Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in the 1689
London Sermons of Ḥakham
Solomon Aailion

Matt Goldish

The late seventeenth century was a period of extreme religious turmoil in Western Europe. Challenges to traditional faith were spreading among common people, philosophers, scientists, and, perhaps most surprisingly, among established religious clergy. Sometimes the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, or the conflicting belief systems within individuals, could be very complex, even paradoxical. The Jewish community of England, though not concerned with the same set of doctrines as its Christian counterpart, was also deeply affected by challenges of faith. And, as in the case of the English Christians, heterodoxy among the Jews was found among clergy as well as laymen. Here I will discuss the place of one London rabbi in this dynamic miasma of religious transformation. After describing his background, I will analyze certain orthodox and heterodox elements found in his sermons, and then place him in the context of his clerical peers (if they may be called that) in the English church.

Ḥakham Solomon Aailion and the Jews of London

In 1689, the new rabbi of London’s Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community, Ḥakham Solomon Aailion (ca. 1660-1728), took up his post and delivered a series of sermons which are the focus of this study. Three pieces of background information are important for an understanding of Aailion’s place and of these sermons: the origins of

1 The family name was apparently originally Hillion, but at some point the Ḥakham began adding extra letters to it out of the kabbalistic and messianic reasons described here. This is why I have attempted to render the name phonetically as Aailion, reflecting the extra aleph at the beginning. Some Sabbateans made it 'Elion (most high), reflecting their view of his messianic standing. See M. Benayahu, Sefunot 14 (1971-1978), pp. 147-149.
the London community, the messianic movement of Shabbatai Zevi, and Aailion’s personal history.

The Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews Sha’ar Ha-Shamayim in London was essentially a satellite of the community in Amsterdam, but its origins were distinctly tied to the English situation. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, at the time when London was becoming a central trade entrepot, a number of Portuguese refugees found their way to the city. These were mainly conversos – Catholics descended from Jews who had converted under pressure in Spain or Portugal during the fifteenth century. Many were merchants with significant trading networks and contacts around both the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds. Their utility caused them to be tolerated despite the fact that they were foreign Catholics.

There was some question about whether they would continue to be tolerated after 1656, when the poorly kept secret that a number of them had privately reverted to their ancestral Judaism was brought into the open. This revelation was a result of two events. One was the visit of Amsterdam’s Ḥakham Menasseh ben Israel, who arrived to plead before Cromwell for the readmission of the Jews to England after almost 400 years of exclusion. The second was the war of the English against Spain, which forced the conversos to explain why they should not be regarded as hostile foreign nationals. They were not formally readmitted during this entire period, but their continued presence and open practice of Judaism was tacitly allowed, despite a measure of pressure from opponents.2

Like the Spanish and Portuguese former conversos of Amsterdam, this Sephardic community in London suffered from a certain element that was unwilling to accept the authority of the rabbis and the rabbinic tradition. For some this may have been a reaction to their expectations of a biblically-based Judaism without the authoritarian attitude of the Catholic persecution they had just escaped. For others it was undoubtedly a lack of any real religious commitment to Judaism. The synagogue

may have been more of a social and cultural center than a religious one for many congregants. Elsewhere I have written about Ḥakham Aailion’s struggles with former Portuguese *conversos* living at the edges of the community and challenging his clerical authority. This, of course, is closely analogous to the anticlericalism of the period in Christian England and Europe. So London’s Sephardic community suffered from popular heterodoxy in several forms.

**Sabbatean Heresy**

Another form of heterodoxy in London was common not only to communities of former *conversos*, but across the Jewish world of the late seventeenth century. This was the continued adherence of many Jews to the belief in the messianic pretender Shabbatai Zevi (1626-1676). Shabbatai was a kabbalist scholar from Izmir who lived for decades with the conviction that he was destined to be the messiah and savior of Israel. He did not act openly on this impulse until, in the spring of 1665, he came in contact with the brilliant seer Nathan of Gaza in the Spring of 1665, who claimed to know prophetically that Shabbatai was indeed the messiah. Nathan became the prophet and driving force behind the Sabbatean movement, which spread rapidly through almost the entire Jewish world and convinced many Jews, perhaps the majority, to believe in Shabbatai. This was the largest Jewish messianic movement since Christianity. In 1666, Shabbatai was hauled before the Grand Vizier and chose to apostatize to Islam rather than be executed for rebellion.

Shabbatai’s apostasy did not put an end to the movement. His theologians, Nathan of Gaza and Abraham Miguel Cardoso, as well as Shabbatai himself, wrote complex kabbalistic treatises to explain why the messiah had to convert, or enter the realm of the unclean husks (as

---


they put it), in order to complete his mission of redemption. Even after Shabbatai’s death in 1676 the movement did not disappear, though it had been driven underground in most places after 1666 by an embarrassed rabbinic leadership. A group of believers in Saloniki in the 1680s converted to Islam in imitation of Shabbatai, and became known as the Dönme, or converts. They continued to believe and practice Sabbatean rituals until at least World War I. A much larger group of believers, including Nathan of Gaza and Cardoso, remained within the Jewish camp and taught their faith to a new generation.6

The nature of the Sabbatean faith is critical to the present inquiry. Shabbatai himself, who appears to have suffered from bipolar personality disorder, was well known for his sudden public desecrations of Jewish commandments and changes in the liturgy or calendar. So great was his magnetism that these transgressions were alpha-switched into positively valued ritual acts, rather than causing Shabbatai’s immediate rejection by the rabbis. This penchant for ritualized antinomian acts was carried on by Shabbatai’s followers, and was explained by his theologians. Nathan, Cardoso, and other Sabbatean ideologues also introduced complex mystical interpretations about the nature of God, the messiah, and the future of the world. Some of these explanations were distinctly heterodox, crossing the line into such doctrines as the deification of the messiah and the multiplication of essences in the infinite Godhead. However, these writings were so abstruse, and used such a complex set of symbols, that even learned rabbis were often unable to spot the heretical meanings in them. This lack of clarity led

to the birth of several enormous rabbinic controversies in the eighteenth century.7

