

And the Spirit of Sabbatai Zevi Moved Upon the Waters

Modes of Authority and the Development of the
Donme Sects

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Abstract

The conversion of the purported Jewish messiah Sabbatai Zevi to Islam in 1666 created a crisis among his followers. Many returned to mainstream Judaism; others remained secret Sabbateans. However, a small group in Salonika followed their master into apostasy, converting to Islam in imitation of Sabbatai Zevi. This group, known as the Donme, was very homogenous at the beginning; its members were few in number, knew each other well, and tended to be related to one another. However, shortly after the death of Sabbatai Zevi they split into three factions (a fourth, the Frankists, arose later in Europe), who differed greatly from each other in organization, ritual, and theology.

This thesis examines two main distinctions between the groups that led to their divergent outcomes. First, I examine the differences in modes of authority between the groups. In order to do this, I conceptualize two models of authority, the mundane and the charismatic (loosely based on Bruce Lincoln and Max Weber's theories of authority). The four groups are compared and contrasted based on the degree to which they rely on each of the modes of authority.

I also examine the ways in which each group linked itself to Sabbatai Zevi and legitimated itself as the rightful successors to his legacy. In this case this thesis distinguishes among legitimacies conveyed by the body of the messiah, the soul of the messiah, and the ideas and teachings of the messiah. Each of these pathways was claimed by one of the major groups, with major implications for the sect's theology and ideology.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction and History

Introduction and Transliterations

The Donme, both in history and in theology, were a most unusual group. They began as Jews, followers of the 17th-century messianic claimant Sabbatai Zevi. When he was captured by the Ottomans and forced to convert to Islam, a number of his followers did so as well; these converts and their descendants became the Donme. Clustered in Salonika, they developed a blend of Judaism and Islam, outwardly completely Muslim but privately holding to many Jewish rituals and practices, altered somewhat to reflect their faith in Sabbatai Zevi.

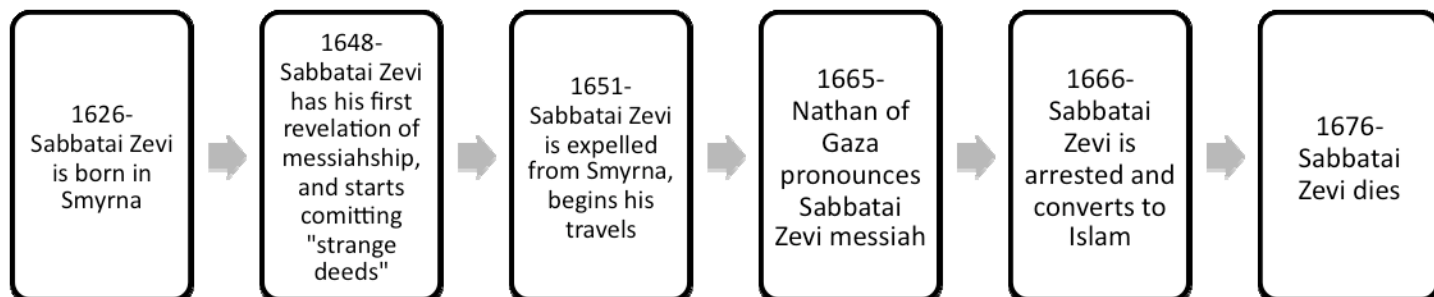
In time, these converts fractured into sects; these sects became radically different from each other in both theology and practice. At first, this seems puzzling; after all, they all stemmed from the same group of converts, operated within the same city, and followed the same redeemer. Yet they differed on their conceptions of authority and in their belief as to what constituted a true, binding authority. It was this difference in modes of authority and claims to legitimacy that shaped the divergent outcomes of the sects. This thesis argues that the difference in how each sect institutionalized successorship to Sabbatai Zevi and modes of authority determined their eventual structure, ritual, and theology. The Donme provide a fascinating example of a tight-knit, homogenous group that, through differences in conceptions of authority and sources of legitimacy, ended up diverging wildly.

In order to understand the development of the Donme and the key role that their differing modes of authority and methods of legitimation played, it is first necessary to give a historical overview of the movement, as well as some background on kabbalah and Jewish messianism.

Much of their unique character and theology can be traced back to their iconic founder; thus, it is only proper to give an introduction on both Sabbatai Zevi himself and the movement he led. For this historical overview I am much indebted to the seminal work on Sabbatai Zevi and his movement, Gershom Scholem's *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*. Except where otherwise stated, the historical data presented here is taken from this text.

The transliteration system used here represents, to the best of my understanding, the most current within the literature. While many transliterations have been used for Sabbatai/Shabbatai/Shabtai Tsevi/Zvi/Sevi, the most current appears to be Sabbatai Zevi; thus, this will be used throughout. Similarly, each of the Donme groups presented have been known by many names; I will use the transliterations Yakubi, Karakas, and Kapanci, since these appear to be the most faithful transliterations in standard English type.

Figure 1: Timeline of Sabbatai Zevi's life



Kabbalah

In order to fully understand the Sabbatean movement and later Donme development, it is necessary to discuss kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), given that much of Sabbatai Zevi's own thoughts and theology originate in kabbalistic ideas. Sabbatai Zevi began as a student and

scholar of kabbalah, and its influence on him throughout his life was pervasive. However, kabbalah, as with the mystical segments of all religions, is a varied and evolving body of ideas; as such, some introduction may be required.

Kabbalah did not originally concern itself much with messianism; it drew from “old Gnostic traditions and philosophical ideas”¹ and focused more on the individual kabbalist cleaving to God in mystical union than on the redemption of Israel as a whole. The Zohar, the seminal text of the Kabbalah written in Spain before the expulsion, began to change this. It concerns itself greatly with the advent of the messianic era, and says that true insight and wisdom is impossible until the redeemer comes to free all Jews from exile.²

In the sixteenth century, Safed (in the north of what is now Israel) became a major center of kabbalistic thought. They developed a system of mythological images, designed to make deep truths more understandable, which became popular with the laity and resulted in an upsurge of interest in mysticism by the common Jews.³ The greatest of the Safed kabbalists was Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534-72), who described an elaborate theology of exile and redemption; eschatology was crucial to his system of thought. Luria’s views were (and still are) enormously influential, and it was in a milieu that was deeply interested in such issues that Sabbatai Zevi began his career.⁴

Gershom Scholem discusses several elements as underlying all kabbalistic thought. Firstly, there is a negation of the personality of the mystic himself (as with many other traditions, kabbalists up until very recently were exclusively male). The master kabbalist seeks to describe

¹ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973], 15

² *Ibid.*, 17

³ *Ibid.*, 23

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29-30

the divine reality he has experienced in an objective, impersonal manner; the truth of his revelations is important, not the person to whom they were revealed.⁵ Isaac Luria, for instance, is widely considered one of the greatest kabbalistic thinkers of all time, and his works are still studied. However little is known of his personality or life; such details were not considered important.⁶

Here I would like to pause for a moment in order to problematize this idea as essential to Jewish mystical thought, specifically in how it relates to Sabbatai Zevi and his followers. To the Sabbateans, and to the later Donme, the personality of the messiah was central; if anything, his revelation occupied a secondary place to his charismatic identity. This can be gleaned from the Donme credo, the central assertion of faith and thus a useful glimpse into that which the Donme considered the most important aspects of their faith. The credo consists of nine statements; of these, three concern themselves with establishing Sabbatai Zevi as the messiah and redeemer (for the full text of the credo, see Appendix A).

I believe with perfect faith that Sabbatai Zevi is the true King Messiah.
I believe with perfect faith that Sabbatai Zevi, may his majesty be exalted, is the true Messiah and that he will gather together the dispersed of Israel from the four corners of the earth.
May it be pleasing to Thee, God of truth, God of Israel who dwells in the “glory of Israel,” in the three knots of faith which are one, to send us the just Messiah, our Redeemer Sabbatai Zevi, speedily and in our days⁷

From this we see that it was the person of Sabbatai Zevi, not his ideas or his experiences, that was held as central to the later Donme. The credo does not glorify Sabbatai Zevi’s writings, and no mention is made of his kabbalistic insights. Rather, it is Sabbatai Zevi as messiah and redeemer that is presented in and of itself as a fundamental truth. Sabbatai Zevi is, as is repeatedly emphasized, not merely held as the messiah, but the “true” messiah (or in the final

⁵ Gersom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Schocken Press, 1996], 16

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gershom Scholem, “Seder Tefilot ha-Donme me-kat ha-Izmirim,” quoted and translated Sisman 335-6

formulation, the “just” messiah). Truth is found in the person of Sabbatai Zevi and in his role as the messiah, rather than in his discoveries. This is a complete inversion of Scholem’s purported fundamental tenet of kabbalah, the exclusion of the personhood of the kabbalistic master in favor of his ideas. Here, it is not the ideas which are important, but the person producing them; it is Sabbatai Zevi who validates his notions, and not vice versa.

In light of this, we are left with two possibilities: either this definition of kabbalah itself is flawed, or that Sabbatai Zevi and his followers abandoned traditional kabbalistic modes of meaning-making in favor of a more charismatic approach. Both are possibilities, but it is Sabbatai Zevi’s (and those who followed him) adaptation of Kabbalah for his purposes that most concern us here. That Sabbatai Zevi considered himself and was considered by others to be a kabbalist is frequently acknowledged⁸; thus, while his approach was unconventional, it cannot truly be considered to be outside the realm of kabbalah.

The second major aspect of kabbalah in Scholem’s definition is a reverence for language, specifically Hebrew. The Hebrew language “reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world.”⁹ The world is seen as the speech of God; there is a divine essence in Hebrew, since it is the language God speaks. Thus, Hebrew can reveal the hidden, inner meanings of things. This view led to the practice of *gematria* in some kabbalistic circles, a system wherein Hebrew letters are given numeric value and the sum of the letters of a word or phrase is said to reveal mystical truths.

Sabbatai Zevi himself was much taken by gematria- in fact, much of his energy following his declaration of his messiahship was spent on discovering gematriot that would prove his

⁸ Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998], 186

⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 17

messiahship or indicate his spiritual perfection. For example, he discovered in 1665 that the gematria of his name, Sabbatai Zevi, was identical to that of the phrase “the true messiah” as well as Shaddai, one of the names of God in the Torah.¹⁰ This, of course, proved without a shadow of a doubt that he was the real messiah. The gematria of a word or phrase was its essence; thus, if the gematria of two words or phrases is the same, they are fundamentally the same. Given this, the fact that “Sabbatai Zevi” and “the true messiah” have equal value was irrefutable proof in Sabbatai Zevi’s mind that he was, in fact, the long-awaited messiah.

Messiahship

This raises an important question: who, exactly, is the messiah supposed to be, and what did Jews of the time believe he would do? According to Scholem, messianic ideas in Judaism revolve around two the central themes of catastrophe and utopia.¹¹ Sabbatai Zevi’s movement, like other Jewish messianic movements, would thus be shaped to fit these two conceptions of messiahship.

In the catastrophic view of redemption, the messiah comes at the end of a long series of catastrophes and sets the world aright. What distinguishes this trope is that “there is no continuity between the present and the messianic era;”¹² that is to say, the arrival of the messiah is a total break with all history up until that point. The messiah arrives and leads the Jews in war against their former oppressors; in the end, the gentiles are overthrown and the Jews rule over the Land of Israel. In this case, the messiah’s main function is a kingly one; he leads his people to victory in battle, establishes a kingdom, and sets up self-rule.

¹⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* 235

¹¹ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 8

¹² *Ibid.*, 9

A different view is at play in utopian ideas of messianic redemption. Here, the messianic age is a true “golden age, including miraculous manifestations and a radical transformation of the natural order.”¹³ In this golden age, the Jews would be free to study Torah and learn halakha in peace, untroubled by gentile overlords. This idea of redemption has a much different timeframe. Rather than a series of wars which, while long, were nonetheless a discrete time, the focus here is on the messianic age of freedom. The messiah is thus important not so much for his personal battles and strivings as for the age he creates or brings about.

