

Messianic Expectations and Paper-Based Networks: The Role of the Merchant

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From 1665 to 1667, the coming of Sabbatai Sevi in the Levant created an upheaval that was unprecedented in the history of messianic movements. “Over a period of several weeks, an immense outbreak of Sabbatian prophecies by ordinary Jews of all classes occurred [...] The particulars of this outbreak were almost unique in Jewish history up to that time.”¹ What’s crucial here is not that his followers gathered and marched in greater numbers than those of earlier prophets (although they may have), but that the story of his appearance, professions, progress, supporters, triumphs, and misfortunes spread farther, wider, and more rapidly than ever before. Sabbatai appeared in the first age of publicity. The category “news” had come into being to name, for the first time, what people valued rather than what they disdained. Information had begun to circulate for its own sake, through increasingly complex and overlapping networks, and with the ease of virtual communication independent of actual mouths and ears. By the middle of the seventeenth century, northern Europe especially had become what might be called a print culture, and print put much of this paper in motion; but it was by no means the only factor. Gathering information – intellectual, political, religious, social, scientific, commercial, and merely incidental – across national and cultural

¹ Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 89.

boundaries had become an open-ended ambition that would define the modern world. And the indiscriminating nature of this process of accumulation is reflected in the permeable boundaries of the discourses that are sampled and collected, which soon will be more sharply delimited.

In the following essay I'll document that over the course of a few years, news of Sabbatai spread throughout the Mediterranean – through Jerusalem, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Spain, Greece, and Italy – and was relayed northward in Europe to Austria, France, Hungary, England, and Holland through a medley of paper media: letters, newsletters, newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, and the like. These papers were borne by a variety of travellers who voyaged abroad for a variety of reasons, but the majority of them were likely to be merchants. In the later seventeenth century, merchants were an important medium for all sorts of news between different countries. And in the case of the Sabbatian movement, their mercantile interests were necessarily engaged, as we shall see, by its millenarian expectations. My evidence will be drawn from communications that were received by or available to English people. Sabbatai's most exhaustive historian, Gershom Scholem, had relatively little recourse to, or knowledge of, the English interchange of Sabbatian news. This gap has been filled more recently by scholars like Brandon Marriott, and although I draw on much of this material, I bring to it a more limited and particular focus.²

Information about the Sabbatian movement was generated by a number of diverse and overlapping sources that cut across each other, sometimes contributing to an already-existing network of in-

² Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* (trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton, NJ, 1973); Brandon Marriott, *Transnational Networks and Cross-Religious Exchange in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds: Sabbatai Sevi and the Lost Tribes of Israel*, London, 2015). Among other things, in refuting the notion that Christian millenarianism influenced Sabbatai's appearance in 1665 Scholem overlooks (pp. 153-154) many texts that directly concern Sabbatai's appearance, as well as the proliferation of English texts publicizing the expectation of the second coming in 1666, the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation.

formation whose nexus is one or two correspondents known to several others, sometimes as a single thread, laying the ground for what will become a new patchwork of notice and report. This is how Sabatai's career became a "network of information." That paper now begins to circulate with velocity is central to the creation of information networks like this one. But in this modern sense, both terms are only emergent at this time, and historians differ in their readiness to apply them to early modern conceptual and material exchange. The idea of a trade network is a case in point. The most comprehensive historian of cross-cultural commerce makes clear the shifting and variable condition of trade networks in the early modern period: they "could complement each other, work together and assist each other or they could compete. Competing did not automatically mean destroying each other. There were 'complementary enemies' and forms of unpeaceful coexistence which were destined to last." But "all networks, even the most solid, sooner or later encountered difficulty or misfortune."³ More recently, it's been argued that the scope of trade networks – the notion itself goes without saying – needs to be expanded. The focus on Atlantic trade networks, at least, has become limiting and parochial. This kind of "regional viewpoint separates northern Europe and its Atlantic colonies from the rest of the world whereas a focus on networks across a broader geographical area shows that the rest of the world was not only connected to Europe, but played an important role in shaping it as well."⁴ And a historian of Mediterranean commerce writes, with instructive circumspection: "'Network' is a useful heuristic device when not used generically, because it serves to identify the particular channels through which individuals, money, commodities, and information circulated."⁵

³ See Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, vol. 2 of *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds, New York, 1979, p. 163.

⁴ David Armitage and Michael Braddick (eds.), "Introduction", in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, New York, 2009, p. 9.

⁵ Francesca Trivellato, "Sephardic Merchants in the Early Modern Atlantic and Beyond: Towards a Comparative Historical Approach to Business Cooperation", in Richard L.

