspective. Jewish communities in this period were hardly interesting historical subjects, hence this particular view about the sense and need of historical chronicles. Besides the obvious difference between the Jews and the gentile peoples they lived with, we have to add how differently both peoples appraised primitive and classic history. Sasson states that the “rigorous sense of connection with their own past”, in which faith is a vital link in the chain of historical continuity, favored the fact that medieval Jews did not share the idea of historical *novum* with the peoples they lived with. Lacking this theological-political urge for novelty, the Jewish national sense in the Middle Ages faced the problem of God’s justice in history with unceasing hermeneutics protected by a set of “eternal truths”²³. The fact that Sasson’s approach justifies the absence of historiography does not mean the historical perception that sustains it can be applicable throughout all the Middle Ages without nuances. Actually, it can be stated that Sephardic Judaism perceived itself as a novel phenomenon, which lacking a true local origin pressed its own self-assertion in an imaginative way under the mythical recreation of its history, its connections with Babylon and the land of Israel for the sake of being self-pro-

21 Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 15-22.

22 Ibid., 77.

23 Ben Sasson, *History*, 390.

claimed “legitimate heir” to the Tradition. Likewise, the Jewish founding myths in Ashkenaz, Provence and Italy laid the grounds for novel religious and political identity assertions, both within the Jewish society and in their dealings with the Christian world²⁴.

The lack of historiography in medieval Judaism can be understood as something positive, linked to their existence as a people, rather than a limitation. This view affirms the existence of an undeniable spiritual principle of survival in the medieval Jewish world. In the light of ahistoricity, understanding the present is related to an experience that could be called “a becoming of the Absolute”. The events become assimilated to the original conceptual frames, solidly established. Persecution, rejection by the Christians and Muslims they live with, daily sufferings, everything seems the result of being an exiled people, an exile suffered as harsh punishment for “old sins”²⁵. Therefore, when current circumstances drive the medieval Jew to give historical testimony of his troubled situation, we can’t expect his chronicles to deal with new significant happenings. New events, new persecutions, the idea of ever-renewed exile, all are integrated into familiar models. Every injustice, no matter how outrageous, can be explained if it is set within the meaningful frame of an old pattern²⁶. Tradition is the absolute everything around which medieval Jewish life orbits on its almost imperceptible passage towards Modernity. The counterweight to rejecting historiography is an indefatigable interpretation of their own history. Face to face with an ever more aggressive Christian theology and the change from ecclesiastic tolerance towards Jews to intolerance since the rationalization of antisemitic polemics and the discovery of Jewish post biblical literature, besides other social and cultural factors²⁷, the Tradition will need to develop a historical apologetics of its own meaning, a “Tradition chain” that succeeds in refuting external enemies, as well as in silencing hostile voices within Judaism. The past time, the remote and founding history, suspends the present. The relived origins shed light on the present and endow the hardships they undergo with an ahistorical substance and, at the same time, allow them to glimpse into a distant future when promises will be fulfilled.

24 Ben-Shalom, “Medieval Jewry”, 160.

25 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 36.

26 Ben-Shalom, “Medieval Jewry”, 165.

27 See Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, 172-190.

IV. THE SPIRIT OF NARRATION

Such is the aim of the singular work *Sefer Josippon*. The history of the second Temple period is the setting for the feats and sins of some men who illuminate their current disasters from their own distant misfortune. The Hellenistic approach to historical facts in Flavius Josephus' work, for instance, is an obvious attempt to find a secular, rational explanation, but this is here replaced by a religious vision: the Jewish believer who suffers the uncertainties of his time needs light and hope. The peculiar theology of the present history in this work will become a source of inspiration for a negative theology of salvation throughout the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modernity; a kind of immanent revelation that explains, from human limitation and moral responsibility, God's absence in vital moments of Jewish people's history. This existential experience of time, turned ahistorical and integrated into the collective consciousness, possesses an "anamnethical principle": one must remember in order to understand the present in its fair terms, assimilating the events into the historical past experience, into a history that can provide "today" with meaning thanks to its nature of weighed-up and founding fact.