Utopian visions, however, had a strong potential for conflict with traditional law. Some authorities held that halakha was unchanging and would continue to exist after the coming of the messiah; others believed that the messianic age would bring about a total transformation of the Law, permitting much that had been forbidden and altering the very structure of Judaism. The idea that the current law was somehow imperfect, tainted by the impurity of the pre-messianic age, was held by some kabbalists¹⁴, and certainly had an influence on popular ideas of messiahship and redemption.

This utopian vision of the radical transformation of the law seems to be the basis for much of Sabbatai Zevi’s thought. He believed himself to have ushered in the messianic age, and with it the reversal or negation of many traditional prohibitions. Although his followers ascribed some miracles to him, Sabbatai Zevi’s main idea does not seem to have been one of catastrophic conflict. He did not rally armies or make moves towards political independence from the Ottoman Empire (which probably saved him from being executed); rather, he focused on what his coming meant in terms of the traditional law.

¹³ Ibid., 10

¹⁴ Scholem, , *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 11

Seen in this light, Sabbatai Zevi's antinomianism has both a strong historical precedent and a certain intellectual genealogy. The idea that the messianic age would be qualitatively different from the rest of history in law no less than in political facts was already popular; from this, others had already concluded that the messiah would change some of the halakha. Given this, Sabbatai Zevi's purposeful violations of what his contemporaries saw as normative Jewish law takes on a certain performative sense. He was proving his messiahship by demonstrating that the law had changed; if the law was to change in the messianic age, and the law had changed, then the messianic age must have begun and Sabbatai Zevi must be the messiah.

This explicates some of Sabbatai Zevi's "strange behavior," but it also provides a potential explanation or justification for Donme apostasy. The coming of the messianic age was supposed to produce a "messianic Torah;" a new set of laws would arise even as the old were negated. The laws of the "Created World" or pre-messianic age were intended for an era of subjugation and hardship; they were thus unsuited for the epoch of holiness and liberation following the arrival of the redeemer. He would bring a new law, a guide to living in the messianic era that differed drastically from the old ways. However, this produces a gap; there is a time when the old laws have been abrogated, but the new revelation is not yet complete. To the Sabbateans, the only guide in the interim would logically be the behavior of the messiah; since he was to produce the new Torah, it would make sense to believe that his actions were already guided by it. Thus, if Sabbatai Zevi converted to Islam, the messianic Torah must not forbid Jews from nominally becoming Muslims (or might even enjoin this as a positive commandment). This provides a justification for apostasy, and thus allowed the new community to see itself as a continuance of Jewish tradition instead of a radical break.

All of this comes together in the defining feature of Sabbatean messianism: the unique place of Sabbatai Zevi as a quasi-divine redemptive figure. The messianic kabbalah created by Sabbatai Zevi and his disciple Nathan of Gaza “identified the Messiah with a divine power, a sefirah;”¹⁵ he was a connection between the human and the divine, sharing in attributes of both. This divine power was physical as well as spiritual; the entirety of the personality of Sabbatai Zevi partook of divinity. This was the most radically novel element of Sabbatean mysticism; while other kabbalists had spoken of the mystic as approaching the realm of the divine, none had ever identified the divine with the physical body of the messiah.¹⁶ This infusion of the divine into the body and soul of Sabbatai Zevi was to have long-term ramifications for the development of the various Donme sects, as each laid claim to a portion of this messianic inheritance.

Sabbatai Zevi

Sabbtai Zevi was born in Smyrna in 1626 to a successful Jewish merchant, Mordecai Zevi. From an early age, he displayed both a passion for religious thought and a tendency towards erratic, unconventional behavior. Sabbatai Zevi received “all the stages of a traditional Jewish education”¹⁷ and showed considerable talent, resulting in his recognition as a rabbi while still in his teens. Throughout his life, Sabbatai continued to debate halakha and maintained a keen interest in normative Jewish law, even while he held that it no longer applied to him.

However, even in his childhood there were signs that Sabbatai Zevi was not entirely like other rabbinical students. After finishing his studies, he isolated himself for a number of years, practicing asceticism and teaching himself kabbalah. Sabbatai retired to a room in his father’s house, practicing self-mortification and attempting to overcome all worldly temptation. At this

¹⁵ Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 199

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 202

¹⁷ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 110

time he experienced terrifying visions of demons, tempting him to leave the path of the law; reports passed on through his followers reveal a strong erotic character to his visions.¹⁸ Sabbatai Zevi's path to kabbalistic knowledge was likewise unusual; rather than learning from a master he was entirely self-taught. Further, he eschewed most of the popular Lurianic texts of his day, choosing instead to read only the *Zohar* and *Qanah* (a kabbalistic biblical commentary). In general, Sabbatai Zevi seems to have held a rather contemptuous view of Lurianic kabbalah, dismissing its meditations and special prayers as superfluous at best. Rather, he focused on devotion, on pouring his soul out before God plainly and clearly.¹⁹

Beginning in his early twenties, Sabbatai Zevi began to manifest the alternating states of exaltation and depression that characterized his entire career. In his elevated state, he prayed ecstatically, believing himself "to be floating in the air."²⁰ He transgressed both social norms and contemporary interpretations Jewish law, feeling himself to be guided by a supernatural impulse that commanded him to behave in an irrational fashion. He wrote frantically, eating little and sleeping even less. On a mystical level, Sabbatai Zevi felt himself to be overcoming the power of sin and evil in the world and receiving direct illumination from God. This manic energy was felt by those around him; contemporaries compared looking at him in this state to "looking into a fire."²¹

Sabbatai Zevi also suffered from corresponding fits of deep depression, wherein he was unable to leave his house or even to read. At such times, he believed that God had withdrawn Himself from him, and that heaven was closed to him. Sabbatai Zevi's followers likened him to Job, whose sufferings were a test of his holiness; their leader's anguish served to reinforce his

¹⁸ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 113

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 127

²¹ *Ibid.*, 132

mystical claims rather than undermine them. Sabbatai Zevi himself adopted popular rumors of his “foolishness” or mental illness as signs of his favored status; as Scholem says, “he who appeared in the eyes of the world as an utter fool was in his own eyes the holiest of saints.”²²

The process by which Sabbatai Zevi came to believe himself to be the messiah (and make this claim to others) appears to have been a fairly long one. As early as 1648, he had a vision of the patriarchs anointing him with oil as the messiah. At this point, however, Sabbatai Zevi made no explicit messianic claims; rather, he began to “pronounce the holy name of God”²³ during his ecstatic states. Pronouncing the true name of God (the Tetragrammaton) has traditionally been forbidden to all but the High Priest, who himself was only to speak it when in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, it became forbidden for any Jew to say the name under any circumstance. Thus, Sabbatai Zevi’s utterances were in direct opposition to rabbinic law. This, while clearly unacceptable to the local rabbinic authorities, was not in and of itself tantamount to claiming the role of Messiah; it appears to have been more of an assertion that a new era was at hand than any particular claim of personal status by Sabbatai Zevi.²⁴

This ushered in a period of what were perceived as escalating transgressive actions on Sabbatai Zevi’s part, ultimately leading to his exile from Smyrna (sometime between 1651 and 1654). While in a manic state, he would not only recite the name of God but perform other unusual ritual transgressions²⁵, the details of which unfortunately appear to be lost. Finally, Sabbatai Zevi went too far; he took a group of disciples into the mountains and attempted to command the sun to halt. For a day they prayed, with Sabbatai Zevi confidently announcing that

²² Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 138

²³ *Ibid.*, 142

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148

the sun would respond to his commands. This blasphemy earned him the censure of the local religious court; Sabbatai responded by declaring himself superior to the court and excommunicating them.²⁶ This impudent response earned him excommunication and banishment from Smyrna. Other contemporaries recount that Sabbatai aroused the ire of the Smyrna community by “proclaim[ing] himself a prophet,”²⁷ and that it was this that led to his excommunication and banishment.

In any case, after his banishment from Smyrna Sabbatai proceeded to Salonika, at the time “the largest Jewish community in the Turkish Empire and an important center of rabbinic and kabbalistic learning.”²⁸ Here he established himself once more as a scholar and a kabbalist, and managed to maintain a normal life, at least in the beginning. However, his mania soon returned, and with it his transgressions of the law; once more he pronounced the divine name. Further, he staged an elaborate wedding ceremony and banquet, to which he invited all of the leading rabbis of the city, wherein he married a Torah scroll. According to Scholem, this ceremony appears to have had a profound personal impact on Sabbatai Zevi; for the rest of his life he spoke of the Torah as a bride and himself as its bridegroom.²⁹ Once again, Sabbatai’s odd behavior was deemed as too transgressive to allow him to remain, and he was banished from Salonika sometime before 1658.

From there he traveled throughout Greece for a time, finally arriving in Constantinople in 1658. As in Salonika, Sabbatai Zevi managed at first to control his impulses, appearing to be nothing more than a competent rabbinic scholar. As such, he made friends in the city and was generally considered to be a respectable man. Unfortunately, this return to normality was not to

²⁶ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 148-9

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 149

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160

last, and his behavior became gradually more and more bizarre, culminating in an incident in which Sabbatai “bought a very large fish, dressed it up like a baby, and put it into a cradle.”³⁰ Apparently, this had profound significance to Sabbatai Zevi; just as a child slowly grew to adulthood, so too would Israel’s salvation be an ongoing process. The fish symbolized the astrological sign of Pisces, under which redemption was to occur. The rabbis were not convinced; they saw this act as the formation of some strange new cult. For this and other transgressions, the rabbinical court ordered him flogged and excommunicated.³¹

It also appears that Sabbatai Zevi may have had visions during his wanderings in which he was given a new law, supplanting that of Moses. This law primarily consisted of “the sanctification of transgressions and their elevation to the level of positive religious precepts.”³² That is to say, Sabbatai Zevi did not merely violate normative Jewish law; he held that such violation was in fact sacred and necessary. This was based on the kabbalistic doctrine of the “Gathering of the Sparks,” in which the material world holds sparks of the divine essence. However, such sparks are encased in “kelippoth” (shells) of materiality. The task of observant Jews is to redeem these sparks by extracting them from their material prisons and returning them to proper holiness.

In Lurianic formulations of this, the task of redeeming the world is accomplished through blessings and ritual observations, which elevate the mundane to a divine level. Sabbatai Zevi, however, took this logic one step further; he was to liberate the divine sparks encased in sins and ritual transgressions. In essence, to not sin would have been in and of itself a sin; he was required to transgress divine law in order to redeem the world. This placed him as separate from and

³⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 161

³¹ *Ibid.*, 161

³² *Ibid.*, 163

above rabbinic Judaism; its laws were intended for the ordinary believer, not for a Messiah whose task transcended all earthly boundaries. As the Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi felt himself to transcend the established rabbinic religion and to operate in an entirely new space.

In all this, it is important to note that Sabbatai Zevi only transgressed Jewish law while in his manic, ecstatic state. Indeed, in his periods of normalcy Sabbatai deeply regretted his excesses and followed a path of asceticism and self-mortification. He himself was unable to comprehend the reasons for his actions when the spirit left him; the entire affair seems to have been deeply bewildering and somewhat frightening for him. This pattern of wild exaltation followed by a return to the ordinary life of a holy and respectable man led many to see him as mad, and earned him a certain degree of sympathy for his transgressions in each town (at least at first). However, as his mania continued and his actions became more and more transgressive, town after town banished him as a threat to communal order.