Meanwhile, antinomianism among the Dönme was reputed to have gone much further. By the early eighteenth century one sect among the Dönme, led by Barukhiah Russo (called Osman Baba), was apparently practicing prohibited sexual unions, incest, and other grave sins as part of a new, kabalistically justified theology of reverse nomianism.8

Aailion among the Sabbateans

Among Nathan of Gaza’s students was none other than the young Hakham Solomon Aailion, who spent time with Nathan in Saloniki during the 1670s. Furthermore, according to his later opponent, Hakham Moses Hagiz, Aailion as a young man temporarily converted to Islam and belonged to the Dönme. Hagiz (writing in 1714) accused Aailion of participating in many of the most disreputable alleged practices of the Dönme, including wife-swapping and perverting justice:9

You should know that this impudent man is one of those who was struck by the plague of the impure Querido, Philosoph, and Florentin, may their name and memory be erased.10 At that time he took a forbidden woman who was with him.11 She had already been contaminated by a certain foul man who separated her from her husband by claiming that she was not his proper [spiritual] mate, and other such impure claims that they would invent at that time in order to permit forbidden women to

---

8 Accusations of sexual impropriety actually date to the very beginnings of the movement.
9 No other evidence exists to confirm or gainsay these accusations. See G. Scholem, Kabbalah, Jerusalem 1988: p. 274; Benayahu (above, n. 6). On the accusations against Aailion see M. Goldish, ‘An Historical Irony: Solomon Aailion’s Court Tries the Case of a Repentant Sabbatean’, Studia Rosenthaliana 27 (1993), pp. 5-12.
10 Jacob Querido, Joseph Philosoph, and Solomon Florentin were the leaders of the Dönme in this period. See G. Scholem, Kabbalah (above, n. 9), p. 274.
themselves. They were with themselves and Satan was among them.\textsuperscript{12} After they apostatized people say that they would divorce and marry without any involvement of the Jewish rabbis in the matter. It was exploitation, for if they fancied and lusted after someone’s wife they would force him away from her with no thought of the consequences.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the misgivings of scholars about Hagiz’s reliability, there appears no reason to doubt this information, and I know of no instance where Aailion denies it. In fact, these matters will become very important in understanding Aailion’s sermons later on.

Aailion apparently regretted his apostasy after a short time and returned to Judaism. He showed up again in Italy in the middle 1680s, probably directly after his abandonment of the Dönme. There he maintained close contacts with the circles of the Sabbatean faithful, including the bet midrash of Rabbi Abraham Rovigo.\textsuperscript{14} It was probably either in Italy or shortly afterward that Aailion composed his one openly Sabbatean work, a treatise on Sabbatean Kabbalah.\textsuperscript{15} This work is immensely important in understanding Aailion. It shows his deep affinity and respect for the teachings of Nathan; and, as Yael Nadav cogently explains, it also proves that Aailion’s supposedly ‘conservative’ Sabbatean doctrine was in fact quite radical, perhaps more radical than that of Abraham Miguel Cardoso. In particular, Aailion posited a distinct bifurcation in the Infinite Godhead, En-sof, a heretical position by most traditional standards.\textsuperscript{16}

Aailion left Italy for Amsterdam, where, after a short time, he was induced by representatives of London’s nascent Portuguese Jewish community to come to London as their new Ḥakham. Hagiz claims

\textsuperscript{12} On this phrase, Yael Nadav makes the following comment: ‘This is a common expression even today among Eastern Jews. It refers to opponents or enemies who are already fighting within their own ranks, so there is no need to argue with them’; see Y. Nadav, ‘A Kabbalic Treatise of R. Solomon Ayllion’, Sefunot 3-4 (1960), p. 305 note 9.

\textsuperscript{13} R. M. Hagiz, Shever Posh’im (The Sundering of Sinners), Amsterdam 1714, p. 71 (37v).

\textsuperscript{14} This is where the articulations of his lessons from Nathan of Gaza were recorded in the Sabbatean notebook discussed by Y. Nadav (above, n. 12), pp. 301-348.

\textsuperscript{15} This was published by Nadav (above, n. 14).

\textsuperscript{16} Nadav (above, n. 14).
that these representatives knew the rumors about Aailion’s past but chose to ignore them. Aailion arrived in London in 1689 and stayed for about ten years before accepting an invitation to serve as Hakham in Amsterdam in 1699.

**Orthodox Elements in Aailion’s 1689 Sermons**

Several of the extant manuscripts of Aailion’s writings date specifically to the year 1689. These include the sermons I will discuss here, lessons he taught at the yeshivah (rabbinical academy), and several important letters. This material embodies a seemingly bizarre mixture of the very orthodox and the heterodox, which appear to be integrated seamlessly in Aailion’s thought. I will begin at an easier place, with the evidence for Aailion’s orthodoxy.

In 1689 Hakham Aailion wrote to his friend, Hakham Jacob Sasportas, who had served as rabbi in London in 1664-65 and knew the foibles of that community. In the letter, Aailion complains bitterly about *converso* fence-sitters at the fringes of his community who encourage his congregants to be lax in observing the commandments. He comes off there as a completely traditional rabbi in every sense. In the 1689 sermons Aailion expresses a similarly orthodox position concerning the *conversos* and the imperative of their return to the practice of Jewish law (Appendix A). In this case he speaks not of the local Spanish and Portuguese who have already arrived in England, but of those remaining on the Iberian Peninsula as Catholics. Here he expounds the warning passages from Leviticus chapter 26 with reference to the situation of *conversos* in his own day. He explains that these descendants of apostates to Christianity have abandoned God and refused to see God’s hand in their success. God has given them prosperity in order that they might flee the Iberian Peninsula and return to the Judaism of their ancestors in the freer lands of Western Europe or the Ottoman Empire. Instead, many of these wretched *conversos* turn a blind eye to God’s providence and stay in their woeful state, accumulating more money.