A similar purpose serves *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, Cordoban Ibn Daud's greatest work in medieval Jewish historiography. Part of a broader treatise, composed in the form of historical polyptych, the section with the title *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* ended up nullifying to the whole. A project of very wide sights: to write a sketch of universal history that showed the superiority of rabbinical Judaism, emphasizing the central and vertebrate character of Hispanic Judaism in that world history. An added bonus is his determined and heated apologetics. The conceptual structure of this work in itself is the essence of his argumentation for the defense of Judaism, a symmetrical pattern of Jewish history through which messianic conceptions are expressed and in which Sephardic Judaism is bestowed an exceptional singularity²⁸. Ibn Daud's work represents a vindication of history that sheds new light on the chronological.

From this outlook, the work in its four sections is a consistent apocalyptic reflection. Its messianism expresses a creative dialectic between the veracity of the promises, renewed in the Tradition, and Jewish orthopraxis; and also, on a negative note, between those same promises and the condemnation of Jewish heterodoxy, or the "mistaken" conception of Christian messianism (specifically

28 Gerson D. Cohen, "The Book of Tradition", in Abraham Ibn Daud, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah: The Book of Tradition*, trans. and ed. Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Society of America Publications, 1967), 169.

sections II and III). Ibn Daud reports the succession of landmarks in time. However, he knows that history possesses some inner dynamics which is not always discernible from mere evidence. History has its ebb and flood, a hidden and unceasing movement which, while shaping time eons, only shows superficial signs of a hidden, arcane level. The *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* is, in this respect, an instance of how dogmatic theology gives way to the theology of history from a messianic outlook that includes gentile history, too, within the history of Jewish salvation. That's why there is a deep historical root, in spite of everything, in this life experience where the flowing of time is condensed and becomes ahistorical, where the historical participation becomes atemporal. The profound change that the history of Jewish life underwent in Europe in XIIth century had a special stamp in Sepharad because of the outright showdown between Christianity and Islam²⁹. It strikes us as extremely clarifying, in this respect, that with Jewish splendor in Al-Andalus in decline, the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* provides such a suggestive characterization as the one called the *new Edom* in regard to the Almohad destruction. The descendants of the sages and rabbis, of the community leaders in the big Andalusian towns could not hold the positions they were entitled to by right in their respective academies; they left for the northern Christendom, for Toledo –like Ibn Daud himself did– where they strove to train new disciples³⁰. In this respect, the chronicle of Spanish rabbinate ends with a hopeful glance to the North, the *new Edom*, that begins to take shape in the Jewish exiles' mentality as the renewed symbol of promises and a prelude to their fulfilment. The eschatological redefinition ensued, and its emergence meant getting rid of the recent past trauma of persecution, and that a hopeful horizon was reachable in a historical and social context in the Spanish Christian kingdoms. The strengths of this theology, its sacred foundations and original morality, set the standard for the medieval Jewish religious man to take on the present with an outlook towards the origin, in the hope for a promised future “yet to come”.

V. ASPIRING TO THE ABSOLUTE

The pole of history stands up high and straight as some dynamic essence that is, nonetheless, subjected to the strain of a cyclical recurring power. A timeless mysticism, a transcendental way of life is constantly asking for way in medieval Jewish life. Both alternating experiences express duality about God's relationships with men, already stamped from the “beginning”. The “work of the