After his expulsion from Constantinople, Sabbatai Zevi returned to his native Smyrna. While this apparent violation of his exile apparently was not considered noteworthy by the local authorities, he soon returned to his strange actions, once more causing a scandal. Once again, Sabbatai travelled on, eventually reaching Egypt, where he became friendly with Raphael Joseph, the head of the Egyptian Jews, treasurer, and head tax collector. Joseph was apparently well known for “his generosity and his penchant for extreme ascetic piety,”³³ which may have endeared Sabbatai to him.

Following his stay in Egypt, Sabbatai Zevi headed for Palestine, settling for a year in Jerusalem. There he was again noted for his “ascetic saintliness and shockingly strange

³³ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 178

actions,”³⁴ a combination that would define him throughout life. For this he was repeatedly flogged, although as a whole he seems to have been relatively well-respected. His position was secure enough that he was sent by the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem to Cairo to ask for donations to help pay off the Turkish governor, who was extorting money from the Jews of Palestine. Sabbatai was an ideal choice of emissary, due to both his charm and his friendly relationship with Raphael Joseph.

The Sabbatean Movement

Up until 1665, Sabbatai Zevi had no true following. While he attracted a few sympathizers in each town he lived in, there was no real movement, and these followers inevitably fell away when he was censured by the rabbinic authorities. This changed, however, when he traveled to Gaza and met Nathan of Gaza, who was to become his chief prophet. Nathan was a popular preacher, who was believed to have the power to determine the innermost secrets of people’s souls and tell them what they must do to expiate their sins. Before meeting Sabbatai Zevi, Nathan had already attracted a following in Gaza; Jews sought him out to heal their souls.³⁵ In an ecstatic state, Nathan pronounced Sabbatai Zevi the messiah, the first time anyone other than Sabbatai Zevi had done so.³⁶ In so doing, he sparked the true beginning of Sabbateanism as a movement; in 1665, Sabbatai Zevi proclaimed himself the messiah. Nathan began to preach of Sabbatai Zevi’s messiahship, attracting huge crowds; he told them to repent and follow Sabbatai Zevi, God’s chosen reformer.³⁷

³⁴ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 180

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 213

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 207

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 216

This culminated in a great meeting on the 17th of Tammuz (although some sources attribute certain events to the 17th of Sivan), where Sabbatai Zevi held court over a throng of believers, his face “shining with a great radiance.”³⁸ The date is particularly important as the traditional date of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem; rabbinic Judaism thus observes it as the principal fast day of the liturgical calendar. Sabbatai Zevi, however, inverted the meaning of the day; he declared a feast of celebration, glorying in his coming as the messiah. He chose twelve of his followers to represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel, a bold move that symbolically represented the messiah’s ingathering of the scattered Jews. Finally, he commanded that the traditional priestly blessings were to be recited at the afternoon prayer “not only by the priests but also by three nonpriestly Israelites.”³⁹ All of this served as an inversion of traditional norms; this inversion would later come to constitute a key element of faith for the Donme, especially the Karakas.

This was followed at later date with a series of larger and more grandiose claims by Sabbatai Zevi, mostly based upon gematria. Gematria, a sort of numerology, is a kabbalistic method in which Hebrew letters are assigned numerical value; the calculating of the number of names and phrases supposedly reveals mystical truths. Firstly, he announced that the gematria of his name was identical to that of the full spelling of the divine name Shadday (one of the names of God in the Torah), as well as that of “the true messiah.”⁴⁰ Most daringly, he proclaimed that his name and the phrase “God moved” in “the spirit of God moved upon the waters”⁴¹ were

³⁸ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 222

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 223

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 235

⁴¹ Genesis 1:2

numerical equivalents, hinting that his spirit moved with God at the very beginning of creation; the verse became in his mind “and the spirit of Sabbatai Zevi moved upon the waters”.⁴²

From this Sabbatai Zevi began to make even more daring announcements. He identified himself personally with God, telling one follower that “there is no division, distinction, or separation whatever between me and Him.”⁴³ Sabbatai Zevi even went so far as to sign his letters “I am the Lord your God Sabbatai Zevi.”⁴⁴ While his followers accepted this formulation, it incensed his rabbinic opposition. To them, Sabbatai Zevi was a dangerous blasphemer, and one who had clearly strayed from true Judaism. This view was strengthened when it was discovered that he “had caused ten Israelites to eat *heleb*, ‘fat of the kidney’ and had actually ‘recited a benediction over this ritually forbidden fat: Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who permittest that which is forbidden.’”⁴⁵

This was outrageous to the rabbis on several fronts. Eating kidney fat is not only forbidden according to the laws of kashrut (kosher), it falls under a special category of sins that cause the soul to be cut off from the people of Israel.⁴⁶ The other sins in this category are almost all sexual in nature, especially forms of incest; thus, the act had special symbolism as the overturning of all prohibitions, including those considered most defiling. Driving this home was Sabbatai Zevi’s benediction, making explicit his belief that God, through him, was suspending ritual law.⁴⁷ It also served as a final slap in the face of the rabbinic establishment, for while a Jew is permitted to eat forbidden foods under duress, to make a blessing over them is considered

⁴² Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 234-5

⁴³ Israel Hazzan, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 235

⁴⁴ Sabbatai Zevi, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 235

⁴⁵ Moses b, Habib, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 242

⁴⁶ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 243

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 242

tantamount to throwing one's disobedience in God's face. It is a declaration of disdain for Jewish law, and thus was a perfect gesture for Sabbatai Zevi to demonstrate his antinomianism.

Meanwhile, Sabbateanism began to spread out from Gaza, where almost all the Jews followed Sabbatai Zevi. The believers wrote letters to other Jewish communities, starting with those in Egypt, Smyrna, and Aleppo, urging them to follow the newly-revealed messiah.⁴⁸ Sabbatai Zevi himself, along with some trusted companions, set out for Jerusalem, planning to rebuild the Temple; he even appointed a new high priest, Rabbi Najara of Gaza. Unfortunately for him, the rabbis in Jerusalem were not well-disposed towards one they saw as a dangerous heretic; they quashed his plans for a new temple and denounced him to local authorities for sedition. While this failed, it nonetheless demonstrates the growing tension between Sabbateans and the rabbinic establishment.

In Jerusalem, the rabbis were split, with many supporting Sabbatai Zevi and at least as many as his most vociferous opponents. Nathan of Gaza weighed heavily in his favor, as many of the rabbis were convinced that he was a true prophet, which would indicate that his declaration of Sabbatai Zevi's messiahship must also be true.⁴⁹ However, his opponents prevailed, in no small part due to the supposed messiah's blasphemy in eliding himself and God; Sabbatai Zevi was formally excommunicated by the rabbinic council in Jerusalem. Following this, the rabbis of Constantinople issued an edict proclaiming that "the man who spreads these innovations is a heretic, and whoever kills him will be accounted as one who has saved many

⁴⁸ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 238

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 244

souls, and the hand that strikes him down without delay will be blessed in the eyes of God and man.”⁵⁰

The ban, however, seems to have had no effect on the continued growth of the Sabbatean movement or on Sabbatai Zevi himself. From Jerusalem he travelled to Aleppo, drawing large crowds of worshippers. The populace seems to have totally supported him; many ““decided to cease all business, to put on sackcloth and ashes, and devote themselves to penitence, charity, and prayer so as to be worthy to behold the fulfillment of prophecy.””⁵¹ The movement spread quickly throughout the world; by the end of 1665 there were believer communities throughout North Africa, as well as in Italy and the Netherlands. The movement spread largely through letters sent by believers to their contacts abroad, telling them of Sabbatai Zevi’s miracles and entreating them to follow him as the messiah. By 1666, the movement had spread throughout the East and most of Europe.

Sabbatai Zevi travelled to Smyrna, where his arrival caused great controversy; the city was split between his supporters and his detractors. This did not cause him great concern; he acted like a king, bearing a royal scepter and attended by rabbis holding up his robe, carrying flowers, and followed by “a trusted believer, a rabbi, who carried Sabbatai’s comb in its case.”⁵² Like the Turkish sultan, he had carpets laid out in front of him, so that his feet would not be sullied by contact with the ground. In a telling scene, upon being informed that one of his chief opponents was praying in the most important synagogue in town, Sabbatai Zevi ordered his expulsion. When the town elders refused, Sabbatai Zevi smashed the synagogue doors with an axe and had his followers occupy the synagogue, delivering great speeches about his power and

⁵⁰ R. Yomtob b Yaqar, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 249

⁵¹ De la Croix, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 258

⁵² Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 393

the appointed redemption of Israel.⁵³ Finally, Sabbatai Zevi declared himself king of all Jews, ruler of all the Earth. A time of festivals and banquets was declared to celebrate his coronation, at which he divided up all the nations of the Earth to his chief followers, naming them as kings. In the midst of all this elation, Sabbatai Zevi decided to leave for Constantinople, accompanied by four of his new kings.

Arrest and Conversion

This move, however, proved to be a grave mistake. The rabbis of the city warned the Ottoman government that Sabbatai Zevi was preaching sedition and making claims to rulership over the empire; on this basis, he was arrested.⁵⁴ Turkish guards met his ship as it came in to port, and “he was brought ashore in chains”⁵⁵ to face the judgment of the Grand Vizier. After three days, he met with the vizier, who handed down a sentence of imprisonment; the fact that Sabbatai Zevi was not immediately killed was held by his followers to be a great miracle and proof of his exalted office.⁵⁶ Following a large bribe, Sabbatai Zevi was moved to more comfortable quarters; in order to avoid any possibility of unrest, the vizier ordered him removed to a fortress in Gallipoli.

Once Sabbatai Zevi had been arrested, his opponents charged him with lewd and immoral behavior; he was said to have fornicated with many women, taking virgins from their fathers and, at least in one case, a betrothed woman from her fiancé.⁵⁷ Faced with charges of immorality, Sabbatai Zevi was brought to Adrianople to face the sultan’s cabinet, while the sultan watched from above. There he was charged with immorality, sedition, and fomenting rebellion; he

⁵³ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 398-401

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 434

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 448

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 450

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 670

formally denied any pretension to the messianic title. Finally, the council decided to give him a choice: recant his Judaism and embrace Islam, produce a miracle, or die. For his miracle, he was to “be stripped naked and set as a mark to his [the sultan’s] dextrous Archers; if the arrows passed not through his body, but that his flesh and skin was proof, like Armour, then he would believe him to be the Messiah and the person whom God had designed to those Dominions.”⁵⁸ Faced with this stark choice, Sabbatai Zevi broke down and converted to Islam. The Jewish messiah was now a Muslim.

Beginnings of the Donme

Turning now from the Sabbateans as a whole to the group which presently concerns us, the Donme, it is once again necessary to give a brief historical overview of their beginnings. If the Sabbatean movement provided the ground for the Donme, it was the apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi which proved their ideological and historical foundation. For the history of the early Donme and for some of their later developments I rely heavily on Cengiz Sisman’s doctoral dissertation, *A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court: Sabbatai Sevi and the Emergence of a Judeo-Islamic Community (1666-1720)*. Unless otherwise stated, historical assertions are taken from his work; primary sources are cited in Sisman’s translation.