Compared to the scope and depth of these historical projects my own concern is sharply limited both in time and in the geography of its sources. I'm interested in discovering what and how English people learned about the Sabbataian movement as it transpired near its apogee and until Sabbatai's apostasy, how much of this information came to them through the writings of merchants, and whether information networks, however fugitive, can be seen to coalesce at this moment in the circulation of news and commodities.⁶

Political Intelligence

The English Post Office was established in 1660 with the primary purpose of controlling the flow of domestic and foreign information. Control of foreign intelligence was exercised largely by the secretaries of state, among other ways through the dissemination of news in the official state newspaper, the *London Gazette*. However, supervision of the post gave the secretaries two-way access to information through the interception, opening, reading, and counterfeiting of letters. After Charles II was restored, Joseph Williamson was appointed under-secretary of state and was the principal figure to exercise this office of supervision, and he relied on a number of aides to this end, among them Henry Oldenburg, a German master of European languages who had arrived in England during Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate as agent for the state of Bremen. Oldenburg was highly serviceable to Williamson at gathering and sifting political intelligence, although he ran afoul of the system he served when he was briefly confined in the Tower for sending abroad letters that were critical of England's blunders in its war with the Dutch and that were intercepted, probably by Williamson himself.⁷ Oldenburg had

Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500-1800*, Baltimore, 2009, p. 119.

⁶ Marriott, who has confirmed Scholem's rebuttal of a Christian influence on Sabbatai's appearance, is also mindful that the concept of the network has an emergent and important application to informational exchange at this time.

⁷ See Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660-1685*, Cambridge, UK, 1994, pp. 29-30, 55-59, 78-80, 83n.29.

gained access to the network of correspondents developed by Samuel Hartlib, who according to John Dury, the Scottish Calvinist, deserved to “bee sette uppe as a conduit pipe of things communicable.” Known to posterity as an educational reformer, Hartlib exchanged over 4,000 letters with a multitude of both celebrated and obscure literati on an expansive range of topics that took in much more than the one he’s known for.⁸ One of these was Sabbatai Sevi. Likely influenced by Sabbatian rumours, Hartlib and John Worthington exchanged views in 1662 on the “news of the Jews’ fasting and humiliations” and its implication that “the redemption of Israel is drawing near.”⁹

English affairs of state generated an enormous number of miscellaneous papers that were received by the secretaries of state and later came to rest in the Public Record Office and itemized in hundreds of volumes in the Calendars of State Papers (CSP). Williamson’s disingenuous letter to Oldenburg when he was imprisoned in the Tower is in CSP Domestic.¹⁰ So is one from Oldenburg to Williamson about Sabbatai Sevi. In that letter Oldenburg thanks Williamson “for the care of my two letters. One of them from Amsterdam expresses some doubt of ye news concerning ye Jewish kings being turn’d Turk.”¹¹ Oldenburg wasn’t a state official, but diplomatic correspondences showed an interest in all manner of local affairs that had an impact, however transitory, on people of the region, among those affairs the fortunes of Sabbatai.¹² By then Oldenburg

⁸ <http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=samuel-hartlib> (accessed on 21/04/2023). For Dury, the Scottish theologian and controversialist, see note 1.

⁹ <http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=samuel-hartlib>, no. 53 (Feb. 14, 1662, accessed on 21/04/2023). *Diary and Correspondence of Dr. John Worthington* (Feb. 24, 1662), ed. James Crossley, in *Publications of the Chetham Society*, vol. 36, 1855, no. 2, p. 111. Worthington was vice-chancellor of Cambridge University.

¹⁰ CSP Domestic, vol. ccviii, 46, July 3, 1667.

¹¹ Public Record Office SP 29/136 (93), letter of Nov. 10, 1666, not included in Oldenburg’s correspondence (see below note 13).

¹² E.g., see Benjamin Lannoy, English consul at Aleppo, to Earl of Winchelsea, Jan. 24, 1666, in *Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports (HMC) Finch*, p. 410; *A New Letter Concerning the Jewes, Written by the French Ambassador, at Constantinople, To his Brother the French Resident at Venice* (1666).

had turned to account Hartlib's connections, first in a scatter-shot fashion, but soon after when he became, like Hartlib, an original member of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge.

