

Great Controversies



**A Changing World
1500's - 1700's**

**The False Messiahs:
Shabbtai Tzvi and
Yaakov Frank**

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Great Controversies in Jewish History

The False Messiahs (Part 1): Dovid HaReuveni and Shabbatai Tzvi

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Yearning for the redemption is a fundamental component of our belief system

We have purposely not been told when he is coming, nor any reliable means to figure it out

I. Dovid HaReuveni and Shlomo Molcho

A. Dovid HaReuveni

- a. 1523, Enters into the crises and chaos of the 1500s Spanish Jewish world
- b. Charlatan, madman, genius, scholar, opportunist, hero, villain and liar
- c. In Cairo, proclaims himself as ambassador of the King of the Ten Lost Tribes on a journey to engage the Pope of Rome on a "secret" joint venture
 - i. They will jointly attack Ottoman Empire to free it of Muslim rule, return trade routes to Christian control, and reestablish a Jewish State
 - ii. All conversos would be welcome there, saving them from state of limbo

When times are particularly tough, and there appears to be no human or rational solution other than the supernatural, Messianic Redemption is an obvious choice.

- iii. Did not overtly claim messianic redemption, but it was impossible to separate
 1. Rode a white horse and golden carriage with flag of 10 tribes
 2. Visited Yerushalayim in 1524 and claimed to perform miracles and gained possession of magical rock from under Holy of Holies
 3. Many Jews, particularly Marranos, believed him
 - d. Traveled to Rome where Pope Clement VII gave him an audience, agreed to the plan on condition that Dovid get the King of Portugal to end the ongoing disputes between German Emperor and French King
 - e. Marrano community was ecstatic, the Inquisition was enraged, and soon had him exiled
- #### B. Diego Perez - Shlomo Molcho
- a. Born into powerful Marrano family, child prodigy, secretary to judicial advisors to the King at age 20

- b. Spiritual person, unsatisfied with Christianity, sought Jewish roots, self taught Talmud and Kabbalah
 - i. Meets Dovid and shares with him messianic visions; converts
- c. The two travel from Portugal to Italy to Germany, with messianic fervor following them
 - i. Floods earthquakes and war ravaged Europe in 1532, furthering fervor
 - ii. Rabbis opposed them, but Shlomo viewed as a Holy Man and miracle worker
- d. In Germany Emperor arrested them and burned Shlomo at the stake
 - i. Sealed fate of Marrano communities
 - ii. Only later viewed as false messiahs and not legendary martyrdom

II. Shabatai Tzvi and Nathan of Gaza

- A. Chmielnicki Uprising of 1648-1649 was an absolute disaster for the Jews
 - a. 200,000 brutally slaughtered, nearly a full 10% of the population at the time
 - b. (1666 had been set by Christian authors as apocalyptic year, 1648 had become well known amongst Jews based on a computation based on the Zohar)
- B. Shabbatai Tzvi
 - a. Very charismatic, spiritual person, drawn to Kabbalah and aesthetic practices. Fasting. Immersing in the mikvah. (Jewish Encyclopedia reports he was married twice and both wives requested and were granted divorces because he refused to engage in married life.) Rabbi Wein describes him as suffering from Manic Depression, vacillating from powerful visions of grandeur, charm, charisma to long bouts of total isolation and depression, visions of demons and fantasies.
 - b. At age 22, in 1648, declares himself the leader of the Jewish people to a small group of followers in hometown of Smyrna, Turkey.
 - i. Rabbis banish him; banished from Constantine, then from Salonika, then from Cairo.
 - c. Eccentric
 - i. Held a wedding between himself and the Torah
 - ii. Proclaimed the fast days commemorating the Destruction as feast days and celebrations
 - iii. Sexual immorality
 - 1. Married Sarah, a refugee from Ukraine, who claimed visions of marrying the Messiah. Shabbatai obliged.
 - 2. All things forbidden were now permitted, having been elevated by the Messiah

Kabbalah: With the exception of the Rambam, Messianic times are assumed to be exceptionally miraculous and mystical - it's hard to judge with our rational minds. Even when something doesn't make sense, maybe this still might actually be the messiah.

C. Nathan of Gaza

- a. The "John the Baptist" of Shabatai Tzvi
 - i. Golden pen and writes letters throughout the world proclaiming the arrival of the Messiah.
 - 1. Throws the Jewish world into ecstasy, panic and confusion

Caution: No one wants to be the one to oppose the messiah

D. They go to Jerusalem, are banished from there, and with great audacity move to Turkey, under the Sultan, who owns the Land of Israel.

- a. For a few years the Sultan allows it (very good for business)
- b. When ST announces his plans to raise an army, retake Jerusalem, destroy the mosque and rebuild the Temple, Sultan has him arrested.
- c. Nathan writes letters proclaiming this as the real test to see if we believe and if we'll come

Mossiach ben Dovid and Mossiach ben Yosef allow for great ambiguity and confusion

E. Jewish world in Confusion

- a. Estimated up to a third of the Jewish world believed in him
- b. There were blessings added in his honor, feasts on Yom Kippur, Jews sold homes, businesses, the Dutch East Indies Company complained that there no commercial ships available for purchase, and pogroms broke out against Christian communities.

Rabbi Yaakov Sesportos to Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav: Why didn't you stop it? His response: This has been good for the Jews. Shul is packed. Excitement is palpable. Many are returning.

F. The Sultan had enough, threatened him with death or conversion...and he converts

- a. Takes an additional Muslim wife and becomes officer in Sultans court
- b. Nathan sends letter declaring: This is indeed the real test
- c. ST pretends to be both a pious Jew and Muslim, the Sultan eventually banishes him and he dies a lonely isolated death in 1676

Additional Sources

1) Rambam, Laws of Kings 11:1

Anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming, denies not only the statements of the other prophets, but those of the Torah and Moses, our teacher. The Torah testified to his coming, as Deuteronomy 30:3-5 states: "G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you. He will again gather you from among the nations... Even if your Diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, God will gather you up from there... and bring you to the land...." These explicit words of the Torah include all the statements made by all the prophets.

2) Talmud Shabbos 31a

Rava says: When a person's soul is brought into the Heavenly Court of Judgment after he dies, it is asked six questions about what he did during his life here on earth: (1) Did you act in good faith in your dealings with others?(2) Did you set aside fixed times for Torah study? (3) Did you attempt to fulfill *pru u'rvu*? (4) Did you yearn for the Redemption? (5) Did you delve deeply into wisdom? (6) Did you intuit one matter through another?

3) Rambam, Laws of Sanhedrin 12:2

These things were purposely left ambiguous by the Prophets. Our Sages likewise did not have any clear tradition in this area, and could therefore only come to some conclusion by interpreting various Biblical passages. It is for this reason that we find so many opinions regarding this matter.

4) Talmud Sanhedrin 97b

R Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R Yonasan: May the very essence of those who calculate the End suffer agony. For they say, "Since the date of the End has arrived and the Messiah has not come, he will never come!" Rather, one should wait for him, as it says (Chabakuk 2:3) *If he tarries, wait for him.*