In itself, the speech is touching and shows the power of Aailion’s

---

18 See Goldish, ‘Jews, Christians, and *Conversos*’ (above, n. 3).
ability to relate to the human plight of his congregants. Many of those in the community had personally survived the torments of the Inquisition, and everyone had relatives or acquaintances who remained behind. Aailion explicates the scriptural passages in terms of their suffering, echoing many ideas from earlier texts such as Judah Ibn Verga’s Shevet Yehudah. He evokes the fear of the Iberian conversos that every knock at the door could be the Inquisitors, come to drag them off to prison and take all their belongings. Even when all is well this fear is never absent. When conversos were arrested, Aailion points out, it was usually because another converso had betrayed them, either voluntarily or under torture. The Inquisition would not be able to operate without the conversos turning upon their own people. Aailion ends on a positive note: despite their obstinacy and greed, God has never abandoned the conversos. Both their wealth, on the one hand, and their terrible suffering on the other, are sent by God to wake them from their complacency and induce them to leave. He is waiting for their repentance and return to Judaism.

This is a type of sermon which must have been fairly common in the Sepharadi diaspora. Hakham Saul Levi Mortera of Amsterdam had delivered a very similar message in various sermons. It is part of what Cecil Roth called the ‘proselytization’ of the conversos, which had a long and fairly successful history after 1492. It had a distinct purpose, even when addressed to a congregation of former converso Jews at the end of the seventeenth century, because Western Sepharadim regularly made their way to Spain, Portugal, and other so-called ‘lands of idolatry’, where they came in contact with conversos still living as Catholics. In short, Aailion’s sermon on the conversos was part of a

---

19 See M. Saperstein, Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira’s Sermons to a Congregation of ‘New Jews’, Cincinnati 2005. I am grateful to Professor Saperstein for pointing out this parallel to me when his book first appeared.


larger program to encourage their return to Judaism and orthodox Jewish practice.

In addition to the excursus on the conversos, in the sermons Aailion deals very extensively with fine points of Jewish law. In the great medieval style of rabbinic tradition, he assumes that the biblical patriarchs and prophets were scrupulously observant of the entire written and oral law as it was preserved in the Torah and the Babylonian Talmud. He spends numerous pages trying to reconcile various Talmudic passages with the deeds of biblical heroes. With sufficient scrutiny, however, an odd note can be detected in his choice of subjects, something to which we will return forthwith.

**Heterodox Elements in the Sermons**

Two related elements show up in the sermons which reveal a tiny corner of Aailion’s heterodox and heteroprax identity. This is a side of Aailion about which we previously knew from his Sabbatean treatise and letters, as well as from the accusations of Ḥagiz.

The first of these elements is straightforward and requires no further explanation. In several instances in the 1689 sermons, Aailion quotes from an authority identified by the initials Ra”N. Now, toward the end of the sermons, where he is dealing with legal issues from the Talmud, it is clear that his references to Ra”N refer to the fourteenth-century Spanish Talmud commentator, Rabbenu Nissim. But two mentions of Ra”N on theological matters near the beginning of the sermons certainly do not derive from Rabbenu Nissim’s Talmud commentary; nor are they from the famous Derashot ha-Ra”N.22 They can only be from the same Ra”N to whom Aailion refers in his Sabbatean treatise: Rabbi Natan, or Nathan of Gaza. This constitutes proof that at least as late as 1689 Aailion still regarded his Sabbatean teacher as a worthy guide.

The matters quoted from Nathan do not have any overt Sabbatean content. Neither those citations nor the rest of these sermons contain the telltale terminology of Nathan’s Sabbatean Kabbalah, Or she-yesh bo maṭshavah and Or she-ein bo maṭshavah – ‘The Thinking and

22 I am again grateful to Professor Saperstein for suggesting I check this source. The references to RaN are in the manuscript sermons (Ms. Ets-Haim 47 D 33), 4r and 8r.
Unthinking Lights’. This does not mean, however, that there is no Sabbatean content. So far I have not been successful in working out the kabbalistic symbolism with any certainty, but apparently I am not the first to find it opaque: Ḥayyīm Malakh, a major Sabbatean figure and contemporary of Aailion, says he found Aailion’s writings to be ‘full of bizarre things’, some of which he lists.23 The sermons are replete with references that have messianic implications, such as the biblical figures of Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, and Solomon. The same figures are prominent in Aailion’s Sabbatean treatise from the mid-1680s. It is inconceivable that he would focus on this same set of figures in his Sabbatean work and in these sermons, written within a very few years of each other, without intending a similar set of symbolic implications. Other kabbalistic passages in the sermons diverge considerably from Zoharic or Lurianic traditions and seem to beg for a messianic interpretation.

These concealed symbols and hints constitute a second heterodox element in the sermons related to Aailion’s Sabbatean past. They include both the messianically suggestive figures mentioned above, and thinly veiled references to the peculiarities in Aailion’s marital situation, discussed by his detractor, Ḥagiz. In fact, Ḥagiz states explicitly that Aailion concealed allusions about these matters in his sermons. He says Aailion compared himself to King David, his wife to Michal or to Bathsheba, her first husband to the primordial serpent, and her second husband to Uriah the Hittite.24

None of this will do him any good, for when the soul of a wicked man is not full enough [i.e. repentant] to cover the filth of his nakedness, how many times both here and there [in London and Amsterdam?] will he step in it publicly!25 He twisted the matters so as to explain to us that as he lives, he was the reincarnation of David; his wanton woman is like him,26 her

25 The phrasing is obscure but may refer to Maimonides’ *Laws of the Recitation of Shema* 3:11, where Maimonides discusses someone who steps directly on a lump of defecation which has stuck fast to his shoe.
26 Perhaps this means that just as he is the reincarnation of David, she is the reincarnation of Bathsheba.
poor, cuckolded original husband was the primordial snake;\(^\text{27}\) the second one who took her, but with whom she did not remain, was Uriah;\(^\text{28}\) and nobody who knows the [mystical] roots of the matter would criticize him for it, for indeed it was said that the original Adam was an idol worshipper.\(^\text{29}\) [72/38r] There were more such profane and blasphemous things which, had I not heard from his mouth with my own ears, I would not have believed [he said].\(^\text{30}\) In Appendix B I have reproduced a section of one of the 1689 sermons dealing with some of these matters, including King David and his problematic marriage. Underlying the text are various kabbalistic symbols. The circumcision and removal of the foreskin symbolizes the revelation of the Shekhinah, the feminine presence of God and lowermost sephirah, represented by the corona. Sexual intercourse represents the

\(^\text{27}\) The serpent (generally identical in kabbalistic writings with Satan) is a central theme in the writings of Nathan of Gaza. Serpent (\(naha\'\text{s}h\)) with a diacritical indicator is Hagiz’s term for Nehemia Hayon, the Sabbatean who occasioned this polemical book, but I do not believe he is alluded to here.