Natural Knowledge

As one of the two first secretaries of the Society, Oldenburg augmented his already-voluminous network of correspondence to acquire as much information as he could about nature, casting his nets far and wide on the understanding that to discover the uniformity of nature it was necessary to sample the variety of its productions in all climates and geographies. The result was a vast correspondence that fills 13 volumes and was to form the basis of the first scientific institution in the world.¹³ This survey had been called for by Francis Bacon in his utopian narrative the *New Atlantis* (1627). There he gives a "relation of the true state of Salomons House," which observes that "[t]he end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of humane empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (35). The twelve "Fellowes" of the house who "Sayle into Forraine Countries" and "bring us the books, and abstracts, and patterns of experiments of all other parts wee call *Merchants of Light*." Other fellows in Salomons House then examine this material and test its properties and applications (45).¹⁴ In *The Great Instauration* (1620), Bacon had spoken metaphorically of the pursuit of knowledge in terms of sailing around the "terrestrial globe" and making "a coasting voyage along the shores of the arts and sciences received" ("The Plan of the Work"). The famous title page of that work pictures a fully-rigged ship sailing between the Pillars of Hercules, above the prophetic leg-

¹³ *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg*, ed. A. R. Hall and M. B. Hall, 13 vols, Madison, WI &, London, 1965-86.

¹⁴ Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1627), ed. Alfred B. Gough, Oxford, UK, 1915, p. 45.

end (Daniel 12:4): “Multi pertransibunt & augebitur scientia”: “Many will pass through and knowledge will be increased.”¹⁵ But these terms also aptly express the search for natural knowledge in metonymic terms, because the ambition of the new philosophy, as it was called, was to travel abroad in order to discover natural species not yet known to English people in their little island off the coast of the great European continent.

Inquisitive minds like Oldenburg’s thought it possible to pinpoint all but the actual physical entity of those species through the virtual expeditions of letters. Along the way he forwarded to another fellow of the Royal Society, the celebrated chemist Robert Boyle, several passages from *A New Letter Concerning the Jewes* (1666) citing prodigies and miracles and the prophet Elijah in anticipation of Sabatai’s advent.¹⁶ The nature of this letter suggests that the modern boundary between the material and the spiritual wasn’t in place in the seventeenth century, when “the scientific revolution” was gaining ascendancy. In 1657, Oldenburg had sought the opinion of the Amsterdam rabbi Menasseh ben Israel on the prophesied coming of the Messiah. Nine years later he asked Spinoza the opinion of the “Amsterdam Jews”: “You will tell your friend what you hear of this matter.”¹⁷ If Oldenburg sounds credulous, perhaps we need to distinguish macro-eschatology from micro-epistemology: for his scepticism inclines him to credit only “trustworthy” news from Constantinople, where messianic activity seems to be centred.

Natural Experiments and Commercial Merchandise

On the testimony of Thomas Sprat, the first historian of the Royal

¹⁵ *Francisci de Verulamio, summi Angliæ cancellarii instauratio magna*, London, 1620.

¹⁶ *Correspondence of Oldenburg*, 3: 49-50, no 493, March 6, 1666.

¹⁷ *Correspondence of Oldenburg*, 1: 126, no. 55, July 25, 1657; 2: 637, no. 467, Dec. 8, 1665 (both letters trans. from Latin). For more on Oldenburg’s attitude toward the Sabbatian movement see Zvi Loker, “English Contemporary Opinions on the Sabbatean Movement” in *Jewish Historical Studies*, vol. 29, 1982, pp. 35-37.

Society, the virtual network undertaken by Oldenburg went hand in hand with the actual enterprise of English people in all stations and walks of life: "All Places and Corners are now busie and warm about this Work: and we find many noble Rarities to be every Day given in not only by the Hands of learned and profes'd Philosophers, but from the Shops of *Mechanicks*; from the Voyages of Merchants; from the Ploughs of *Husbandmen*; from the Sports, the Fishponds, the parks, [and] the Gardens of *Gentlemen*."¹⁸ Of these the most important are the merchants. Sprat echoes, at the same time that Sabbatai's fortunes were unfolding, Bacon's utopian anticipation of a global empire of knowledge. The Society "will be able, to settle a *constant Intelligence*, throughout all civil Nations [and] overcome the Mysteries of all the Works of Nature" (64). Sprat's vision extends across the Mediterranean and beyond: "This their Care of an universal Intelligence is befriended by *Nature* itself, in the Situation of *England*: For, lying so as it does, in the Passage between the *Northern* Parts of the World and the *Southern*; its *Ports* being open to all Coasts, and its *Ships* spreading their *Sails* in all *Seas*; it is thereby *necessarily* made, not only Mistress of the Ocean, but the most proper Seat for the Advancement of Knowledge, "for" the same Proportion of Discoveries above others in the *intellectual* Globe, as they have done in the *Material*" (86). "[I]n *foreign* and *remote* Affairs, their *Intentions* and their *Advantages* do far exceed all others. For these, they have begun to settle a *Correspondence* through all Countries; and have taken such Order, that in short Time there will scarce a Ship come up the *Thames*, that does not make some return of *Experiments*, as well as of *Merchandize*" (86).