29 Ben-Shalom, “Medieval Jewry”, 165.

30 Abraham ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* VII, 465-468.

Creation” (*Ma’aseh Bereshit*), a metaphoric abstract of all history to come, can be watched from “the other shore” in the “work of the Chariot” (*Ma’aseh Merkabah*), as is pointed out in Genesis 1 and the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, respectively. It is not a well-outlined dialectic, but a complex historical-spiritual praxis which conceals, rather, hidden polarities within the elements that make it up³¹. Together with this obsession with the historical, an unyielding upright aspiration to the Absolute will arise in Judaism generation after generation. Maimonides, a powerful rationalist, does not fail to echo the might of *mysterion*. Even though he admits that these topics are obvious to speculative spirits in his introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he warns that the profundity of *Ma’aseh Merkabah* prevents it from being shown “unless he be wise and able to reason for himself, and even then you should merely acquaint him with the heads of the different sections of the subject”³². Maimonides points out at the near extinction of this kind of knowledge in their communities given that his contemporaries were still unaware of the incoming spiritual break that would give rise to the Spanish Kabbalah. The fully rational man of faith that he represents raises, nonetheless, a set of important objections to the power and worth of mysticism. Willing to explain Prophet Ezekiel’s Visions to his “perplexed interlocutor”, he has to remind him in the introduction to part III of his work that “it is forbidden by law to teach these mysteries, except *viva voce*”³³. His rational exegesis, however, seems to stagger when faced with the attractive power of a mystery that goes beyond what simple reason can understand. And that is why he will regret getting “recklessly” into a complex and intricate spiritual sphere, after the analysis of “this sublime, important and grand subject, which is the pin upon which everything hangs, and the pillar upon which everything rests”³⁴.

The present confirms the weight of history. But this does not imply that current affairs can be exalted to the category of essential just like that. From its beginnings, Judaism has diluted current vicissitudes in the ocean of the messianic hope. The idea of discontinuous temporality, detached from determinism or the pressure of progress, comes across as a privileged image, the key to disentangling the complex and multiform net that makes up Jewish history. Jewish historical temporality possesses its own, unique historicity. It is precisely this

31 See Joseph Dan, “The Religious Experience of the *Merkavah*”, in *Jewish Spirituality*, vol 1, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 289-307.

32 Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Friedlander (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 3.

33 Ibid., 251.

34 Ibid., 252.

“difference” that opens up the possibility to integrate the mystical and the ascending into the common development. The versatile and ever renewed character of the Jewish historical experience allows the insertion of particular and eccentric forms into a collective whole. From the end of XIIth century, Jewish communities lived amid a Christian society that was undergoing a period of cultural rebirth, social change and religious unrest. In this context of change and transformation, Judaism questions itself radically, lives and doubts, immersed in its troubled intellectual, social and religious experience. Controversy and apologetics come together in Judaism, a Kabbalistic mysticism approaches historical time from the perspective of eternity, a return to tradition is demanded, or mere pragmatism in their dealings with gentile political power. Maimonides’ compromise between faith and reason was welcome by many in Iberian Jewish quarters as an exceptional solution to a rather important spiritual conflict. Others, however, regarded that compromise as treason and a threat to the community’s faith. The controversy was out³⁵. A renewed Jewish mysticism, contemporary to the Maimonidean controversy, and begotten in Provence, spread over the Peninsula at the beginning of XIIIth century. The new doctrines merged with Israel’s traditional faith, becoming a mystical strengthening in the fight against that religious rationalism which was thought to weaken Jewish people’s true faith.

Amidst their current yearnings and frustrations, the Kabbalah, a singular, exceptional manifestation of the human spirit, was developed along XIIIth century. This is the beginning of the “golden age” of the Spanish Kabbalah, driven by the impulse of a set of mystics who lived in the Jewish quarter in Gerona. This work, created around the reinterpretation of *Sefer ha-Bahir* (*The Book of the Bright*) will open for these sages the gates into a fascinating world of gnostic visions and experiences that will show clearly the stages of a process through which all things emanate from God and return to Him. Nahmanides is the unifying authority in this group of mystics, made up of remarkable figures, such as Ezra ben Solomon, Azriel or Jacob ben Sheshet. All of them helped to unify and consolidate the fundamental elements of the first Hispanic Kabbalistic³⁶. Starting from this initial core of mystic experiences, two antithetical forms of Kabbalistic experience will be developed along this century: the prophetic and ecstatic kabbalah by Abraham Abulafia, and the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (*The Book of Splendor*), a pseudo-epigraphic work attributed to Moses of León, presumed to