\(^\text{28}\) See 2Samuel 11. Uriah was the husband of Bathsheba, the woman whom King David lusted after, slept with, and impregnated. Uriah, a faithful servant of the king, suspected nothing; but the king repaid his loyalty by sending Uriah into a dangerous battlefield to be killed so he could keep Bathsheba. Aailion, as the reincarnation of King David, has inherited David’s lust and misdeeds, suggests Hagiz.

\(^\text{29}\) This comment is clearly intended to support these highly unorthodox practices concerning marriage, but I have not found a source for it in either the classical or the Sabbatean literature. However, some related ideas do occur. The Midrash says that when Adam was created, the ministering angels mistook him for God and worshiped him - that is, Adam became the object of idol worship (\(\text{Bereishit Rabbah}\) 8:10 and elsewhere). Furthermore, Adam was understood by the rabbis to be an acrostic for Adam David Messiah. Nathan of Gaza and other Sabbateans emphasize aspects of sin connected with all three. Adam’s sin created the world as we know it. David’s sins with Bathsheba and Uriah are well known. The rabbis foretell that the system of Jewish law will be nullified in the time of the messiah. Aailion is apparently making a connection of this type as well. See Scholem, \(\text{Studies and Texts Concerning the History of Sabbetianism}\) (above, n. 6), pp. 250-252, from a treatise by Nathan of Gaza, which bears certain similarities to the writings of Aailion.

\(^\text{30}\) Hagiz, \(\text{Shever Posh\text{\text{\text{"y}}}im}\) (above, n. 13), pp. 71-72 (37v-38r). For a larger selection from this text, see Appendix C. My deep thanks to Professor Haim Kreisel for his critical recommendations regarding the reading of this text.
relations between masculine and feminine sephirot. According to Elliot Wolfson, for Kabbalah the absorption of the feminine in the masculine in the Sephirotic realm is the essential process of redemption.\textsuperscript{31} Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David all represent the messianic line in different ways.

In fact, the particular cluster of human symbols here is important at several levels. One relates to the accusation by Hagiz concerning Aailion’s connubial liberties described above. David’s marriages to both Michal, the daughter of King Saul, and to Bathsheba, occurred under suspect circumstances. David’s marriage to Michal was never truly meant to occur, because Saul demanded one hundred foreskins of Philistines for the wedding gift, expecting David to be killed getting them, which did not happen. On the other hand, David’s marriage to Bathsheba was accomplished when David deliberately sent her husband, Uriah, into a dangerous combat zone, where he was indeed killed. Aailion’s actions with the other man’s wife could well be compared to those of David, his wife to Bathsheba, and the wife’s previous husband to Uriah. This is no great mystery.

At a slightly deeper level, the discussion of the various biblical figures in the text may be intended to make a more complex point. Jacob married two sisters, a situation later forbidden by the Torah. Joseph was involved with Potiphar’s wife. Judah was not married to Tamar, but bedded her on the understanding that she was a prostitute. Their offspring, Peretz (meaning, in Hebrew, to break out), was an ancestor of Boaz. Boaz slept with Ruth, a Moabite woman. The Torah forbid Moabites from joining the Israelite people, and Ruth was allowed to join only on the merit of the doubtful technicality that she was a Moabitess rather than a Moabite. The great-grandson of this union, David, was involved in the two deeply problematic marriages related above. Thus, David, the archetype Jewish king and ancestor of the messiah, is a product of a series of dubious liaisons. Similarly, Joseph, the ancestor of another messianic figure, is not without taint. The message that percolates through these allusions seems to be that the

The 1689 London Sermons of Hakham Solomon Aailion

messianic line derives not from the most righteous and untainted stock of the patriarchs, but specifically through unions that defy the prescribed laws and mores of Judaism. This suggests a sort of justification for the illicit marriage practices of the Dönme.

The discussion of problematic unions also raises another issue close to the hearts of the Sabbateans. It may hint at the idea that Shabbatai’s ‘strange actions’, and Sabbatean antinomianism, are a necessary part of the process of bringing the messiah, just as transgressions were a recurring part of the original messianic ancestry of David. Perhaps Aailion is even imputing a messianic identity to himself or his offspring.

An additional subject which comes up with great regularity in these and Aailion’s other sermons from various periods is the status of converts, conversion, and apostasy. This again relates to the David story, since Ruth is the archetype Jewish convert, but it is probably also an allusion to the significance of Shabbatai’s apparent apostasy from Judaism.

So, Aailion’s sermon dealing with these biblical figures could conceivably possess meaning on three levels: the simple level of the biblical commentary being presented for all listeners; a mystical justification of Aailion’s actions with his wife based on a justification of King David’s actions; and a Sabbatean kabbalistic commentary about the messiah. The latter two layers contain elements which have at least the potential of heresy.