What Sprat means by "experiments" is in this context circulating papers, questionnaires formulated so as to elicit information about the countries merchants visit in their primary pursuit of "merchandize," and Sprat is eloquent, if hyperbolic, in describing "the *noble*

¹⁸ Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London, For the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, London, 1667, pp. 71-72. All further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

and *inquisitive Genius* of our *Merchants*" in this enterprise (88): "Of our chief and most wealthy *Merchants* and *Citizens*, very many have assisted it [the Society] with their Presence; and thereby have added the industrious, punctual, and active *Genius* of Men of *Traffick*, to the quiet, sedentary, and reserv'd Temper of Men of *Learning*. They have contributed their *Labours*; they have help'd their *Correspondence*; they have employ'd their *Factors* Abroad to answer their *Inquiries*; they have laid out in all Countries for *Observations*; they have bestow'd many considerable Gifts on their *Treasury* and Repository" (129-30). In formulating the "Queries and Directions they have given abroad," the Society requires "some of their Fellows, to examine all Treatises and Descriptions of the Natural and Artificial Productions of those Countries, in which they would be inform'd. At the same Time, they employ others to discourse with the Seamen, Travellers, Tradesmen, and Merchants, who are likely to give them the best Light. Out of this united Intelligence from Men and Books, they compose a Body of Questions, concerning all the observable Things of those Places. These Papers being produc'd in their weekly Assemblies, [...] then the Fellows themselves are wont to undertake their Distribution into all Quarters, according as they have the Convenience of Correspondence" (155-56). "They have collected, and sent abroad Inquiries for the *East Indies*, for *China*, for *St. Helena*, for *Teneriff*, or any high mountain, for *Guinea*, For *Barbary*, and *Morocco*, for *Spain*, and *Portugal*, for *Turky*, for *France*, for *Italy*, for *Germany*, for *Hungary*, for *Transylvania*, for *Poland*, and *Sweden*, for *Iceland*, and *Greenland*, they have given Directions for Seamen in general" (156-57). In short, the boundary between commercial and new philosophical exploration was readily crossed.

A Clearing House for Ideologies

Oldenburg's words make clear that the line between Christian and Jewish futurity was also not easily drawn. 1666, the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation, was a year of expectation among

millenarian Christians. With its approach both faiths read signs of the times all about them, and both entertained the highest eschatological expectations. This conjunction had in fact been accommodated in theological speculation. Scholem has discussed “the doubling of the figure of the Messiah, its split into a Messiah of the House of David and one of the House of Joseph.”¹⁹ The doubling expedient acknowledged real ties but occasioned debate, and it was in any case unavailable to those common people on the ground who were caught up in the turbulent moment of Sabbatai’s emergence. A sceptical report from Haarlem found that “[i]t is strange, that not only the Jews here, but some hundreds that own the name of Christians among us, think themselves concerned in it.”²⁰ This concern might be aroused from opposed perspectives.

Traditional antisemitism prophesied that the second coming of Christ would be preceded by the conversion of the Jews, a belief that gained epic proportions under the stimulus of Sabbatian news and rumour. One author was persuaded by his friends to publish the news he’d heard that in 1650 “a great Council of Jews” had assembled in Hungary “because they do conceive it to be a preparative and hopeful sign of the *Jew Conversion*.”²¹ An astrologer, in cautious anticipation of the second coming, inquired: “Are the Jewes marching toward *Jerusalem* or no? Let them take sober advice, the time is not yet.”²² In conversation with a royalist mathematician during Cromwell’s Protectorate, the royalist diarist John Evelyn learned of his “strong apprehensions of some extraordinary events to happen the following yeare [1656], from the calculation of coincidence with the diluvian [of the biblical Flood] period; and added that it might possibly be to convert the Jews by our Saviour’s visible appearance,

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York, 1971, p. 18.

²⁰ *Gazette*, no. 8, Dec. 7-11, 1665.

²¹ Samuel Brett, *A Narrative Of the Proceedings Of a great Council of Jews*, London, 1655. See Richard H. Popkin, “The Fictional Jewish Council of 1650: A Great English Pipedream”, in *Jewish History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1991, pp. 7-22.