35 On the Maimonidean controversy, see Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982), 147-160.

36 A synthesis on this early Hispanic Kabbalah in Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: Mod Books, 1993), 34-44.

be written in Palestine in Roman times by Simeon bar Yochai. Abulafia's Kabbalah turns around a pragmatic philosophy of ecstasy where the most important is the choice of the ones going through the mystical experience, and meditation as the means to know God³⁷. The *Zohar*, on the other hand, ended up outshining all the other documents of Kabbalistic literature, due to its growing fame and influence throughout time. In contrast with other forms of Jewish mysticism, this one represents a kind of theosophy that swings between two not so original poles: God revealed in the Creation, and the relationship between God and man. However, research into this kind of mysticism is linked to a suggestive dialectic that revolves around the idea of time and the connections between mysticism and current history. Skim-reading these and other texts of Jewish mysticism would lead to state that the mystical dynamic is a way to shed the burden of time perception towards eternity; by contrast, it is obvious that time, and more specifically sacred time, is the focal point where the mystical and the divine meet. The mystic's spiritual search for the alternative understanding of time and space does not mean disregard for the world, rather the wish to transcend it so as to understand its true nature.

In the world of Jewish mysticism, both time and space belong to the esoteric scope. Aspiring to the absolute must be understood as a way to understand space-time, only available to initiated spirits; it is restrictive because there can be found the deepest secrets of human existence and the cosmos. To transcend the deep breach that separates the human beings from the understanding of time and space nature is to participate in the aspiration of maybe understanding God's secrets. Elliot R. Wolfson offers an interesting interpretation of the temporal implications of this kind of mystical experience from a philosophical reading of time of the Spanish kabbalistic tradition, after the manner of Heidegger. In his search for a constructive use of the kabbalistic sources, he approaches the idea of *chronos* as a "present becoming a repetition of a past that induces the expectation of a future"³⁸, instead of understanding it as a chronological succession of aligned moments that expand from the past towards the future. Once again, as we saw before, the future pole and the culmination of history appear, even in such a fundamentally ahistorical experience; once again, a cyclicity that suspends the chronological time barriers from the recurring interaction of all the eras: "the achronic fecundity of the future that is the origin continually emptying

37 On the mystical Kabbalah of Abulafia see Idel, *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 73-100; Gershom Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 119-155.

38 Elliot Wolfson, "Retroactive Not Yet: Linear Circularity and Kabbalistic", in *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism. That Which is Before and That is after*, ed. Brian Ogren (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 30.

itself in the coming to be of the beginning that passes away incessantly”³⁹. The paradox of a “linear circularity” sheds light on the temporal dimension of the kabbalistic mysticism –to be understood as an exercise of historiosophy, not an inner narration of experience. What “comes to be” is a manifestation of what “has always been”.