Sabbatai Zevi converted to Islam in 1666, in order to save himself from execution. This, of course, created enormous problems for his followers, who believed in him as the Jewish messiah. He was expected to liberate the Jews from all earthly oppression and gather them in to Israel; instead, Sabbatai Zevi submitted to the power of the sultan, forswearing Judaism and

⁵⁸ Rycout, quoted Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 679

accepting exile. This turn of events was utterly shocking; “it was simply inconceivable that he should apostatize.”⁵⁹

This, naturally, led most of his former believers to fall away; “the messiah’s apostasy plainly and conclusively proved that they had all been mistaken” (Scholem 695) in believing him to be the final redeemer. Many former believers, understandably bitter at the dashing of their hopes, pronounced Sabbatai Zevi to be a devil or a sorcerer, in league with dark powers to bring ruin to faithful Jews. It became popular, for a time, to compose open letters heaping scorn and hatred on Sabbatai Zevi; doing so helped the community close ranks and reform as a single Judaism once again, aiming at “restoring peace in the synagogues.”⁶⁰

However, some of Sabbatai Zevi’s followers were not dissuaded by his apparent betrayal. Most of these held to the belief that he had been taken to heaven at the moment of his supposed apostasy; the man that now lived as a Muslim was merely a simulacrum, not the true Sabbatai Zevi. The messiah had been taken from the earth, but he would return again at the end of days; thus, there was no need to pay heed to the man who had replaced him. Others held that his conversion had been a mere show; he still did not eat forbidden food but instead subsisted on bread and fruit, or even manna from heaven.

In general, Sabbatai Zevi’s remaining Jewish followers were careful not to outwardly distinguish themselves overmuch from other Jews, and in many cases did not truly see themselves as separate; they were “essentially pious and orthodox Jews who differed from the rest in believing that the messianic redemption had already begun.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 694

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 703

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 735

There was furthermore a third, smaller group: those who imitated their messiah and followed Sabbatai Zevi into apostasy. This group was always rather small in number; even after his apostasy, Sabbatai Zevi rarely enjoined upon his followers to convert to Islam. These followers gathered in Salonika after Sabbatai Zevi's death in 1676; they included his wife Aisha and his brother-in-law Yakub Celebi. These converts expressed a firm belief that Sabbatai Zevi's apostasy was preordained and purposeful, rather than a mere yielding to pressure and fear. The Turks gave them the name "Donme," (converts) stressing their recent acceptance of Islam; the community itself preferred the Hebrew term *ma'aminim* (believers).⁶²

A key argument for this belief was the kabbalistic notion of the "gathering of the sparks," which holds that sparks of the divine essence are present throughout the world, entrapped in the physical forms which we perceive. It is the task of Jews to liberate these sparks, gathering them together and reuniting them with God. Sabbatai Zevi was thus held by his Salonikan followers to have entered Islam for the purpose of redeeming the sparks trapped within it; it was their duty to follow his example and convert, so as to be able to fully liberate the divine essence.

Sabbatai Zevi died in exile in 1676. The community of believers in Salonika had an immediate issue to resolve following his death: who was to lead the movement now that Sabbatai Zevi, their leader and the central figure of their belief, was no longer alive. First to take control was Yakub Celebi, the brother-in-law of Sabbatai Zevi. He claimed to have been given a letter by Sabbatai Zevi before the latter's death naming him as "halife" or successor to Sabbatai Zevi's authority.⁶³ Yakub Celebi already had a strong position in the Sabbatean community; his sister was the messiah's wife, and both he and his father were respected leaders. These connections

⁶² Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "Donme"

⁶³ Cengiz Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court: Sabbatai Sevi and the emergence of a Judeo-Islamic community (1666-1720)" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2004), 224

helped him to establish his legitimacy and that of the supposed letter from Sabbatai Zevi sanctioning his authority.

Yakub Celebi's ascendancy was further ensured by Aisha's declaration that the soul of Sabbatai Zevi had transmigrated into his body. Kabbalistic theory holds that souls can be reborn (in fact, must be reborn) in new bodies; the Sabbateans extended this to include the possibility of the soul entering another body long after birth. Aisha testified before the elders of the community that she had observed her brother undergo this process for three days, after which he was reborn as Sabbatai Zevi.⁶⁴ Yakub Celebi thus established himself for a time as the ruler of the Donme community.

Right away, the Donme faced suspicions of heresy. The local populace, including many officials, believed that their conversions were insincere; they were thus under exceedingly close scrutiny at all times. In order to avert suspicion, Yakub Celebi decided to implement a policy of normative Islamization. Trusted members of the community (whose loyalty was beyond reproach) were to integrate into local Sufi orders. The community as a whole made a great show of following Islamic practice; they attended the mosque for noon and afternoon prayers, and all holidays were celebrated with appropriate enthusiasm and ceremony.⁶⁵

Further, several men were chosen to embark on Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). This, at the time, was done only by very observant Muslims, since the journey from Turkey took several months and was notoriously dangerous. Internally, the community followed a set of 18 principles and commandments supposedly issued by Sabbatai Zevi to govern their behavior and belief;

⁶⁴ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 226

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 229

these were codified by Yakub Celebi and his advisors in the early years of the Donme (for the text of the 18 Principles see Appendix B).

Besides compiling the set of 18 commandments, Yakub Celebi instituted a number of other rules and policies governing all aspects of communal life from birth to death. He formed an administrative committee to oversee the community and enforce its regulations; all decisions, however, were ultimately in his power. His rules combined elements of Sufism, Sunni Islam, and Judaism, with interpretation and guidance from the teachings of Sabbatai Zevi. The code as a whole was pragmatic, adopting whatever parts of each legal code Yakub Celebi found to be the most useful.

This bureaucratic method of administration was effective, but some felt it did not truly capture the essence of the Sabbatean movement. Mustafa Celebi, one of the leading elders of the community, particularly felt that Yakub Celebi had gone too far in accommodating to Islam; his theological and legal views were “lax and deviant.”⁶⁶ The final straw appears to have been when Yakub Celebi allowed a man to divorce his unfaithful wife, as was the Islamic custom; Sabbatai Zevi had forbidden divorce to all Donme. Mustafa Celebi announced that Yakub Celebi had abandoned Sabbateanism in favor of Islam, that he no longer followed the teachings of Sabbatai Zevi. Mustafa Celebi began to gather followers who believed in the original purity of Sabbatai Zevi’s message, rebelling against Yakub Celebi’s perceived assimilationism and abandonment of the Sabbatean cause. These purists called themselves *muminler*, Turkish for true believers; they denounced Yakub Celebi as a usurper and a false claimant to the messiah’s authority.

⁶⁶ Sisman, “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 257

In his place the muminler raised up Osman, a boy born shortly after Sabbatai Zevi's death. They held that the messiah's soul had transmigrated into the boy; he was therefore the only legitimate spiritual successor to Sabbatai Zevi. Osman became renowned as a miracle worker, supposedly able to effect healings and displaying a wisdom far greater than his years. This attracted many of the Donme to his side; the muminler (or Karakas, as they became known) were soon by far the majority within the Salonika community.⁶⁷

Unlike the Yakubi, the Karakas rejected assimilation and held fast to the spiritual principles of Sabbatai Zevi. While the Yakubi shaved their beards and dressed in Turkish style, the Karakas continued to dress as they always had, attracting a great deal of suspicion from the Muslim community. Internally, they held the 18 Principles to be paramount, giving little or no credence to Islamic law. The two groups quickly enacted total separation; they erected their own mosques and purchased their own burial grounds, and members of each community were forbidden from interacting with the other. The sectarian division thus became permanent, lasting until the Donme as a whole fractured in the 20th century.

Yakub Celebi, in keeping with his assimilation to Islam, decided to undertake the Hajj. He left the Yakubi community in the care of his brother, Huseyin Celebi, and took with him Mustafa Efendi, another Yakubi leader. Yakub Celebi never reached Mecca, however; stories differ as to the exact place, time, and cause of his death. The commonly-accepted narrative appears to be that he was crushed by a camel in or near Alexandria. Regardless, Mustafa Efendi carried on in his pilgrimage, returning afterwards to Salonika.

⁶⁷ Marc David Baer, *The Donme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010], 8

Upon his return, Mustafa Efendi produced papers allegedly from Yakub Celebi pronouncing him the new leader of the Yakubi. Furthermore, he claimed that he and Yakub Celebi had journeyed to Mount Sinai; there, Yakub Celebi, in imitation of Moses, remained at the peak for seven days in solitude. When he returned, glowing with divine power, he informed Mustafa Efendi that he had to leave the world for a time, and that he placed responsibility for leading the Yakubi on Mustafa Efendi.⁶⁸

While some believers privately doubted these claims, the elders of the community accepted them as the only way to avoid fracturing the Donme further. Mustafa Efendi was thus enshrined as the second leader of the Yakubi. It is important to note that while the narrative justifying his ascension was, like that of Yakub Celebi, at least partly mystical, he did not make the same degree of claim to messianic power. Mustafa Efendi was in no way considered to be a reincarnation of the messiah or the inheritor of his destiny; rather, he functioned as a sort of deputy, safeguarding the Yakubi for his master's return. Reflecting this, he (and the Yakubi leaders after him) was titled *halife*,⁶⁹ caliph, in imitation of the early leaders of Islam who were to lead the Muslims in the Prophet's place after his death.

Like Yakub Celebi, Mustafa Efendi worked to establish communal institutions for the Donme. He created strict rules against interaction with the Karakas; Yakubis were forbidden to marry them, and even the suggestion of doing so was enough to excommunicate the head of one Yakubi family. Mustafa Efendi established tight social control over the Yakubi Donme; alms

⁶⁸ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 266

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 266

were centrally collected and distributed to those he found to be needy, begging was absolutely forbidden, and couples had to ask Mustafa Efendi's permission before marrying.⁷⁰

Mustafa Efendi also promoted integration with the broader Ottoman society, again following the example of Yakub Celebi. Both men and women were required to dress in the Ottoman style; this served not only to aid integration but also as a further boundary between them and the Karakas, who did not shave their heads after the Turkish fashion. Both genders were required to attend daily prayers at local mosques, so as to dispel any notion of insincerity in their Islam. This assimilationism served the Yakubi Donme well, as they rapidly began to attain positions of power in both local government and Sufi orders.⁷¹

While the Yakubis established institutions and formalized their religion, the Karakas were in a period of turmoil. They had split with the Yakubi for their belief in the immanence of the messiah, yet years went by without Sabbatai Zevi's return. Osman Baba, their nominal spiritual leader, was held to have some messianic qualities, but had never been formally proclaimed the messiah.⁷² It appears that there were some doubts within the community as to his messiahship; some held him to be the reincarnation of Sabbatai Zevi and thus the messiah, while others continued to hold to the notion of the original Sabbatai Zevi's physical return.

Finally, the other main Karakas leader, Mustafa Celebi, declared that when Osman Baba turned forty he would become the messiah. Forty, for the Donme, was highly symbolic; Sabbatai Zevi declared himself to be the messiah at forty, the prophet Muhammad was said to receive his revelation at forty, and numerous kabbalistic and Sufi sects considered forty to be the age of true

⁷⁰ Ibid., 267

⁷¹ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 267

⁷² Ibid., 278

maturity.⁷³ Most of the community received this news with great joy; it was, after all, the messiah who had founded their group and who they had been awaiting this whole time.⁷⁴

Mustafa Celebi was held in high esteem; it was he, after all, who had led the Karakas in the split from the leadership of Yakub Celebi. He gathered the Karakas leaders and “told them that the soul of Sabbatai Zevi had transmigrated to Osman;” Osman Baba was the long-awaited messiah.⁷⁵

Osman Baba led the Karakas for a few years after his fortieth birthday and Mustafa Celebi’s proclamation of his messiahship. He relied largely on Mustafa Celebi for support, as his leadership was somewhat controversial. A group of the Karakas, led by Ibrahim Agha, refused to accept anyone other than Sabbatai Zevi as the true messiah. They had split from the Yakubi when the latter had accepted Yakub Celebi as the inheritor of the messiah’s power, and they felt that Osman Baba was no less a usurper. When Osman Baba died suddenly a few years after taking office (the exact date of his death is unknown) tensions came to a head.⁷⁶

At first, the elders who supported Osman Baba tried to cover up his death, believing that he would shortly return from the dead and retake control of the group. However, the body began to rot in the heat, so a secret burial was arranged; “two days passed, but Osman Baba did not show his miracle by opening his eyes. The days were hot, and it was possible that the corpse would soon reek very badly... they buried him and returned before dawn.”⁷⁷ However, Ibrahim Agha learned of Osman Baba’s death and spread it around the community, claiming it as a final proof that he had been an ordinary man, not the messiah.