²² Nicholas Culpeper, *An Ephemeris for the Year 1652*, London, 1651, p. 21.

or to judge the world" in his second coming.²³ Evelyn, an original member of the Royal Society, dispassionately records this information from a source whose scientific and royalist principles seem compatible with his millenarianism. Fourteen years later, Evelyn looked back on Sabbatai's moment from the seemingly settled ground of Stuart kingship and Anglican episcopacy to judge it an emanation from "the Heads of Phanatical *Enthusiasts* who Dreamed of a Fifth Monarchy."²⁴ A tract of 1659 assured its readers that in five years "the despised and dispersed Jewes" would be ready for conversion, "and that by means of English Divines."²⁵ And in reference to an unnamed prophet, a letter from Smyrna dated Nov. 27, 1665 remarks: "And God alone knows whether he may be a means of the Conversion of that stiff-necked Generation."²⁶ Most bizarre, the millenarian Welsh prophet Arise (Rhys) Evans brought out another's tract in which was heralded the assembly of an army of 144,000 Jews, "twelve thousand of every Tribe," "under the Ban[n]er of King Charles," who "is Gods chosen vessel to deliver us all."²⁷ But on reflection, this meeting of royalist and Puritan sentiments, like the meeting of scientific and millenarian and Jewish and Christian sentiments, is bizarre given the modern conviction of their polarity. The Sabbatian network of papers, in motion before they come to rest, offers a less tidy view of convictions at the moment of their intersection. In effect, Sabbatai provided a sort of clearing house for ideologies, mediating between beliefs that, however distinct, shared enough to possess a certain fungibility.

²³ *Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E.S. de Beer, Oxford, UK, 1955, vol. 3, p. 158 (Aug. 28, 1655).

²⁴ John Evelyn, *The History Of the Three late famous Impostors* ([London] 1669), pp. 41-42. That the world would end with a final Fifth Monarchy was the belief of one millenarian sect of the Interregnum. According to Richard H. Popkin, Evelyn's account was taken from Paul Rycaut, *The History of the Turkish Empire from the Year 1623, to the Year 1677*, London, 1680: see "Three English Tellings of the Sabbatai Zevi Story" in *Jewish History*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2, 1994, p. 45. This may or may not explain the change in Evelyn's viewpoint.

²⁵ *Forraign and Domestick Prophecies*, London, 1659, pp. 182-183.

²⁶ *Several New Letters Concerning the Jewes: Sent to divers Persons of Quality here in England*, London, 1666, concluding letter, 6.

²⁷ Arise Evans, *Light For the Jews: Or, the Means to convert them*, London, 1664, 11, 16.

But the antisemitic anticipation that the Jews would convert to Christianity wasn't the only view of them that the expectation of the last things precipitated out of Christian eschatologists. Even preceding the Interregnum hotbed of 1649-1660, when the lapse of absolutist rule encouraged some English people to pursue their beliefs as far as they might go,²⁸ there had grown among millenarian sectarians a philosemitic identification of their own divine election with that of the chosen people of the Old Testament. Among some, Sabbatai, in part because of his and his prophet Nathan of Gaza's contorted bodily possessions, became known as the Jewish Quaker.²⁹ The philosemitic identification of many sectarians even encouraged the hope among their sympathizers that the long-awaited conversion would proceed in the opposite direction.³⁰ This was the hope of Petrus Serrarius among others, a figure to whom I'll return. Encouraged by the theological doubling expedient, Serrarius "wove the two religious traditions together in a manner that led him down the path of universalism," persuaded that "the approaching end of history would be accompanied by a period of universal peace for all people."³¹ A decidedly unsympathetic tract countered the optimistic hope for a counter-conversion with dismay and apprehension: "considering the fantastical opinions and heresies reigning in this Nation, instead of our converting them to Christianity, they rather may pervert and turn us to Judaism."³²

Both the hopes and the fears were fed not only by the self-conception of radical Puritans as the Old Testament chosen, but also by news that the ten tribes of Israel, dispersed for centuries, were now

²⁸ On which see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, New York, 1972.

²⁹ See Goldish, *Sabbatean Prophets*, 111, 129 on this sobriquet in a 1666 Polish pamphlet, and on the bodily basis for the association. See more generally Michael Heyd, "The 'Jewish Quaker': Christian Perceptions of Sabbatai Zevi as an Enthusiast", in Allison Coudert and Jeffrey Shoulson (eds.), *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, Philadelphia, 2004, pp. 234-265.

³⁰ See Petrus Serrarius, *The Restoration of the Jews*, London, 1665.

³¹ Marriott, 2015, p. 117.

³² [John Bland,] *Trade Revived*, London, 1660, p. 21.