This all raises a number of questions with which I may attempt to deal elsewhere but will at least point out here. To what degree do these sermons, preserved in Hebrew (they were certainly delivered in Spanish) in Aailion’s hand, reflect what he actually spoke? Assuming they reflect something of the actual sermons, why would a secret Sabbatean with a successful rabbinic career risk exposure by inserting banned messianic material into this most public genre? Could his congregation, in a small and highly mobile Jewish world, have been so oblivious to Aailion’s past and proclivities? If they were not (and Ḥagiz claims the leaders knew about Aailion’s Sabbatean past), why did they embrace him? Is it possible that fewer people knew or cared about deeply veiled, highly arcane theological doctrines (even heretical ones) than contemporaries and scholars have led us to assume? And finally, how did Aailion reconcile the orthodox and Sabbatean elements in his own belief system?
Aailion and the English Clergy

England was a hotbed of heterodoxy and religious ferment during the later seventeenth century. There were numerous types: popular religious and anticlerical positions; anti-Trinitarian Arianism and Socinianism; skepticism; deism; pantheism and panentheism; atheism; and mystical ‘enthusiasm’. The first decade of the period, described by Paul Hazard as the ‘crisis of the European mind’ (1680-1715), witnessed a series of events directly connected with these trends.32

The Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 culminated in England’s Toleration Act, which allowed dissenting Protestant groups to worship according to their own lights. Many common people took this as an opportunity to simply stop going to church altogether. Sir Isaac Newton’s Principia, explaining the mathematical principles of physical motion, was published in 1687. While Newton saw these rules of the universe as proof of divine providence in nature, others felt that God could be eliminated from the equation, leaving an orderly Newtonian universe which operates with no active providence. The years after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 saw a flood of refugees from France, many of whom had free-thinking tendencies, into England. Huguenot churches were reputedly a hub of anti-Trinitarian thought. 1689 was also the year John Locke returned from exile in Holland and published his classic Letter Concerning Toleration, in which he advocated the removal of temporal power from ecclesiastical authorities. In 1689 the bishopric of the Scottish church was abolished, removing another source of ecclesiastical power. The same year, the first full English edition of Benedict Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise appeared, with its frontal attack on the divine origins of the biblical text and on the temporal power of the clergy. Spinoza’s work was followed by the publication of numerous radical and deist tracts in England.33


The dominant moderate wing of the Anglican Church, the Latitudinarian divines, as well as dissenters, were often accused of Arianism and Socinianism by the orthodox High Church theologians. Numerous Latitudinarians were deeply involved with the Royal Society and Newtonian science, which were reputed (correctly) to incubate deistic ideas. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, was accused by his detractors of adhering to an anti-Trinitarian position.34

While the rationalist heresies associated with the New Science have deservedly received much scholarly attention, mystical ‘enthusiast’ heterodoxy was as much a concern for contemporaries as rationalism.35 The epithet of enthusiast was leveled at persons who claimed a divine inner light or prophecy, and those who believed in an imminent terrestrial Millennium. Often the two were intertwined, as in the case of the French Prophets who appeared in England shortly after Aailion’s tenure there.36 England was crawling with would-be prophets, messiahs, cabalists, quietists, Quakers, Freemasons, Hermeticists, Rosicrucians, alchemists, and other spiritual errants whose heresy was based on mystical conviction rather than science and rationalism.37 While it reached an apex of public exposure in the Civil War period, enthusiasm

---

34 On this see the very lucid article by W. Kolbrenner, “The Charge of Socinianism: Charles Leslie’s High Church Defense of “True Religion”, The Journal of the Historical Society 3 (2003), pp. 1-23. I am grateful to Professor Kolbrenner for bringing this paper to my attention.


37 For more on these trends see e.g. R. H. Popkin, The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought, Leiden 1992, Chaps. 6, 15, 17, 18; M. K. Schuchard, Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture, Leiden 2002, Chaps. 9-12; and, mainly for the earlier seventeenth century, K. Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, Oxford 1971.
remained an important part of the religious turmoil in England well into the eighteenth century. And, despite (or perhaps because of) the threat enthusiasm posed to the religious establishment, divines were found in this camp as well. This is the facet of English heterodoxy into which Ḥakham Aailion may best be placed by the historian. Just as Shabbatai Zevi himself was a contemporary of similar messianic movements in England, Aailion, who brought his Sabbatean beliefs with him to London, was an integral if not an integrated part of the larger religious agitation gripping contemporary Europe.38

Richard H. Popkin offers the context in which to understand the relationship between rationalism and enthusiasm, as well as that between Christian and Jewish heterodoxy in the Hazard generation. The skeptical crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries drove many thinking people (including clerics) into a desperate search for a system of thought that could overcome doubt and establish certainty. For some, the New Science and New Philosophy (including Cartesianism, with its mind-body distinction) offered the antidote to skepticism. Unfortunately, philosophical certainty also tended to lead in the direction of Socinian and Arian heresies. These became so widespread in England that – though belief in the Trinity remained part of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church – it was usually overlooked by all but the most zealous High-Church theologians. Other thinkers, however, found certainty not in knowledge of the physical world, but within themselves. The conviction of an immediate experience with the divine, or an inspired ability to understand the true meaning of Scripture, conquered all doubts.39

This skeptical crisis and its possible solutions were part of a broad intellectual current affecting much of Europe and the Mediterranean. Spinoza was as much a part of it as Descartes; Shabbatai Zevi as much as James Nayler. Aailion’s attempt to forge a theology out of orthodox and heretical elements was part and parcel of this early modern landscape. His certainty about the divine origin of Shabbatai’s mission and the true prophecy of his teacher, Nathan, was unshakeable. At the same

39 See the following works by R. H. Popkin: The History of Skepticism, From Savonarola to Bayle, Oxford 2003; Third Force (above, n. 37), Chap. 6.
time, he clearly struggled with the tension between Jewish orthodoxy and Sabbatean faith. It appears that, in one period, his Sabbateanism was strong enough to lead him into a temporary apostasy. His dedication to Jewish law and tradition were dominant enough to bring him back into the fold, but this did not solve his conundrum. So, like many other thinkers of his generation, he negotiated a path that fused the orthodox elements with which he was raised to heterodox elements he held by conviction. The resulting synthesis may seem odd to us, but was not entirely out of place in the complex religious world of 1689.

Appendix A

Sermons of Ḥakham Solomon Aailion, London 1689

MS. Amsterdam – Ets Haim 47 D 33 (=Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts #3566), my translation. Bible translations in the appendices are either from the JPS Tanakh or are my own.

