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Shabbatai Zevi – IV

Lead: In the mid-1660s the Jewish world was rocked by the appearance and claims of a messiah, Shabbatai Sevi, who some have deemed the most significant millenarian movement in modern Jewish history. He, however, was a piece of work.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: He was born in Smyrna, a wealthy port city on the west coast of present-day Turkey. His family recognized a native intelligence which destined him for the rabbinate. He

studied under some of the most prominent rabbis in Smyrna and probably around 15 began a life of isolation, abstinence and asceticism, during which he struggled with powerful sexual temptation. Shabbatai became a rabbi about the age of 18 and became attracted to Kabballism with its emphasis on the devotional life and the coming of the messiah.

During these periods of sequestration he began to exhibit symptoms of cyclothymia or manic-depression, a psychosis marked by periods of deep depression alternating with outbursts of euphoria and exhilaration. In between these outbursts he lived a normal life. Later, his followers would not attribute his

euphoric periods not to mental illness, but rather call them times of “illumination.” The problem was, when he was in one of these states of rapture, he tended to behave extravagantly, even in weird ways, breaking religious laws such as pronouncing the Name of God and in 1648 making a preliminary claim to be the messiah.

In Smyrna he was considered to be a bit of a lunatic, but he was physically quite attractive and had a magnificent singing and speaking voice so he was able to deflect the communities disdain and win followers. Nevertheless, his exotic behavior caused the rabbinic council of Smyrna to banish him from the city. He then began a long period

of wandering principally to Jerusalem and Egypt where he gradually attracted quite prominent Jewish leaders who began to see Shabbatai Sevi as the messiah. Next time: Rise and precipitous fall.

From Richmond Virginia, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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