converging on the holy lands.³³ In 1665, several tracts from Scotland told the story that a ship, cast up in Aberdeen by a storm, was manned by a crew that spoke “broken *Hebrew*” and rigged in blue (or white) silken threads with satin sails on which was inscribed: “THESE ARE OF THE TEN TRIBES OF ISRAEL, which was to discover them to be Jews: Their Food on board was onely Rice and Honey.” They bear with them news of more than one and a half million Jews in Arabia engaged in triumphant battle with the Turks. The anachronism – or perhaps the fulfilment of Old Testament type in antitype – entailed in these reports is evident in the notice that “[t]hey give Liberty of Conscience to all,” a phrase of early modern provenance.³⁴ The vision of the ten lost tribes in particular captured the imagination of English people, and it was widely debated whether the ten tribes were actually the natives of America.³⁵ Speculation on the movement of the tribes continued with the approach of the year of the beast 1666. George Wither, poet and prophet over the past forty years of upheaval, was by now circumspect about the “Letters and Reports much credited concerning an Army of *Israelites* repairing toward the Ancient Habitation of their Forefathers,” and he awaited “better evidence.”³⁶ A year later, the title-page of a tract announced its candid expectations: *A Brief Relation Of several Remarkable Passages of the Jewes, In their Journey out of Persia, and Tartaria toward Jerusalem. [...] Printed in the second Month, and hoped-for Year of Israels Restoration, 1666* (1666). In New England John Davenport understood these journeys to be the fulfillment of Daniel 12.4. Increase Mather’s punctual sermons, he wrote in 1667, were “preached in a time when constant reports from sundry places and hands gave out

³³ See CSP, Ireland, Sir George Rawdon to Viscount Conway, from Dublin (Sept. 5, 1665), 639; Thomas Nunnes, *An Almanack [...] For [...] 1666* (1666), sig. C8v; John Tanner, *Angelus Britannicus, An Ephemeris for [...] 1666* (1666), sig. C7v.

³⁴ *A New Letter from Aberdeen in Scotland, Sent to a Person of Quality*, London, 1665, pp. 2-3. Typology was a Christian method of reading history that conceived the antitypes of the Old Testament to be fulfilled by the types of the New Testament.

³⁵ See Marriott 2015 for extended treatment of this debate. See also Cecil Roth (ed.), *Magna Bibliotheca Anglo-Judaica*, London, 1937, pp. 279-280.

³⁶ George Wither, *Meditations upon The Lords Prayer*, London, 1665, p. 33.

to the world that the Israelites were upon their journey, from sundry Forreign parts in great multitudes." "W.G"'s following preface testified that "not only Protestants, but Papists, Jews, Turks, Mahometans, and other Idolaters do expect some great Revolution of Affairs, as Travellers that have been among them do relate."³⁷

The Mixed Perspective of the Merchant Community

The conjunction of merchandise and experiments that Sprat reports accords with the more mundane truth that along with commodities merchants bore news, and they were bound to have a wide variety of attitudes toward the information they encountered and passed on. The perspective of Christian merchants on the Sabbatian movement was influenced principally by two factors, one antisemitic, one pragmatic. The antisemitic axiom that Jews are motivated by an amoral lust for money and an ambition to drain it from Christian communities was as powerful in early modern England as elsewhere. The merchant Richard Baker reviled "the blood-sucking Jews" as the "Horseleeches of every Commonwealth."³⁸ This prejudice drew strength, however, not only from the Christian assignment to Jews of usury, a sinful and useful practice, but also, more subtly, from the importance of especially Sephardic Jewish commercial routes throughout the Mediterranean.³⁹ The cited sources document in ample detail that the movement of papers between merchants included not only bills of exchange and paper currency, which was be-

³⁷ "An Epistle to the Reader" and "To the Reader," in [Increase Mather,] *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation, [...] or, A Discourse Concerning the General Conversion of the Israelitish Nation. Wherein is Shewed, That the Twelve Tribes shall be saved* ([London] 1669), sig. A3v, b1r.

³⁸ [Richard Baker], *The Marchants Humble Petition And Remonstrance*, London, 1659, p. 15.

³⁹ See Trivellato, "Merchants' Letters across Geographical and Social Boundaries" in Francisco Bethencourt and Florike Egmond (eds.), *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe III*, Cambridge, UK, 2007, pp. 10-23; *The Familiarity of Strangers: the Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, New Haven & London, 2009.

ginning to displace coins and specie, but also manuscript newsletters, which circulated from Turkey in the south to Amsterdam in the north and whose nodal points were Smyrna and Leghorn. For English traders in the Levant, the desire to infiltrate and capitalize on the routes of Jewish merchants was complicated by concern that the Sabbatian movement might compromise the crucial Jewish role in maintaining the flow of commercial activity. Newsletters from Smyrna to Leghorn reported Sabbatai's capitulation to the Turkish sultan, perhaps even his apostasy, in various terms but with a common emphasis: "and tis well if [his devotees] so escape, but twill bee some tyme before [they] can regaine their C[redit] which is noe small Detriment to trade." "[T]hose people will suddenly returne againe to their sences, & Trade will reuiuue, for'tis not to bee expressed how farr they were gone in delusion." "Here is now greate hopes trade will suddenly much amend the Jewes returneing very eagerly again to their callings." "[T]hay now begin to Selle and promise to follow Tradeing as before, which they had totally Neglected, diuers haueinge sould their houses and Jewells to bee in a readynesse for the Jerusalem voyage."⁴⁰