And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it. And you will I scatter among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you; and your land shall be a desolation, etc. [Leviticus 26:32]

[2r] We might ask: why did it change [the terms]? First it said simply, And I will bring the land into desolation [hashimoti]; but afterward it said, and your land shall be a desolation – it calls the land by their name. Furthermore, God curses the Jews, but it appears that it is actually the nations of the world he is cursing, for it says, and your enemies ... shall be astonished [shamamu] at it.40 The purpose is to tell of God’s mercy; for even at the moment of God’s fury he pities them, and he41

For here is foretold the matter of the future, in the time of the exile of the Ten Tribes, when the king of Assyria brought [foreigners] from Babylonia and Cuthea and settled them in Samaria in place of the Jews. God afterward brought upon them lions and dangerous animals that killed many of them, as is found in Scripture, 2Kings 17. It is to

40 ‘Astonished’, shamamu, appears to be from the same root as hashimoti, ‘I will make desolate’.

41 Aailion appears to break off in mid-sentence at this point.
this that the passage refers when it states *And if ye will not for all this hearken unto Me* [2v] ... *And I will bring the land into desolation* [Leviticus 26:27-32]. It means, ‘I shall hurl my fury upon sticks and stones rather than upon you. And even those [gentiles] who simply come to live in this land, as in the time of Sennacherib, as we said, will be astounded [or desolated] by it, for the lions will come and multiply against them. And later, when you will go into exile, you will not stay there forever, for I will arrange that decrees are made against [the occupiers] in order to punish them for doing evil to you’. This is the meaning of, *And you will I scatter among the nations.*

Following that, *and I will draw out the sword after you* – then those lands to which you were taken in the country of your enemies shall be a desolation. This is what we have seen in our own days in the kingdom of Spain. For after the Jews left that kingdom, it became desolate.42 The Sages say the same thing about Egypt: while the Jews were there it was lush *mataronit*, but after they left it was said about [Egypt], *It shall be the lowliest of the kingdoms* [Ezekiel 29:15]; and so too Babylonia and Greece.

It further states, *And as for them that are left of you* [I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee, as one flees from the sword; and they shall fall when none pursues; Leviticus 26:36]. He assures them that even those who remain among the nations, as in Spain, heaven forbid, and are lost, may He have mercy, *I will send a faintness into their heart*. This means God will appoint harsh overseers [Inquisitors] who will torture them like madmen. They will arrest them if they do not keep their [Catholic] faith. Then *I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies*, for they will constantly worry that someone is coming to arrest them and slander them and pursue them; *the sound of a driven leaf* – even though nobody suspects them. This is the meaning of *and they shall fall when none pursues.*

It is yet worse than this! They will not fall because of their enemies, but rather, *And they shall stumble one upon another, [as it were before the sword, when none pursues; and you shall have no power to stand*
Before your enemies, Leviticus 26:37]. For no person is arrested except by the testimony of another person [...]. This is the meaning of And they shall stumble one upon another. But a pursuer, meaning a real gentile [that is, the ‘Old’ Christians], is not there, for they do not know how to do evil except through themselves [that is, with converso testimony].

What can I do? You shall have no power to stand before your enemies, which means, they will take all your money from you, that which holds a person upright on his feet, as the Sages comment, And every living substance that followed them [ve-et kol ha-yequm asher be-raglehem; lit: ‘all the existence that was at their feet’, Deut. 11:6] – this refers to money.43 This is the meaning of, You shall have no power to stand before your enemies. [...] After their money is taken away they come to seek out God [i.e. they escape Iberia], though there are others who, despite having their money taken, remain there! This is the meaning of, And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity [in their enemies’ lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them, Leviticus 26:39]. It means that they are pining away because their money was taken, but they remain in their sins.

If they would confess their [iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, in their] treachery which they committed [against Me, and also that they have walked contrary unto Me, Leviticus 26:40]; for I have given them great wealth in order that they might leave there, but instead they stayed even longer! Now they wanted to seek out God [that is, to leave], but their enemies had taken all that they owned. Indeed, it was worse than this! The overseers [Inquisitors] made them confess and state with their mouths anew that they wanted to be like them [good Catholics]. This is the meaning of the first use of treachery [be-mo’alkhem], that they remained there. Which they committed [asher mo’al], when they did it anew.

Despite all this, the Lord had pity on his nation of Israel, for though they had not acted properly, but had instead angered God with what he gave them, still God saved them and He went with them to protect them. This is the meaning of, and they have also walked contrary to

43 See BT Pesahim 119a; Sanhedrin 110a.
The message is this. [3r] Indeed, they have walked contrary to Me – for as much as I have multiplied their gold, they did not come to seek out God and his Torah, and all these miseries and sufferings have befallen them which no man born of woman would by nature be able to endure. How did they manage to endure such tortures? This is why the passage continues, I will also walk contrary to them [Leviticus 26:41] – God will remain with them in that same exile, and he will give strength to the weary. Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob [Leviticus 26:42] […] For the merit of Jacob remains in place, which assures that [his descendants] will never again plunge into exile, and evildoers will never again torture them […]

Appendix B

R. Moses Ḥagiz, Shever Posh'im [The Sundering of Sinners], Amsterdam 1719

[71/37v] Before I finish my discourse, I will inform you briefly about how the leader of this obscenity, the ass [ha-aton], 45 that is, Aailion, may his name and memory be erased, has filled his measure. 46 You should know that this impudent man is one of those who was struck by the plague of the impure Querido, Philosoph, and Florentin, may their name and memory be erased. 47 At that time he took a forbidden woman who was with him. 48 She had already been contaminated by a certain
foul man who separated her from her husband by claiming that she was not his proper [spiritual] mate, and other such impure claims that they would invent at that time in order to permit forbidden women to themselves. They were with themselves and Satan was among them. After they apostatized, people say that they would divorce and marry without any involvement of the Jewish rabbis in the matter. It was exploitation, for if they fancied and lusted after someone’s wife, they would force him away from her with no thought of consequences. Throughout all this it was well known to us that no hand of the Jewish rabbis was present among them except that of the ones who apostatized. This means that all their progeny have the assumed status of bastards.49

He later became estranged from them and came to these distant lands to receive reward like Pinhas.50 The sins of this generation occasioned one of the holy congregations of Israel to be taken in by him and to employ him.51 When the sages of Israel [rabbis] heard of this development, they turned a blind eye as if they knew nothing of the matter. It is possible – nay, almost certain – that this deliberate obliviousness has been the cause of all these sorrows we suffer at present from this villain. Still, the Lord God knows, and Israel will know52 that when the congregation consulted me in 499 of the minor

49 The Hebrew term is *mamzer*, which does not mean the same as the English ‘bastard’, but rather, a child born of an illicit relationship. Such a person can not marry a Jew and is stuck in an extremely complex legal conundrum.