⁷³ Sisman, “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 278

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ayhan, quoted Sisman “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 278

⁷⁶ Sisman, “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 281

⁷⁷ Ayhan, quoted Sisman “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 281

While many supported Ibrahim Agha, a larger segment still believed that Osman Baba would return. Ibrahim Agha proposed a simple solution to determine if he had been the messiah: unearth the body and see if it had rotted. The Karakas elders refused, saying that they would not desecrate the tomb of the messiah for an unbeliever. In fact, they maintained, Osman Baba was not truly dead. Like Sabbatai Zevi before him, he had simply removed himself from the world and would return to bring about the final redemption. However, the matter could not be decided peacefully, and the two parties nearly came to blows.⁷⁸

Finally, it was decided that Osman Baba would be exhumed and his body examined. So great was the tension between the two sides that the Yakubi, enemies to both, were called in as the only possible neutral party to exhume the corpse. As Ibrahim Agha had predicted, Osman Baba was decomposing; he “forcibly took the ring from his finger, and brought it to the meeting as proof that they had opened the grave” and found nothing supernatural about it.⁷⁹ This exhumation, and the display of the ring as proof of Osman Baba’s decay, proved a crucial turning point for the Karakas, demonstrating as it did the earthly nature of a man who had claimed divine power.

Bruce Lincoln refers to such revelations in the context of rebellions against the Catholic Church as profanophanies, “a revelation of the profanity, temporality, and corruption inherent to someone or something.”⁸⁰ In his model, spiritual and earthly incorruptibility are linked; holy beings’ bodies are not supposed to decay but to “partake of eternity;”⁸¹ their purity of soul creating a purity of body. Thus, to demonstrate that a person has decayed is to prove their earthly nature; logically, if a pure person does not decay, then a decayed person cannot have been pure.

⁷⁸ Sisman, “A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court,” 281

⁷⁹ Ayhan, quoted Sisman 283

⁸⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 125

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

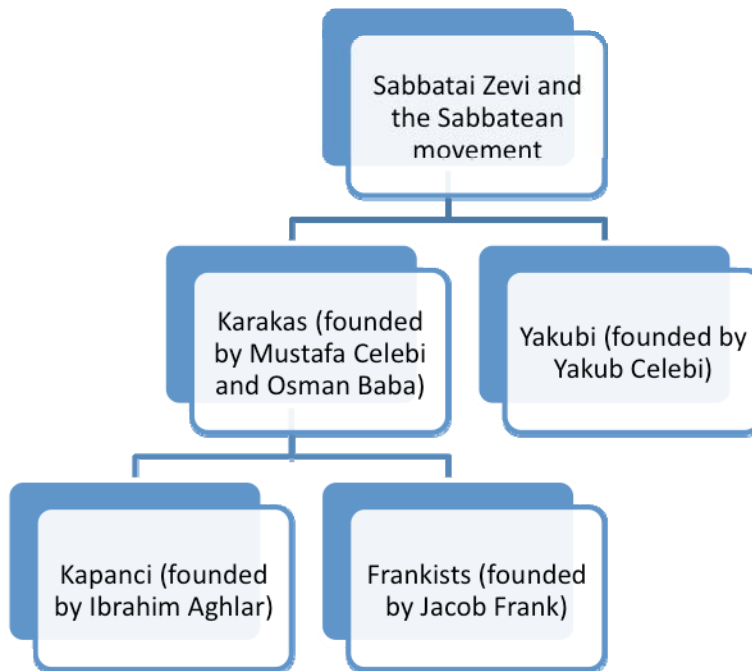
Osman Baba's exhumation is a perfect example of profanophany from a different religious tradition. As with the Catholics Lincoln examined, the Karakas drew an immediate link between the decomposition of Osman Baba and his earthly nature (and thus the negation of his claims); the link between spiritual and temporal incorruptibility was clearly part of their worldview, if perhaps not articulated as such. The crux of Ibrahim Agha's argument was just this, that Osman Baba was "no different from other men, but equally subject to death, time, and decay."⁸² The revolting spectacle of Osman Baba's decaying corpse served as negation not only of claims that he would return but of his messiahship as a whole.

Following this split, Ibrahim Agha denounced Osman Baba and declared that none but Sabbatai Zevi could be the messiah. The Karakas split, with a large group following Ibrahim Agha; these were known as the Ibrahim Aghlar, later called the Kapanci.⁸³ The remaining Karakas stayed loyal to Osman Baba and his family. His tomb became a major pilgrimage site; Karakas visited it until they were expelled by the Greeks in 1924. Osman Baba's children and descendants continued to lead the Karakas until the extinction of the group in the 20th century.

⁸² Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 125

⁸³ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 281

Figure 2: Lineage of the Donme



sects

CHAPTER II: Authority, Legitimacy, and Development

It is clear that the three Donme sects had radically different notions of authority, both in terms of what constituted legitimate authority and which individuals could be said to possess it. These different conceptions of authority shaped the factions, causing them to develop in wildly divergent fashions. As the sects changed throughout the centuries, the ripples from their initial attempts to form a coherent authority structure continued to have a major impact.

The Nature of Authority

In order to discuss the role authority had in the shaping of the various Donme sects, it is first necessary to operationalize and define authority. I will do so here in reference to two models: that of general authority presented in Bruce Lincoln's *Authority*, and Max Weber's

conception of charismatic authority, as presented in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Through the use of these two models I propose a functional binary: that of mundane vs charismatic authority. While these two modes of authority share many functional commonalities, their theoretical underpinnings (and thus the experiences of those subject to them) are radically different. It is this difference that shaped the development of the Donme along such divergent lines.

Lincoln defines authority as “the capacity to produce consequential speech, quelling doubts and winning the trust of audiences who they engage.”⁸⁴ It is differentiated from persuasion in that it is not dependant on the quality of the argument itself but rather on the perception of the speaker him- or herself; the audience accepts the speaker’s words without need for convincing. To Lincoln, this hinges on ““the capacity for reasoned elaboration,””⁸⁵ the idea that the speaker could, in, fact, produce a persuasive argument if challenged but does not have to do so in every instance; essentially, the audience is pre-convinced of the rightness of his speech. While this is true of many types of authority, particularly in a modern, rationalist world, I wish to problematize its universality, especially as concerns more mystical or faith-based groups.

Authority is likewise differentiated from pure coercion or obedience based on fear alone. Force is not in and of itself authority; authority depends on the listener acceding to the authority’s demands of their own will. In essence, authority is distinguished by the respect others show it. No one can possess authority in a vacuum; it is a performative entity, bestowed only when the audience judges a speaker to have authority.

⁸⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 4

⁸⁵ Lincoln, *Authority*, 5

This view of authority is both similar to and radically different from Weber's definition of charismatic authority. Weber, like Lincoln, sees authority as performative; "what is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority."⁸⁶ Charismatic authority in Weber's formulation, like all authority in Lincoln's model, is a function of the followers, not the leader; it can only be possessed by others' acknowledgement of its possession.

Beyond this essential core, however, the two models differ greatly. Authority in Lincoln's framework always has some element of rationality; it depends on the presupposition that all of the authority's speech and actions could be logically explained (without ever actually doing so). This, then, is the fundamental characteristic of mundane authority; it is rational and reasonable. At its core, mundane authority is based on logic; the justifications for its existence, though rarely made explicit, are generally systematic and follow a chain of reasoning.

Charismatic authority, on the other hand, is not based on reason, but rather on the belief that the leader is "endowed supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."⁸⁷ This is not a model based on reason; it is not expected that the charismatic figure could actually produce an explanation for his actions. Such an explanation would perhaps even be detrimental to charisma; finding a reasonable explanation for the supernatural would seem to do little but diminish its supernatural character (and thus the basis for charismatic authority).

Further, the focus of the two models is different. Charismatic authority focuses on a single individual: the charismatic leader. While his power is, to be sure, dependant on his followers, this dependency is never acknowledged; charismatic authority is somehow beyond

⁸⁶ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1947], 359

⁸⁷ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 358

structure or control. It is the leader, not the followers, who is the focus; in the discourse surrounding charismatic figures, it is the followers who would be powerless without the leader, not vice-versa. Sabbatai Zevi himself was the epitome of the charismatic leader; his power was divine, beyond the understanding of mortal men. He was the center of his movement, a cosmic figure who was as much supernatural as he was earthly. Sabbateanism, at its core, appears to have been much more about faith than reason: the faith that Sabbatai Zevi was the messiah, and that he would redeem the world.

Mundane authority, on the other hand, is practical and institutional. While it has leaders, what distinguishes it most is (at least the semblance of) order. Systems of mundane authority provide a certain hierarchy, a framework within which everyone subject to that authority fits. Mundane authority, then, is much more focused on the audience than the speaker, the behavior of the ruled rather than the ruler; it concerns itself with ensuring that society functions smoothly. Put plainly, the dichotomy between the two foci is this: with charismatic authority, the audience exists for the sake of the charismatic leader, while a mundane leader exists to bring order to the audience. These different forms of authority were followed to a differing degree by each of the Donme sects; the difference in forms of authority resulted in a wide divergence in organization and outcomes.

The Yakubi: Pragmatists and Politicians

The Yakubi's approach to the transfer of authority was eminently practical. Yakub Celebi was the closest male relative to Sabbatai Zevi; further, he purportedly bore a letter from the messiah nominating him as successor. While claims to Sabbatai Zevi's transmigrated soul certainly played a part in reinforcing his authority, his leadership was founded on more earthly

claims. Yakub Celebi, and the Donme elders who comprised his key advisors, held their positions more from the respect of the community and traditional methods of inheritance and control than through any real theological justification. The key concern in Yakub Celebi's assumption of power, as well as that of his successors, was to minimize disruption and keep the community functioning as smoothly as possible. This pragmatism and desire for stability was to characterize the Yakubi Donme for the remainder of their existence, and played a key role in shaping their development.

In this, the Yakubi serve as exemplars of a mundane model of authority. There is a logic behind the choice of each new leader: stability must be maintained, order established, the community safeguarded. While the leaders may not have had to explain their actions (and in fact enjoyed near-total dominion over the group), there is a sense that their judgments followed a consistent, reasonable pattern. It was precisely this pattern which gave them their uncontested power; the rank and file of the group accepted that the leaders had good reason for their actions.

From the outset, Yakub Celebi moved to bureaucratize authority within the Donme; "he planned to form an administrative organization, so that he could put community members under control"⁸⁸ In keeping with the practical concerns which characterized the Yakubi approach to authority transfer, administrative committees were established to organize communal life more efficiently. This bureaucratic approach resulted in extremely tight social control; even intra-familial or marital disputes had to be settled by the administrative structure.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ayhan, *Son Saat*, quoted Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 232

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Yakub Celebi, in keeping with this pragmatic approach, emphasized outward assimilation with the broader society; they were to “integrate into the larger Islamic community.”⁹⁰ As part of this, Yakubis were to attend all the regular hours of prayer at local mosques and observe Muslim festivals; a selection of those who were able were to “go on the Pilgrimage, and after touching the house of God, to return as Pilgrims during the pilgrimage time.”⁹¹ It is important to note here the social and performative aspect of the Yakubis’ Islamic devotions; those who go on the Hajj are explicitly to return as pilgrims during the pilgrimage time, reinforcing that the purpose of these actions was to demonstrate their sincerity in their newfound religion. Similarly, the goal of attending mosques was to avert suspicion by ensuring that the local Muslim population saw them performing their religious duties.⁹²

This integration was purely practical, reflecting the Yakubi approach to authority. In the transfer of authority, as discussed above, the emphasis was on stability and pragmatism, epitomized by the formal bureaucracy. Both of these dovetail nicely with assimilation into mainstream Ottoman culture. The survival of a suspicious minority is, almost by definition, tumultuous and insecure; its fortunes are at the mercy of the ruling powers. Integrated members of society, on the other hand, have a measure of security; barring vast social upheavals they are unlikely to be disrupted. Thus, the Yakubi completely adopted, at least outwardly, the customs and behavior of mainstream society in order to safeguard their continued existence.