This concern was not limited, however, either to merchants or to their newsletters. In fact George Wither, no merchant, looked to the mercantile community itself to allay his scepticism about reports that they who "call themselves *Israelites*" are "now repairing to possess the inheritance of their Forefathers": "For, we have yet received no Letters, that I hear of, from any of our Merchants or Factors trading in or near those parts."⁴¹ Albeit concluding with a non sequitur, Oldenburg reported that "the Jews at Amsterdam as well, as in other places, doe resigne their houses, resolved to repaire for Palestina with the first conveniency. It may be, they will doe so for want of Trade in Holland."⁴² *A New Letter Concerning the Jewes*, already cited,

⁴⁰ (Public Record Office) SP 97/18, fols. 156v, 210v, 212v, 211v, Feb. 17, Sept. 25, Oct. 9, 1666.

⁴¹ Wither, 1665, pp. 34-35.

⁴² *Correspondence of Oldenburg*, 3:23, no. 483, Oldenburg to Lord Brereton, Jan. 16, 1666.

reported that in Constantinople, “the most part of the *Jews* here meddle no more with Trading, but prepare to go for *Jerusalem*” (1). In Smyrna, “our Trade has been of late much obstructed in these parts, all the *Jews* being in a kinde of distraction upon the arrival of Sabadai.”⁴³ At Jerusalem, the followers of Sabbatai’s prophet Nathan abstain “not onely from all Vanity, but from Merchandizing and Trading; and especially from Exchange (which Nature terms to be meer Usury) [...] this change of heart [...] is not only so in *Judea*, but also at *Legorn* and *Venice*.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, letters are received in Leghorn from the *Jews* of Alexandria “to send them no more Business, they will have no further thoughts of it, but of higher Matters.”⁴⁵ News of Sabbatai even made its way to merchants as far removed from the Mediterranean as India: “All the Jewes of Holland are going for Jerusalem they saying they haue a King there.”⁴⁶ And Nathanael Homes surveyed the current state of affairs, as well as the paper media that sustain it, with the anticipant eloquence of the last things: “As for the present year 1665 (within five days now expiring) I have not medled with the occurrences thereof; because of them, Mens Pockets are full of *Letters*; their Hands full of *Gazetts*; their Eares full of Reports and Tidings; and their Eyes sufficiently perceive that the Jewes cease Trading, pack up, and are Marching.”⁴⁷

By this point, readers may be experiencing misgivings that the repetition of phrases and formulations in these several writings detracts from their documentary value because it reveals that the sources overlap. But the standard of value in this inquiry is not objective confirmation by independent testimonies, but the thickness of a palimpsest that has been written over from different directions

⁴³ *Gazette*, no. 35, March 12-15, 1666, letter of Jan. 8, 1666.

⁴⁴ *The Wonder of all Christendom*, London, 1666, p. 4; *Gods Love to his People Israel. Being a True Copy of a Letter As it was sent to the East-India Company, Concerning the Jewes*, London, 1666, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *The Wonder of all Christendom*, 6; *Gods Love to his People Israel*, 6.

⁴⁶ (British Library) MS. Add. 40712, fol. 32v, G. Willoughby to Sir George Oxenden, President of East India Company at Surat, March 5, 1666. Cf. also *Gods Love to his People Israel*, above.

⁴⁷ Nathanael Homes, *Miscellanea*, London, 1665, pt. 3, p. 16.

to form a “network” of, precisely, overlapping sources – in other words, the evidence of papers in circulation.

If any single figure can be said to have been at the centre of this network, it was the indefatigably optimistic Petrus Serrarius. Born into a wealthy Walloon merchant family and baptized Pierre Serurier in the French church on London’s Threadneedle Street, Serrarius abandoned his orthodox Calvinism sometime before settling in Amsterdam, and he remained committed to millenarian theology for the rest of his life. Serrarius became acquainted with Spinoza in Amsterdam, and after his excommunication by the Jewish community Serrarius aided Spinoza in establishing ties with Amsterdam millenarians as well as with English intellectuals like Oldenburg. Many of the far-flung notices of Sabbatai’s movements were written or mediated by Serrarius, who published on millenarian topics in French, Dutch, Latin, and English. Nothing suggests more concretely his geographical centrality to the foregoing threads of information that compose the web of Sabbatai’s publicity than the following passage from a letter he wrote to Oldenburg from Amsterdam in July 1667: “As for the Jews their hope revives more and more. Those of Vienna having sent an Expres to Adrianopolis, do writ, that their Man doth affirm, to have spoken with Sabithai Sebi and found him, not turned Turck, but a Jew as ever in the same hope and expectation as before. Yea, from Smyrna by way of Marcelles [Marseilles] we have, that at Constantinople the Jews return to their fasting and praying as before: and so doe some here likewise.” Of Jesus Christ he adds: “Many will allow him a kingdom in heaven, but not on Earth. This, they conceive, is and wil remain, their fashion: but other was the Expectation of the Saints at all times.”⁴⁸