50 BT Sotah 22b; King Yannai warns against counterfeit pietists, ‘whose actions are those of Zimri, but they demand the reward of Phineas’ (referring to events in Numbers 25.)

51 Aailion was employed by the Spanish and Portuguese Jews’ congregation of London in 1689. A decade later he was hired away by the very prestigious congregation of Amsterdam, a post he held for 28 years until his death. This polemic was written after Aailion supported a known Sabbatean adventurer, Nehemiah Hyya Hayyun. The author, Hagiz, attacked the community for standing behind Hakham Aailion rather than evicting him as a heretic. See Carlebach (above, n. 6), chap. 4.

52 Joshua 22:22. In that context, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, declare their innocence of rebellion or treachery against God.
count [1699], I only withheld my testimony [against Aailion] out of a desire not to impede penitents. I said, since he has already risen, he should not be toppled, out of honor for the congregation that erred unknowingly. None of this will do him any good, for when the soul of a wicked man is not full enough [i.e. repentant] to cover the filth of his nakedness, how many times both here and there [in London and Amsterdam?] will he step in it publicly?! He twisted the matters so as to explain to us that as he lives he was the reincarnation of David; his wanton woman is like him; her poor, cuckolded original husband was the primordial snake; the second one who took her, but with whom she did not remain, was Uriah; and nobody who knows the [mystical] roots of the matter would criticize him for it, for indeed it was said that the original Adam was an idol worshiper. [72/38r] There were more such profane and blasphemous things which, had I not heard from his mouth with my own ears, I would not have believed [he said]. Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth etc. [Psalms 58:7]

I have further heard [Aailion] say the following in public: A certain old man (he is still living in guilt but will die in loneliness)\(^55\) testified concerning [Aailion] that he saw some strands extending out further than the others from the beard of Aailion. He counted them and their number totaled thirteen. These are undoubtedly the same hairs that, for him and those of his sort, are considered a great clue and a deep secret.\(^56\) In order not to defile the paper I will not enumerate the details, as they say.

[Aailion] further said that the observer should not be surprised that he adds to his name (may it be blotted out!) extra letters \textit{aleph} and \textit{yod}.

---

53 The phrasing is obscure, but may refer to Maimonides’ \textit{Laws of the Recitation of Shema’} 3:11, where Maimonides discusses someone who steps directly on a lump of defecation which has stuck fast to his shoe.

54 See II Samuel 11. Uriah was the husband of Bathsheba, the woman whom King David lusted after, slept with, and impregnated. Uriah, a faithful servant of the king, suspected nothing; but the king repaid his loyalty by sending Uriah into a dangerous battlefield to be killed so he could keep Bathsheba. Aailion, as the reincarnation of King David, has inherited David’s lust and misdeeds, suggests Hagiz.

55 Hagiz is indicating that the old man is a Sabbatean believer.

56 Here Hagiz plays a word game. Rather than using the Hebrew words for clue and secret, \textit{remez gadol ve-sod ‘amoq}, he writes \textit{remez gadol ve-shod ‘amoq}, meaning ‘a great crawling insect and deep banditry’.
to those he already had. For this too had been revealed to that elderly sinner in a dream: it was necessary that the beginning of [Aailion’s] name be spelled with two alephs and one yod, a hint concerning the first mystical combination of the three holy names. And, with the addition of a further yod after the lamed, he had the special significance of three yods – for the [talmudic] Sages said that in the future the righteous will be called by the name of God – may He in His blessed mercy destroy the memory and progeny of evil people from among mankind. For they intended evil against thee, they imagined a device, wherewith they shall not prevail. [Psalms 21:12]; They weary themselves to commit iniquity [Jeremiah 9:4]; They know not at what they stumble [Proverbs 4:19]. O Lord God, will You not wreak the vengeance of your soul on a brazen dissident apostate adulterer such as this? Will your fury not be cast on the claims of this [elderly] sinner?

I will not go into any clarification for you of the episode concerning an oath he [Aailion] swore loudly and solemnly (at the time the members of the holy congregation [of London] merited to be rid of this stumbling block on which they had fallen) that he would not accept any appointment or post in any community in the world. Afterwards he told them that there had been no phylacteries in the bag upon which he swore, but rather two onions; and that he swore he will not accept [the Amsterdam position], but it was already accepted – because of the sins of that community into which he wanted to be received, so as to ensnare them and acquire for himself a reputation as one of the notables.

You can confirm all this with members of that [London] congregation,

---

57 Hagiz writes the words ‘those he already had’ (otan she-hayu) in bold, indicating he is playing with their numeric equivalencies, but I have been unable to determine his meaning. The word otan (those) does contain the same letters as aton (ass), Hagiz’s standard appellation for Aailion.

58 Aleph lamed heh yod mem, aleph dalet nun yod, and yod heh vav heh.

59 I.e., this occurred ca. 1698 or 1699, around the time Aailion would have been entertaining an offer from the Amsterdam Sepharadi community, a post he indeed accepted.

60 That is, according to the story Hagiz tells, Aailion swore not to accept any job offers, but he hoodwinked his congregants because at the time of the oath he had already accepted the offer from Amsterdam. The punishment for the sins of the Amsterdam Jews was that they got stuck with the scheming Aailion, who was only interested in the glory of the position. In truth, however the Amsterdam Jews were delighted with Aailion.
Matt Goldish

for most of them were saved from his legacy, thank God, which was not too long ago.

At around the same time one of his students pulled a similar stunt, swearing on a matter about which he had no knowledge. It was afterward revealed that he had signed perfidiously. With great nerve he gets up and struts about, feeling no remorse for this or anything else like it among their evil deeds. They eat and defile their mouths like an adulterous woman, saying ‘We have committed no offense’.