Assimilation, itself a byproduct of a method of authority transfer that emphasized the practical, had a distinct effect on the geographical distribution of the Yakubi. While, like the other sects, the Yakubi preferred to live in close proximity to their co-religionists, this was a

⁹⁰Ibid., 227

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

smaller concern for them; Yakubis were much more scattered than either the Karakas or the Kapanci. This was a direct consequence of assimilation; “that the Yakubi are harder to locate... illustrates Yakubi assimilation into Muslim society.”⁹³ Yakubi leaders settled close to the political elite of Ottoman Salonika, building connections with the ruling families and gaining favor in the political establishment.

The end result of this was that the Yakubi gained a significant amount of power and prestige. Many of them became “city officials and upper-level civil servants;”⁹⁴ Yakubi Donme were able to become governors and military leaders. This, in turn, provided the Yakubi as a whole with no small measure of security; who would dare to attack a group that included so many powerful men? But while assimilation and Islamization provided the Yakubi with avenues to success, success itself led to further assimilation. The Yakubi, uniquely among the Donme, endowed a mosque in the city⁹⁵; this expensive declaration of faith pulled them even more into mainstream Islam.

In general, one can see how the mechanisms set in place with Yakub Celebi’s assumption of authority and routinized in the choosing of his successor affected the development of the Yakubi. His election emphasized pragmatic, worldly concerns above all else, particularly the desire for stability; it was a model of mundane authority. This was translated into an efficient bureaucratic and administrative structure, as well as assimilation and tight integration with mainstream Turkish society. This integration in turn allowed the Yakubi to gain significant political and social power, while at the same time diminishing differences between them and the non-Donme Muslim environment in which they operated.

⁹³ Baer, *The Donme*, 34

⁹⁴ John Freely, *The Lost Messiah: In Search of the Mystical Rabbi Sabbatai Sevi* [New York: Overlook Press, 2003], 221

⁹⁵ Baer, *The Donme*, 40

The Karakas: Mystical Fraternity

As with the Yakubi, the Karakas' method of authority transfer was a key factor in their later development. Here, however, the similarity ends, for in stark opposition to the Yakubi the Karakas eschewed traditional, mundane methods for determining a new leader. They followed instead Osman Baba, who was held to be a reincarnation of Sabbatai Zevi; his soul was the same, born again into a new body but with its messiahship (and purported shades of divinity) intact. This decision was a spiritual one, not practical; Osman Baba was a boy at the time of his election, and was never considered an impressive leader by many Donme⁹⁶. However, to the Karakas, all of this was irrelevant in the face of his possession of the soul of the messiah. Following Osman Baba's death, the community was led by his descendants and centered around his tomb (Freely 220).

An important factor in the development of the Karakas is the role (or rather lack thereof) of rationality in the Karakas' determination of authority, which was firmly established by the exhumation of Osman Baba. The purpose of a profanophany is to render support of the individual so revealed impossible, by showing it to be illogical and irrational; it serves as logical proof that their claims are false. Those who continued to be Karakas after the profanophany, therefore, were rejecting logic as a determinant of authority and truth; mystical truths and faith were more valued than reason. To remain faithful after profanophany, and to on the basis of that faith follow Osman Baba's descendants, was to place the spiritual above the plane of rationality, an outlook that had a major impact on the Karakas' development.

⁹⁶ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 278-279

Over time, the Karakas' views of Osman Baba became even more radical, mirroring Sabbatai Zevi's views of the messiah as not just a man, but as a divine being in his own right, as "God incarnate."⁹⁷ This ties back to Sabbatai Zevi's conceptions of himself, in which the line between man and God is blurred, and the divine comes to fully inhabit the mundane form of the messiah. In this line of reasoning, Osman Baba was no mere man, but a physical vessel containing the essence of God himself. This seems to parallel the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, and may have provided a useful link for Jacob Frank's group of Catholic Karakas Donme.

Following his deification, the Karakas created a festival mirroring the traditional Jewish Yom Kippur, when members of the community wear white and ask forgiveness from God for the sins they have committed over the past year. On the Karakas festival of Af Bayrami, devotees dressed entirely in yellow and prayed to the soul of Osman Baba to absolve them of their sins.⁹⁸ This is indicative of the broader method by which Donme festivals evolved; most started as Jewish holidays but were reshaped to fit the particular needs and framework of each subject.

In this, the Karakas serve as a perfect example of a charismatic mode of authority. Osman Baba's powers are not merely supernatural, but divine; his charisma is such that he is no longer merely a man with supernatural powers but a supernatural being in the form of a man. Their leaders after his death are his descendants, chosen because of their charismatic link to Osman Baba; by sharing in his lineage they share some of his supernatural gifts.

Mirroring the Yakubi, the Karakas' location within the city was a direct result of the charismatic, supernatural character of their first leader. Rather than move into the newer parts of

⁹⁷ Sisman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court," 33

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 356

Salonika, they remained in the medieval city, clustered around the tomb of Osman Baba, which was venerated as a sacred shrine.⁹⁹ Given that their leader was seen as the rebirth of Sabbatai Zevi, and later as the actual physical incarnation of God, it is not surprising that his followers chose to congregate around his tomb. Osman Baba's tomb was said to contain some of the charismatic power of its occupant, and Karakas from around the empire came to worship at the shrine.

This mystical approach may also be a factor in the Karakas' marked conservatism. They were held to be the most strictly observant of the Donme, resisting mainstream Islam and holding firmly to the teachings of Sabbatai Zevi.¹⁰⁰ By making supernatural power the defining concern in the selection of a new leader, the Karakas set a precedent for the governing of the community and its further practices; the mystical and spiritual was to be given primacy over the rational and practical. They were not concerned with the mundane details of bureaucracy and internal administration that so defined the Yakubi; rather, the Karakas focused on mystical knowledge and strict adherence to Sabbatai Zevi's code.

This again is a direct function of charismatic authority; because it focuses on the person of the leader, rather than his integration into a framework with his followers, organization takes on a decidedly secondary role. The purpose of the group, its reason to exist, is the charismatic leader, in this case Osman Baba and whichever of his descendants currently ruled. Internal structure and organization, on the other hand, exists for the common follower. Because the rank and file are not the major concern of a movement based on charismatic authority, formal power structures are less developed.

⁹⁹ Baer, *The Donme*, 34

¹⁰⁰ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 220

This inward focus and intense mysticism led the Karakas to be much less temporally successful than their Yakubi rivals. While the Yakubi included many men of significant power, the Karakas tended to be “artisans, shopkeepers, and workers.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, most of the barbers in the city were Karakas; they thus had a key role in determining the distinct styles of hair and beard that distinguished members of the three Donme groups from each other. While the Yakubi shaved their heads and styled their beards in the Turkish fashion, the Karakas defiantly grew out their hair.

All of this led the Karakas to take on a form similar to that of some Sufi orders. They venerated the shrine of their first master, chose their leaders from among his descendants, and held themselves somewhat apart from society as a whole. As the Karakas developed, they formed close ties with the Bektasi order. These Sufis, much like the Karakas themselves, were antinomian and secretive; like the Donme, they existed not as an official group (at least after being banned by the government) but rather as an underground organization.¹⁰²

This overarching concern with the mystical further manifested itself in ritual practice and theology. Unique to the Karakas was the doctrine of the “‘Torah of Emanations’ (*Torah de-Azilot*),” brought by Sabbatai Zevi, by which all the prohibitions of the Torah were reversed into positive commands.¹⁰³ This had long been Sabbatai Zevi’s justification for his seemingly-odd behavior; he was commanded by God to break the injunctions of the Torah in the name of greater holiness.

The reasoning behind this was that there were sparks of divine essence within everything, even prohibitions; they were merely concealed beneath the thick shell of sin (*kelippa*). In order

¹⁰¹ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 221

¹⁰² Baer, *The Donme*, 33-34

¹⁰³ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 220

for these sparks to be returned to God, a truly holy person needed to commit these sins in order to retrieve the sparks within their core. By transgressing the prohibitions Sabbatai Zevi aimed to penetrate to the core of the kelippoth and redeem the sparks within. This would break the power of the kelippoth, freeing the divine sparks, and ultimately negating sin itself. This was necessary for the ultimate triumph of God; the task of the Jews (and specifically the messiah) was to redeem all the sparks of holiness, something that Sabbatai Zevi believed was impossible without his redemption of sin.

The Karakas extended this task to all of Sabbatai Zevi's true followers. The believers, not just the messiah, were to intentionally transgress the law in order to free the divine essence trapped within. The exact extent to which this was followed is not entirely known; however, it was commonly believed that they engaged in wife-swapping and incest, both strictly forbidden under normative Jewish law.¹⁰⁴ This was supposedly practiced at the Festival of the Lamb, a spring equinox ceremony at which Donme ate lamb for the first time each year and allegedly participated in orgies.¹⁰⁵ While allegations of wife-swapping in minority communities were common in the Ottoman Empire, the testimonies of numerous ex-Karakas lend the charges some credence.¹⁰⁶

In any case, such activities would not be entirely unexpected, falling as they do squarely under the category of Torah de Azilot. By breaking the prohibitions and engaging in proscribed sexual relations, the Karakas saw themselves as redeeming the sparks of holiness in those relations; this elevated the act and removed the sin from it. This, it must be noted, was also the original reason for converting to Islam: removing the divine essence trapped within the religion.

¹⁰⁴ Baer, *The Donme*, 168

¹⁰⁵ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 221

¹⁰⁶ Sisman, "A Jewish messiah in the Ottoman court," 351

Breaking from traditional Jewish law was not explained by the Karakas as a matter of keeping up the appearance of conversion or advancing in society but was rather a positive commandment, a task that was demanded of believers. Only through the conscious, purposeful commission of sins, aiming towards their redemption, could the world be truly elevated and God's plan fulfilled.

There is a clear link between these beliefs and the Karakas' method for determining their leader following Sabbatai Zevi's death. Osman Baba's selection was a commitment to mystical truths over practical concerns. This commitment is reflected in the Karakas' character as a spiritual fraternity and faith community, rather than an organized polity like the Yakubi. Further, it explains their ties to the Bektasi, who similarly privileged mystical truths over earthly concerns.

Further, continuing to follow and believe in Osman Baba's messiahship in the aftermath of his death, especially given the proof of his body's decomposition and decay, required an elevation of supernal truths as above mundane rationality. Selecting Osman Baba's grandson as the new leader was thus a rejection of pure reason and instead an affirmation of faith. This fits well with the Karakas' later belief in the necessity of transgression, of serving God by appearing to defy him. The nonrational, faith-based method of authority transfer at the outset of the Karakas thus created a framework within which their theology and praxis was constructed.

The Frankists: Donme in Europe

The Frankists, as the only major Donme community outside Salonica, provide an interesting example of Donme belief and praxis in a non-Muslim context. Their founder, Jacob Frank, a caravan master from Podolia, met Osman Baba and his disciples in Salonika. After converting to Islam and becoming a member of the Karakas, Frank returned to Europe and

claimed leadership of the Polish Sabbateans. Excommunicated from Judaism, Frank and his followers converted to Catholicism, becoming a form of Christian Donme.