Spanish medieval Judaism partakes in a dialectic shared with Judaism throughout its history, which can be understood as a field of tension between the abstract idea of God and a subterranean current firmly clutched at live myths of the representative kind. Despite being a commonplace, we mustn't forget the fact that Castilian mystics, especially the author of the *Zohar*, pull off a task of fictional imagination, the representation of an invented world and reality in their writings. The time breach melts in the ahistoricity of sacred time and space, of the religious experience. The disciple who dives into this experience can undergo transcending past and present, a versatility applicable to just about any future experience of reunion with the text. In this regard, and touching on our previous appraisals on time and myth, we'd like to highlight the regular absorption of the fiction by a realistic representation of the past within tradition and community life. Fiction becomes the lasting culture truth, a representation of the real⁴⁰. Therefore, the *Zohar*, set in an unreal Palestine, develops a gnosis of the cosmic nature in an almost supernatural attempt to understand the mysteries of the Torah⁴¹. We find contemporary historical references scattered in this gnosis, but their function is overshadowed by the mighty power of the sacred names. The human being has a central role in the cosmic drama that unfolds in its pages. Man, set up as a microcosmos, a spiritual being where good and evil intertwine, is the key factor to beating evil and restoring the original harmony. The *Zohar*, an experience of synchrony and time symmetry, displays a temporality where the eternity recreates the historical and endows it with completeness. The verticality and horizontality of the mystic cosmos are the references that the seafarer needs to sail the sea of the Absolute; likewise, the human actions and the divine energy that makes it uphold hands in the gnostic liturgy. For the kabbalist, to plenify history is to transform it into eternity. The means to achieve this is a gnosis where divine knowledge flows towards men renewing their existence and

39 Ibid., 49.

40 See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 43.

41 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 205. For a critique of this paradigm, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11-36; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in The Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 85-139.

restoring the Creation. The historical fecundity of the Kabbalah aims at the Consummation, at the End⁴².

Jewish history halts and speeds. Instants of eternity like *devekut* or *unio mystica* of the Kabbalah, where everything stays condensed, do not provide the simple *fuga mundi* that could annul the present and erase history. Beyond the temptation of quietism, halted time seems to gather drive, ready itself to accelerate history, cancelling out the insurmountable distance between current everyday life and redeeming future. Franz Rosenzweig called this particular point in time “springboard present”, as opposed to the walkway present of lineal time and historical reason⁴³. By transforming the Torah and the Talmud into a cosmic, esoteric ritual, Jewish mysticism managed to channel huge amounts of spiritual energy that gentile history had forced Judaism to dispel uselessly in their exile. Mystic speculations turned the frustration of banishment into an ascending force, into the certainty that the quest for the occult would cause enlightenment. Man could recover divine power and participate in ruling the world if he knew the arcane means to do so. Hannah Arendt detranscendentalizes this matter and regards Jewish mysticism as ersatz for the forbidden action, basically a political substitute to those who cannot alter an unbearable destiny—in any case, something not so different in its psychological genetics, from all those other mystic experiences that are commonplace in monotheistic religions⁴⁴.

An eschatological principle rules over the Jewish man’s time: an always latent messianic drive surfaces providing history with substance, providing chronologic temporality with renewed meaning. Thus, Maimonides, who disdains historiography for its futility, does not waive intrahistory as a way to stimulate future hope from a present viewpoint, though⁴⁵. As for Abraham Ibn Daud, he offered a messianic interpretation of history after an esoteric reading of the prophets at the time when the Almohad rule destroyed the Andalusian communities, which meant the end of an era of cultural splendor⁴⁶. Ibn Daud’s calculations express a common state of mind in XIIth century Hispanic Judaism. The force of that inner ocean afforded by the eschatological experiences makes his-

42 For a description of this dialectic between historicity and ahistoricity in the Zohar, see our work*

43 Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk, Briefe und Tagebücher* (The Hage: Springer, 1979), 345.

44 Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 303-305. On this critical approach, see Eric Jacobson, “The Future of the Kabbalah: On the Dislocation of Past Primacy, the Problem of Evil, and the Future of Illusions”, in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 50-52.