The members of that congregation who testify about him would further enlighten you about this. Many times people would come to him for adjudication; we will use the names Reuben and Simeon for an example. Reuben would claim that Simeon had sworn an oath to make full payment, or whatever the case might be, in accordance with an agreement they had signed. Then Aailion would ask Simeon whether, at the time he swore the solemn oath, his heart had been in agreement with his mouth to fulfill the conditions of the contract. When Simeon would claim that his mouth and heart had not been in agreement, he would absolve him altogether. There were many such sufferings and evils he would teach them on the basis of their [the Sabbateans’] deceitful claims.

Appendix C

More from Ḥakham Aailion’s 1689 Sermons

[13v] Using the second approach we discussed, that everything that occurs only rarely stirs everlasting love, and a person loves it more than that which is constant and common, it appears in my humble opinion that we can say that this was the intention of the elders who blessed Boaz in that holy union, when they told him [And all the nation that was at the gate, with the elders as witnesses, declared]

61 I believe Ḥagiz has gone back to speaking of Aailion here, not of the student.
62 After the apostasy of Shabbatai Zevi to Islam in 1666, his remaining followers were gradually forced underground. Beginning with Aailion’s teacher, Nathan of Gaza, the chief prophet of the movement, they became known for dissimulation and imposture as they guarded their secret identity. See, for example, G. Scholem, ‘Redemption Through Sin’, in his The Messianic Idea In Judaism, New York 1971, pp. 116-117.
63 See Appendix A above.
May God grant you this woman who has come into your home [that she be like Rachel and Leah, the two of whom built the House of Israel ...] And may your home be like the house of Perez, [whom Tamar bore to Judah from the seed God will grant you from this young woman, Ruth 4:11-12].

We must understand why they blessed him with the blessing of our matriarchs Rachel, Leah, and Tamar, and no others. Furthermore, why did they place Rachel before Leah? Also, who has come into your home appears at first blush to be extraneous – it ought to have said, ‘May God grant you this woman’, and stopped there. But using that which we wrote it works well. For we find that Ruth went to Boaz upon the advice of Naomi as the Scripture tells us; and it is obvious that something desired is not like something offered. When one comes upon something that is desired, he loves it dearly, for it has come his way and he has acquired it through his own strenuous efforts. Something that comes to him by itself, however, it is quite the opposite – the item searched him out, and he obviously will not value it at all, because it came to him effortlessly.

This is why the elders say to Boaz, May God grant you this woman – referring to Ruth, who has come to your home. That is to say, the woman arrived of her own accord, and you never sought her out; rather, she came into your home to seek you out, and something desired is not like something offered. May God grant [...] that she be like Rachel, because Jacob sought her out and went to her, so that Jacob loved Rachel. In addition, aside from the fact that Ruth sought out her mate, it appears that she did something unseemly when she said explicitly to Boaz, Spread your wings [over your maidservant for you are the redeemer, Ruth 3:9] – this is a woman who pleads with her mouth. That is why it says and [like] Leah: just as Leah comes out toward Jacob and tells him, You will come in to me for I have leased you [Genesis 30:16], and despite all this God does not count it a transgression, for her intention was to raise up [here my text is cut off. The discussion on the next page has clearly moved to the question of why Ruth is blessed to be like Tamar.] [14r] [...] also did so, as is clear from the fact that she stood at the crossroads, as we see in Scripture. At first this would appear to be an unchaste method, and the matter of Tamar could have been a source of derision. But God, who examines
the hearts and innards, knew the intention of the righteous Tamar and brought out from her all the hidden good [i.e. the messiah]. This was done despite the fact that Judah had other children, such as Shelah – in spite of all this, He brought the house of royalty only from the descendants of Tamar. At that point everyone knew that God was pleased with the actions. By the same token, how can we know that the intentions of Ruth were for the sake of heaven, despite the fact that she came stealthily in the evening of the [?], lay down at his feet, and told him, *Spread your wings over your maidservant?* Through that *And may your home be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore* – God should do the same thing; let the royalty come only from the seed that He gives you from this young woman. End.

We will now return to the subject of our patriarch Jacob, [who said] *Bring me my wife, for my days are completed, and I will come to her* [Genesis 29:21]. It says in the Gemara, in Tractate Sanhedrin [19b] concerning the matter of David and Saul, that one who is betrothed by means of a borrowed item [as the marriage gift] is not betrothed, while one who is betrothed by means of a borrowed item and a *perutah* [a small coin], the intention is on the *perutah*. Saul was of the opinion that he had accomplished nothing, while David was of the opinion that it works for dogs, etc. We must understand this, and in my humble opinion it is difficult to grasp. For, what was Saul thinking when he freed his daughter Michal [from her betrothal to David] and gave her to Palti ben Layish as a wife [1Samuel 25:24]? It is hard to understand, for even if David believed as he did that a hundred Philistine foreskins accomplished nothing [i.e., would not serve as money to seal the engagement], Michal was nevertheless engaged to David and would need a bill of divorce from him, for David had come upon her.

Now, it is a simple matter, clear to every rabbinic decisor, that if one betroths with less than the equivalent of a *perutah* the engagement is not effective; but if he has slept with her she needs a bill of divorce from him. This is affirmed by the Ra”N [Rabbenu Nissim]. […]65 It is thus no matter that the hundred foreskins did not amount to a *perutah*.

64 That is, he thought that David had not successfully betrothed his daughter Michal by means of the Philistine foreskins.

65 Here Aailion goes into detailed citations proving this is the view of the rabbis.
For in any case, because he came upon her, we say that he did so with the intention of marriage, for ‘a man does not conduct intercourse for the mere purpose of licentiousness’. The hundred foreskins might or might not be effective; so he could not leave himself in uncertainty, and he slept with her for the purpose of marriage. It would have been fine if [Saul] had given her to another man before David had intercourse with her; we could say that the hundred foreskins accomplished nothing, and thus no betrothal had occurred. But once David had come upon her, there is no room to cavil that the betrothal of David was no betrothal. If the hundred foreskins did not accomplish betrothal, the intercourse did [...]