Sabbatai’s time marks as well as any the moment when modern communication networks came into being through the intersection and overlapping of papers that bore information in sufficient quantity to draw attention to itself as such. My subject has been not only

⁴⁸ *Correspondence of Oldenburg*, 3:447, no. 652, July 5, 1667. “Saint” was the term used by seventeenth-century Puritans to affirm their election.

the Sabbatian network, but also the way it was constituted by several other networks of major, long-term historical significance, whose coalescence was contemporary with the evanescent flowering of the Sabbatian phenomenon. Some of these networks have emerged explicitly in the course of this discussion: the collection and surveillance of political intelligence by the modern state; the ambition to assess what's constant in nature by surveying and comparing its multitude of variations; and the virtual tracings of actual exchange circuits whose repetition over time invited the label of "trade route." The value of focusing on the moment when networks of information coalesce, before the movement of papers solidifies into the stasis of informational categories, may be that we glimpse their component kinds as they bleed together, distinct but inseparable from each other. In any case, this is what I've suggested regarding the political interests of royalists and Puritans; the religious interests – I use the term advisedly – of Jews and Christians; and the mercantile, new philosophical, and millenarian expectations of those whom we've learned to separate out into the categories of commerce, science, and superstition. From the elevated vantage point of an informed historiography, perhaps this diversity can be concentrated into a categorical distinction between the material and the spiritual whose modern trajectory has been toward separation.

In his utopian community of knowledge production and consumption, Francis Bacon called those who collect information from around the world and convey it to Atlantis "merchants of light." Actual merchants would be unlikely to recognize their practical exertions in this metaphor, but it reminds us that the networks of information that spring up during the Enlightenment are virtual spaces of enlightenment.

The pieces of paper that compose these networks are themselves virtualizations of talk whose insubstantiality enables communication beyond the scope of actual speech. Contemporaries knew this. Is not writing, asked Martin Billingsley, "the very mouth whereby a man familiarly conferreth with his friend, though the distance of thousand of miles be betwixt them?" William Fulwood called a letter

“nothing else but a declaration, by Writing of the minds of such as bee absent, one of them to another, even as though they were present.”⁴⁹ Perhaps it was living in an emergent print culture that gave people enough distance from their accustomed practice to see that the effect print was having on writing was akin to the more evident effect writing had had on speech. One by-product of this recognition was the conceptualization of oral communication as a distinct medium, as “orality” or oral culture.⁵⁰

The case for what was not only gained but lost by the technologies of writing and print has in our own time been made most eloquently by Walter Benjamin. “The art of storytelling is reaching its end,” Benjamin writes, “because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.” “Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories,” for “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories.” A new form of communication confronts storytelling. “This new form of communication is information. Information “lays claim to prompt verifiability.” “If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.”⁵¹

The art of storytelling can be felt to give way to writing and print over the *longue durée* of the early modern period; Sabbatai Sevi’s moment captures that process as it were in a single instant. From the perspective of the *longue durée*, Benjamin writes that “the resident tiller of the soil” and “the trading seaman” are the “archaic representatives” of the storyteller. Three centuries earlier, Sprat had similarly invoked “the ploughs of husbandmen” and “the voyages of merchants,” but for him these represent not an immemorial and van-

⁴⁹ Martin Billingsley, *The Pens Excellencie or the Secretaries Delight*, London, 1618, C2v-3r; William Fulwood, *The Enemy of Idleness*, London, 1568, repr. 1621), pp. 1-2: quoted in Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance*, Stanford, CA, 1990, p. 130 and p. 249 respectively.

⁵⁰ See Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, 2017.

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, New York, 1968, pp. 88, 89, 91.

ishing archaism but the forward-looking gleaners of nature's rarities. Benjamin sees these things from a great height, which allows him to evoke the feeling of a before and an after. Sprat writes in the midst of an ongoing process. The subject of this essay, also written from the middle of things, is the information conveyed by the merchants of the Levant, whose truth both solicits verification and reiterates the wisdom of the ages. The following passage captures this doubleness: "those people the Jewes, according to certaine and credible information, are at this time assembling themselves together into one body from out of all countreys, wherinto they have been driven with a resolution to regain the holy land once more."⁵²

⁵² *Doomes-Day: or, The great Day of the Lords Judgement, proved by Scripture*, London, 1647, p. 2.