45 Moses Maimonides, *Commentary on Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10:1; *Guide*, 2.

46 Abraham ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* VII, 455-458.

tory ductile; it yields to the demands of the cyclically renewed end of times by modifying the narrow margins of the painful present. The messianic strain, however, generates two ways in which the Jewish believer relates to a secular history he can never assume at ease. There is the perception, for instance, that transcendental medieval historiography –albeit scarce–, that the history of the nations, can be integrated into the chain of Tradition. This perception is radically opposed to the idea that gentile history is nothing but *historia damnata*, as apocalyptic literature maintains⁴⁷. The eschatological principle molds history prompted by the existential need of those who aspire to go beyond the present immediacy.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The extremely ambivalent Jewish history holds in its bosom the powers that curtail the idea of its own continuity, or sieve that continuity within the cyclical, the recurring that questions the temporal succession of chronology, or turn this succession into a ritualized process that suspends the very nature of historical time. It is also a power that projects all those experiences towards a future completion/consummation. Beyond any incompatible dualisms, some sort of creative complicity springs from the Scriptures and shines on Jewish life in exile merging linear historical time with a kind of mythical time that owns cyclical nature. Medieval Judaism of different backgrounds, endowed with intimate and diverse temporal qualities, will give its community life meaning thanks to a rational description of time that makes conceptual order possible in the world and history's disorder. This is a field of tension between the abstract idea of God and a subterranean current of live myths of the representative kind. The overriding polarity is the future, the culmination of history, even in the fundamentally atemporal experience of the Kabbalah itself; paradoxically pushed by a cyclicity and recurrence that suspend the chronological time barriers in the ceremonial interaction of all the eras.

The shaping of Jewish life in exile in the Middle Ages is due to a singular conception of time and history. Regardless of the chronology set by Western history, the intrahistory of their existence as a people, the catastrophes and persecutions they underwent, the landmarks of their spirituality, do not represent an itinerary that can cast itself easily towards future times. The cyclically renewed expectation of salvation in history has its counterpoint in the inrush of

47 Alejandro Díaz Macho, *Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento*, vol. 1. (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1984), 85.

ahistoricity. This intrinsic quality comes from their origin; it has feedback on the ghetto experience. The Jewish people live a sort of metahistory in their isolation. The world suspended in this segregated wait is the natural environment that favors the inrush of transcendence in people's lives, or else it unleashes their thirst for elevation towards the absolute. Everything is a symbol in that world. Symbols can halt time, make it eternal. When these symbols weaken or disappear, the community can rush into history. At what price is a different matter - and a deeply historical one.

In the recurring dialectics of Jewish mysticism between an ever-awaited and an ever-postponed end, beats an impulse that bestows the category of "suspended life" on Jewish existence. The inner aim of medieval Jewish mysticism, and of the Kabbalah in particular, is, on the surface, a return to past times to recover the function that the *Mishnah* sages had taken on, faced with Hellenistic rationalism. But underneath this layer lies a much deeper intentionality: to transcend the present time limitations, to free Judaism of the worldly chains and place it near the Torah. The religious precepts and the people's destiny are shown like an emanation from a higher world, and like a way to link man to this higher world, too.

In the Middle Ages, when Judaism wove that singular and complex warp of historical events with a sacred thread, the current affairs made the Jewish man look back to the past. Historical tragedies, their shock and crisis already over, were incorporated into this current of retrospective impulse to look back. A showdown distilled history, certainly, but also a far from negligible ahistorical mysticism. In Spanish medieval Judaism, both mystics and rabbis, philosophers and rationalistic historians, tried to find exceptional solutions to the huge problem of God's revelation in history by making that revelation accessible, either from the experience of individual gnosis, or from the knowledge linked to the chain of Tradition.

Catastrophes, the problem of evil and human freedom, God's power/powerlessness find a compromise in a dialectic thought that is reluctant to regard the divinity as *Moira*, as a destiny that crushes man, just like that, making use of history and increasing the limitations of his existence. This compromise is not a definite answer, but a fragmented representation, whether it being narrations, parables or metaphors at the service of a complex mystical truth. It is eternal questions and answers, from reason to the Bible and the Tradition. It is history and histories conceived as a present springboard anchored in the legendary origin. A thought conceived as a permanent effort to establish a historical

ground for a God that, paradoxically, is always infinitely closer in the numinous remoteness of the vision.

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