Like Osman Baba, Jacob Frank's authority rested on his claim to being the rebirth of Sabbatai Zevi. Further, he fostered the worship of his daughter Eva, who was referred to as the "Matronita" or holy mother. She was identified with the Catholic Virgin Mary and with the Jewish Shekhina, the Presence of God (traditionally considered feminine).¹⁰⁷ Following Jacob Frank's death, Eva led the movement, her divine authority unquestioned.

As with the mainstream Karakas, the Frankists' method of authority transfer was an entirely mystical one. Jacob Frank had no personal connection to Sabbatai Zevi; his only claim to power was through nonrational means. The deification of Eva Frank, like that of Osman Baba, further removed the group from mundane considerations of leadership. Her rule was not merely uncontested but uncontestable; to contradict the literal, physical presence of God would have been unthinkable.

Organizationally, the Frankists were similar in many ways to the Karakas, reflecting both their origins as an offshoot and their founders' near-identical method for claiming authority. The Frankists lacked a formal bureaucracy or administration, being focused instead on devotion and pilgrimage to a central shrine. This was at first Jacob Frank's palace, and later the home of his daughter, "a palace-temple known as Gottes Haus (God's House)."¹⁰⁸ Here the divine lady presided over a large court, receiving pilgrims from much of Eastern Europe. As with the Karakas, the lack of formal organization created a more personal, mystical identification with the

¹⁰⁷ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 226

¹⁰⁸ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 227

cult of the leader, who was held in awe by her followers; one pilgrim says that he “dared not look the Gevira in the face, but fell to [his] knees before her.”¹⁰⁹

The Frankists also serve, however, as an illustration of the dangers of organizing a group so loosely and absent temporal considerations. Following the death of Eva Frank, who produced no offspring, they were left without a viable leader. Because their method of authority transfer was so rooted in the mystical and in charismatic authority, there was no mechanism in place to determine a new leader by more ordinary means. The movement thus broke apart, scattering throughout Europe. While believers remained in contact with one another and with the *Donme* in Salonika, the Frankists lost any form of central authority and group cohesion, and died out by the end of the 19th century.¹¹⁰

The Kapanci: Merchants and Educators

Less is known about the Kapanci than about the Yakubi and the Karakas. Their method of choosing new leadership, for instance, appears to be lost to us. However, a few details are known for certain. After their split with the Karakas, the Kapanci became “professional people and merchants of the upper and middle class.”¹¹¹ They lived contiguous to the Karakas, “in the core of the city,”¹¹² although the wealthiest businessmen and leaders moved to the suburbs outside the walls by the beginning of the 20th century.

In general, the Kapanci appear to have been stuck somewhere in between the Yakubi and the Karakas. Though they never rose to the political prominence enjoyed by the Yakubi, they were nevertheless successful merchants, as compared to the predominantly lower-class Karakas.

¹⁰⁹ Moses Porges, quoted Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 227

¹¹⁰ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 228

¹¹¹ Freely, *The Lost Messiah*, 221

¹¹² Baer, *The Donme*, 34

Less is known about them religiously, although they are said to have participated in many of the Karakas' festivals, particularly the Festival of the Lamb (including the wife-swapping and potential incest). Of course, they did not adopt any of the later Karakas festivals centered around the divinity of Osman Baba.

The genesis of the Kapanci likewise represents a crossroads between the mundane and charismatic modes of authority. While they initially went along with the Karakas, refusing Yakub Celebi's mundane claims to power, they were also swayed by Ibrahim Agha's powerful profanophany following Osman Baba's death. They thus appear to have taken a middle approach, neither sacrificing faith entirely in pursuit of pragmatism nor totally abandoning rationality in pursuit of mysticism. Rather, they appear to have balanced faith and logic, producing a sort of syncretic blend of the other two Donme sects.

It is entirely possible that this blended approach and moderation were responsible for the Kapanci's success in international trade. Operating as they did on the boundaries between Turk and Jew, Karakas and Yakubi, the Kapanci must have developed a keen sense of others' customs to survive. The adaptability and flexibility they demonstrated in balancing two competing modes of authority would have served them well in foreign lands, making them more able to adapt themselves to the ways of others. Flexibility is a key trait in international commerce; it also appears to have been the defining characteristic of the Kapanci approach to authority.

It is known that the Kapanci introduced the first Western-style school to Salonika, then taught by Semsî Efendi, with the aim of providing a modern education to their youth.¹¹³ Atatürk, the later president of Turkey, was educated in this school, a testament to its success. It was

¹¹³ Baer, *The Donme*, 47

followed by the terakki (progress) school, opened in 1879 and bankrolled by wealthy Kapanci merchants, who had been exposed to Western ideas of education while abroad. In order to continue their success in international trade, students were taught “commerce, bookkeeping, accounting, and French.”¹¹⁴ This shows that the Kapanci’s ability to adapt to foreign cultures was not an unconscious one, but rather a careful process; they learned and developed the skills they needed to be useful and secure wherever they went, not just in Salonika. This adaptability, a legacy of their middle-of-the-road approach to authority, served them well in a period of increasing globalization.

Modes of Successorship: Physical, Spiritual, and Intellectual

In charting the development of the Donme it is not only necessary to determine their mode of authority transfer, but also their root relationship to Sabbatai Zevi. All four Donme groups traced their lineage back to Sabbatai Zevi somehow; however, this tracing operated very differently for different groups. Much like modes of authority, models of succession and inheritance can draw on wildly divergent sources of legitimacy, and these sources were integral in shaping the outcomes of each Donme group. While the examples here are specific to the Donme, parallels could be drawn in other movements that trace their foundation and their ultimate legitimacy to a charismatic leader.

In examining the ways in which the Donme groups traced their legitimacy to Sabbatai Zevi it is useful to consider Max Weber’s work on the routinization of charisma. Sabbatai Zevi is a prototypical charismatic leader in the Weberian model, one who is “treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities... regarded as of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 51

divine origin or as exemplary.”¹¹⁵ What Weber referred to as the “routinization of charisma” was the methods by which followers of charismatic leaders carried on the charisma of their leaders after their founders’ demise; the legitimization of the Donme sects through their links with Sabbatai Zevi is thus partly an act of routinization of charisma.

The first mode of succession illustrated by the Donme is what I will refer to as physical inheritance. In this mode, illustrated by the Yakubi, legitimacy is gained through a tangible, physical link to the original charismatic leader. This link could be one of kinship (direct relation), friendship, designation by the original leader, or legal right of succession; in any case, it relies on mundane means and can sustain its legitimacy entirely through earthly proofs. In the case of the Yakubi, the claim to legitimacy was established through all these channels; Yakub Celebi was the closest living kinsman of the messiah, as well as a good friend of his. Further, the purported letter from Sabbatai Zevi directly established his inheritance of leadership. After Yakub Celebi’s death, his successor’s claims were established in much the same way; he was the directly appointed successor of the previous leader.

This, to a certain extent, follows two of Weber’s modes of routinization: “designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor”¹¹⁶ and hereditary transference of charisma. However, there are crucial differences between the Yakubi claims to legitimacy and charismatic routinization in a strict Weberian sense. Most importantly, routinization of charisma is “sharply opposed... to rational, and particularly bureaucratic, authority... foreign to all rules.”¹¹⁷ The Yakubi completely negate this assertion. They establish a bureaucracy and specifically focus on the creation of rules and procedures. Nevertheless, the root of their

¹¹⁵ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 358-9

¹¹⁶ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 365

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 361

legitimacy is this direct, physical link to a charismatic leader. Further, charismatic authority is said to be antithetical to traditional authority,¹¹⁸ and yet the Yakubi's mode of legitimation follows a highly traditional, inheritance-based pattern.

In fact, this sort of direct, tangible linkage is integrally tied to the Yakubi's development as an orderly, bureaucratic organization. The Yakubi claim to successorship, like their mode of authority, was logical and rational. They laid claim to the actual physical person of the messiah; tracing their legitimacy through the person of Sabbatai Zevi, the messiah as a man. This focus on the personhood of Sabbatai Zevi served to disassociate them from more metaphysical or antinomian leanings; it served to make the messiah more of a traditional leader and deemphasize radical ideas about the end of history and the restructuring of reality.

It must be noted that, to the Yakubi, identification with the body of the messiah was a strong religious claim, not merely a practical one. As discussed above, Sabbatai Zevi had ascribed a divine status not merely to his soul and intellect, but to his body as well; thus, following the physicality of the messiah could be seen in and of itself as a religious and devotional experience. There was, to Sabbatai Zevi, no distinguishing between the earthly and the divine parts of his nature; body and soul both partook of the divine. Thus, his physical body, and the ties it had established, were a theologically and ideologically defensible source of legitimation for the Yakubi.

The Karakas (and their offshoots the Frankists), on the other hand, had a much more metaphysical basis for legitimacy. Their claim was not to the physicality of Sabbatai Zevi, but to the soul of the messiah; Osman Baba (or Jacob Frank) shared in that soul even though his body

¹¹⁸ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 361

was totally different. The Karakas made no reference to the body of the messiah in asserting their legitimacy, but to his spirit, an essence which transcended mere fleshly existence.

This is both a positive claim to legitimacy and a challenge to the legitimacy of the Yakubi. By denying the centrality of Sabbatai Zevi as a man while upholding his spirit as the messiah, they assert that kinship and ties to him are irrelevant in successorship. This is a negation of the central claim of the Yakubi; Yakub Celebi's close kinship means nothing for his legitimacy, and even the letter itself could be held as unimportant. After all, the will of the man Sabbatai Zevi is far less important than the actual soul of the messiah; Osman Baba is the messiah, while Yakub Celebi just happens to have been related to the last body the messiah's spirit occupied.

This in some ways mirrors Weber's transference of charisma to an individual sharing the characteristics of the old leader,¹¹⁹ in that authority devolves to the one deemed most similar to the old charismatic leader. The difference here is that Osman Baba was not believed to merely be similar to Sabbatai Zevi or to share his traits; he was Sabbatai Zevi himself. In the conception of the Karakas it was almost as if there was no new leader; the new leader and the old were theologically identical. Thus, while the end result appears similar to the Weberian model, the underlying logic was completely different.

This legitimation through the spirit of the messiah, rather than his flesh, shaped the development of the Karakas and Frankists. A bureaucratic organization would have been not just out of character but fundamentally unjustifiable; by breaking with the messiah as man and attaching themselves to his spirit they rejected traditional modes of authority and organization.

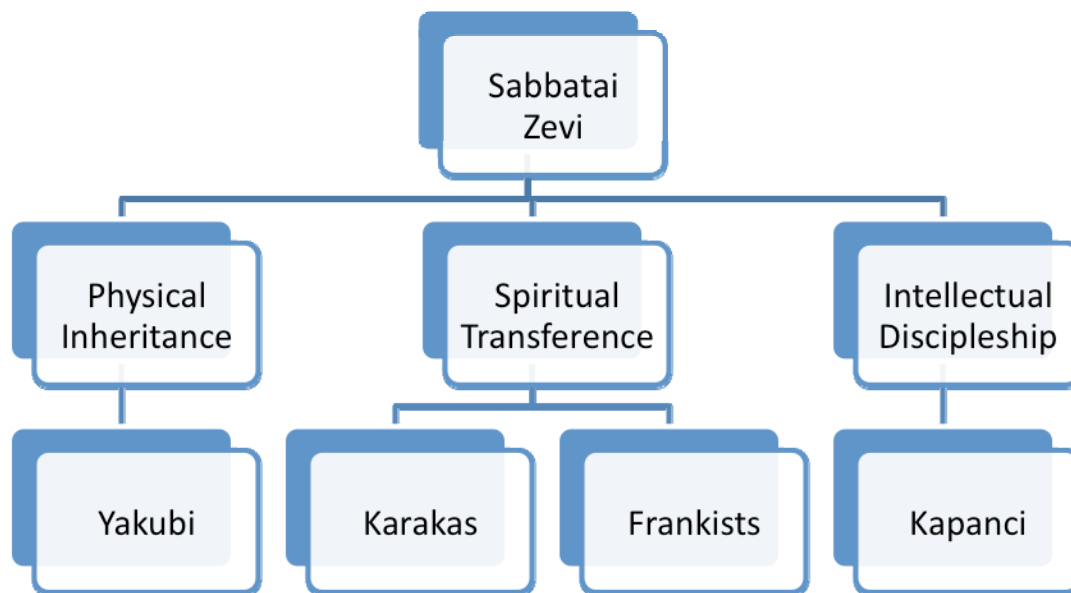
¹¹⁹ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 364

Tracing legitimacy through the spirit required restructuring their society around spiritual aims and devoting themselves to worshipful service. They developed as a mystical society precisely because their fundamental legitimacy as a society depended on mystical claims.

The Kapanci took a final approach to the inheritance of Sabbatai Zevi, one I will conceptualize as intellectual discipleship. They refused to nominate a successor to Sabbatai Zevi, believing that no man could properly succeed the messiah. Rather, they devoted themselves to Sabbatai Zevi's teachings and principles, attempting to follow his directives and live life according to his principles without replacing him. Their legitimacy came through Sabbatai Zevi's ideas, through a claim to the mind of the messiah rather than his body or his soul. In Weberian terms, they declined to routinize the charisma of Sabbatai Zevi; when he died, so too did his charismatic leadership.

This, as with their mode of authority transfer, placed the Kapanci in a position that was both in between the Karakas and the Yakubi and yet uniquely their own. They denied the possibility of inheriting Sabbatai Zevi's power, a move which placed them outside the purely physical, earthly realm of the Yakubi. At the same time, their rejection of Karakas and Frankist claims of transmigration grounded them somewhat, and removed them from a realm of pure metaphysical speculation.

Figure 3: Donme claims to legitimacy through Sabbatai Zevi



Concluding Remarks

The Donme are an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of authority and modes of legitimation on later group developments. The three main sects all originated with followers of the same leader, who converted at the same time, lived in the same city, and were, in many cases, interrelated. Thus, the only real difference between them was the ways in which they conceived of authority and legitimacy; this one difference, however, resulted in radically different outcomes for the groups.

The Yakubi accepted that charismatic authority had ended with Sabbatai Zevi; in its place, they erected a model of mundane authority. Since mundane authority focuses on stability and order, this pushed the Yakubi towards greater assimilation with the broader Ottoman society, which led them to be highly successful. In the end, the focus on mundane authority made the

Yakubi virtually indistinguishable from any other Turks; pragmatism had dictated near-total assimilation.

Ideologically, the Yakubi leadership established a claim to legitimacy based on the physical body of Sabbatai Zevi; they were tied to him by kinship and friendship. This claim as much or more a theological one as a legal one, asserting that Sabbatai Zevi the person was indistinguishable from his messiahship and divine office. Corporeality here is held as just as legitimate as spirituality, which further reinforced the practical, worldly approach of the Yakubi leaders.

The Karakas, on the other hand, still relied on charismatic authority. They followed Osman Baba and his descendants, eschewing assimilation in favor of doctrinal purity; this led them to occupy the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. As charismatic authority is focused more on the leader than on the followers, they never developed a formal power structure like the Yakubi, relying instead on the charismatic authority of the leader to resolve disputes and mediate with the heavens.

While this mode of relative equality in the face of a supreme leader functioned well for the Karakas, the Frankists demonstrate the potential weakness of charismatic authority. With the death of their goddess Eva Frank, they had no charismatic leader to follow her. As a charismatic model of authority does not encourage formal organization and institutionalization, the Frankists were left without a center. They thus fractured apart and disbanded, disappearing entirely by the early 20th century.

Both the Karakas and the Frankists demonstrate a spiritual claim to authority. They rejected the Yakubi notion that Sabbatai Zevi's power was rooted in his body, and asserted in its

place that the essence of messiahship and divine power was independent of the physical. Though the body of Sabbatai Zevi could die, his soul, and the divine essence that constituted it, survived and inhabited new flesh. It was the spirit and divinity of the messiah, rather than any particularity of his person, that held value and power.

Finally, the Kapanci demonstrate the potential success to be achieved with a moderated view of authority. Neither fully mundane nor fully charismatic, their early approach to authority produced a more syncretic blend. This flexibility and adaptability made them successful in global trade and allowed them to create some of the foremost educational institutions in the Ottoman Empire. The unique blend of pragmatism and principle, charisma and organization that defined early Kapanci conceptions of authority gave them the tools to be highly successful in the modern world.

Ideologically, the Kapanci took a unique position. They denied both the physical and the spiritual inheritance of Sabbatai Zevi's messiahship and divine power; he was, to them, entirely unique. Rather, by following the teachings and wisdom of the messiah they could achieve salvation and righteousness in his absence. The Karakas' legitimacy was thus based not of inheritance in any of its formulations, but rather on adherence to the teachings and values of the messiah.

The modes of authority and methods of legitimation demonstrated here are not necessarily limited to the Donme. Rather, they represent vital issues that any new religious community must confront when constituting their society. As religions develop from the followings of charismatic prophets into ongoing, stable groups, they must wrestle both with the organization and formation of their society and with the legitimation of their claims through the

founder. The ways in which religious communities articulate their sources of legitimacy and determine what is considered a valid form of authority is bound to create profound effects for the later development of the community, just as it did for the Donme.

In the future, it would be interesting to use this model to examine the early development of other religions, as well as the formation of sects. It would appear that issues of authority and legitimacy arise primarily at these two crucial junctures: the formation of a new religious community and its division into distinct, separated communities. In particular, I believe this lens could be useful if applied to the early split between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam or to the later split between the Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity. Even earlier, it could be interesting to examine differences between Pauline Christianity, non-Pauline Christianity, and early rabbinic Judaism. In all these cases, issues of authority and legitimacy appear to be the lynchpin which determines the character and shape of the religious community in the long run.

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Appendix A: The Donme Credo

This version of the Donme credo was originally published by Scholem in Hebrew and later translated into English by C. Sisman (formatting and spelling match Sisman).

I believe with perfect faith in the faith of the God of truth, the God of Israel who dwells in [the *sefirah*] *tiferet*, the “glory of Israel,” the three knots of faith which are one.

I believe with perfect faith that Sabbatai Zevi is the true King Messiah

I believe with perfect faith that the Torah, which was given through our teacher Moses, is the Torah of truth, as it is written: And this is the Torah which Moses placed before Israel, as ordered by God through Moses. It is a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to it and its supporters will be happy... [here follows several biblical verses extolling the Torah]

I believe with perfect faith that this Torah cannot be exchanged and that there will be no other Torah; *only the commandments have been abolished*, but the Torah remains binding forever and to all eternities.

I believe with perfect faith that Sabbatai Zevi, may his majesty be exalted, is the true Messiah and that he will gather together the dispersed of Israel from the four corners of the earth.

I believe with perfect faith in the resurrection of the dead, that the dead shall live and shall arise from the dust of the earth.

I believe with perfect faith that the God of truth, the God of Israel, will send the rebuild sanctuary from above down to us [on the earth] beneath, as it is said: Unless God build the house, those that build it labor in vain. May our eyes see and our heart rejoices and our soul sings for joy, speedily in our days. Amen.

I believe with perfect faith that the God of truth, the God of Israel will reveal Himself in this [earthly] world [called] *tevel*, as it is said: for they shall see, eye to eye, the Lord

returning to Zion. And it said: And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it, for the mouth of the Lord has promised it.

May it be pleasing to Thee, God of Truth, God of Israel who dwells in the “glory of Israel,” in the three knots of faith which are one, to send us the just Messiah, our Redeemer Sabbatai Zevi, speedily and in our days. Amen.

Appendix B: The Eighteen Principles

This version of the Eighteen Principles was originally published by Saul Amarillo in Hebrew and later translated into English by Scholem and quoted in its entirety by Sisman (formatting and spelling, including brackets except where noted, match Sisman).

In the name of Sabbatai Sevi.

Here is the 18 commandments of our Lord, King, and Messiah, Sabbatai Sevi, whose glory be exalted.

- 1- They shall be scrupulous in the faith of Heaven, that he is one and only, and besides him there is no god, and providence does belong to any prince or ruler except him.
- 2- They shall believe in his messiah, who is the true redeemer and there is no redeemer except him, namely our master, our king S.[abbatai] C[Sevi], of the seeds of the house of David, (of blessed memory)
- 3- They shall not swear falsely by his blessed name or by his Messiah, for his masters name is in him and they not profane it
- 4- They shall honor his Blessed Name, and so also they honor the name of the [Messiah? word omitted in Sisman] when they make mention of it, and so also [shall each do] for any greater than he in wisdom
- 5- They shall advance from strength to strength in recounting and disclosing, subtleties in the mystic messianic faith, *Raza Demeshiha*, as also on the eighteenth day of Kislev they shall all of them assemble in one house, and there they shall recount to one another what they have heard and understood of the mythic faith of the Messiah, *raza di-Mehemanutha di-Meshiaba*.
- 6- There shall be among them no murderers, even [of those] among the Nation, even if they detest them
- 7- There shall be among them no thieves

- 8- There shall be among them no adulterers. Although, this is only a commandment of the Created World [Beriah], because of the thieves it is necessary to be scrupulous in observance
- 9- They shall not bear false witness, nor shall they speak falsely to one another; and they shall not inform among themselves, even to [against] unbelievers.
- 10- They are not permitted to come [bring] in anyone under the turban, even one who believes intensely. For he who is of the Warriors, will come in himself with a complete heart and a desiring spirit without any trace of coercion whatever.
- 11- There shall not be among them any who covet what is not theirs
- 12- They shall keep the feast [other texts: the fast and the feast] in Kislev with great rejoicing. [Says the copyist: it is the feast of the miracle of “He brought me up also out of the tumultuous pit, out of the miry clay,” which is on the sixteenth of Kislev, as is known, this is the day on which he was plunged into the great ocean by Samael and was delivered, as is recounted on a previous page.]
- 13- They shall behave graciously toward one another, fulfilling his [each other’s] desire.
- 14- They shall study privately the Book of Psalms, a daily measure every day.
- 15- Each and every month they shall look up and behold the birth of the moon and shall pray that the moon turn its face opposite the sun, face to face.
- 16- They shall be scrupulous in [their observance of] the precepts of the Ishmaelites, among whom they have to blind their eyes and eradicate his [their] seed. And as for the fast [of Ramadan], those who keep it shall not be concerned, and similarly about their sacrifices to the demons they shall not be concerned; and those things which are exposed to their [the Muslim] view they shall observe.
- 17- They shall not intermarry with them, either in their lifetime or in death, for they are an abomination and their women are creeping things, and concerning them, it is said, “Cursed be he that lies with any kind of beast.”
- 18- They shall be scrupulous to circumcise their sons and remove disgrace from among the holy people.

For my desire is in these Eighteen Ordinances, although some them belong [only] to the law of the Created World, for the Throne has not yet been made whole, until the

vengeance of the Children of Israel is wrought upon Samael and his company. At that time all will be equal, [there shall be] no proscribed and no permitted no polluted and no pure, for they shall all know them [me], from the least of them to the greatest of them. And caution the Associates who are Believers but have not taken the turban- which is the war- that they must be scrupulous in their observance of the law of the Created World [Beriah] and Supernal World [Atzilut], they must not omit anything until the time of Revelation. Thenceforth, they shall be attired in the Tree of Life, and all will be equal. May it be his will that he [Sabbatai Sevi] soon be revealed. Amen.