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THE LURIANIC STRAND IN JONATHAN EDWARDS' CONCEPT OF PROGRESS

by Joseph P. Schultz, Kansas City

In the year 1739, Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian of Puritan New England and the architect of the religious revival in the American colonies delivered a series of thirty-nine sermons to his Northampton congregation. Shortly before his death, Edwards informed the trustees of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) that he had on his « mind and heart (and which I long ago began, not with any view to publication), a great work which is a *History of the Work of Redemption*, a body of divinity in an entirely new method, being thrown into the form of a history... »¹ The thirty-nine sermons which formed the core of this unique work were not published until nineteen years after Edwards' death. Nevertheless, such was the power of the spoken word in Puritan New England that Edwards' radical view of history which placed the millennium before the Final Judgment and proclaimed the spiritual progress of mankind as achievable through human means, sustained several generations of Americans in the belief that the millennium was not a mere possibility but an imminent and attainable reality. The key passage expressing this idea reads as follows :

There is no reason from the word of God to think any other, than that this great work of God will be wrought very swiftly, yet gradually. As the children of Israel were gradually brought out of the Babylonish captivity, first one company, and then another, and gradually rebuilt their city and temple ; and as the Heathen Roman empire was destroyed by a gradual, though a very swift prevalency of the gospel ; so, though there are many things which seem to hold forth as though the work of God would be exceeding swift, and many great and wonderful events should very suddenly be brought to pass, and some great parts of Satan's visible kingdom should have a very sudden fall, yet all will not be accomplished at once, as by some great miracle, as the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world will be all at once ; but this is a work which will be accomplished by means, by the preaching of the gospel, and the use of the ordinary means of grace, and so shall be gradually brought to pass².

Edwards explains the role of mankind in the world's redemption as follows :

... it is fit that mankind should be informed something of God's design in the government of the world, because they are made capable of actively falling in with that design, and promoting of it, and acting herein as his friends and subjects ³.

Moreover, Edwards was convinced that his generation was living through the last stages leading to the redemption. They were close to the beginning of God's triumph in this world ⁴.

Alan Heimert sums up the import of Edwards' radical view of history :

The Work of Redemption was one with the regeneration of humanity ; it depended on no awful display of Divine power, no shattering of the physical creation but on the gradual restoration of the influences of the Holy Spirit which had been withdrawn at the Fall ⁵.

He also points out that :

With the publication of Edwards' dissertations... the elements of American Protestantism for whom he spoke and whom he profoundly influenced were committed by his very postulates to an optimistic view of history... As Perry Miller has observed, Edwards' achievement in placing the Millennium « on this side of the apocalypse » was to provide Calvinism with a formula in which the good society would and could be attained through natural causes... All the wonderful discoveries in arts and sciences were for Edwards not merely emblems but prophetic tokens of the « spiritual knowledge » which mankind would enjoy in the millennial era ⁶.

What are the sources of Edwards' novel theory of redemption ?

One line of inquiry leads back to Augustine's *City of God*. According to Augustine there are and have been from the time of Cain and Abel two divisions of the human race... « the one consisting of those who live according to man, the other of those who live according to God. And these we also mystically call the two cities, or the two communities of men, of which the one is predestined to reign eternally with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil » (15.1) ⁷. The basic premise of this theory is that the two cities, although they will exist together in one community until the end of time, are separated by an invisible but very real barrier-earthly goods. However, the City of Man is destined to retain supremacy in this world until the end. The Heavenly City lives, as it were, furtively on the margins of the City of Man cultivating its spiritual life which is its one and only interest (19.17) ⁸.

In the City of Man social reform may to some extent ameliorate but can never cure the ills men must suffer. These sufferings will be cured only at the End of Days after human nature has been miraculously transformed. Thus, in the suffering City of Man the idea of progress would seem the most foolish of dreams.

Edwards accepts Augustine's thesis that the City of Man and the City of God have had a continuous history throughout the Jewish and Christian eras. Thus he writes :

The religion that the Church of God has professed from the first has always been the same... The Church of God, from the beginning, has been one society. The Christian Church is manifestly the same society continued, that was before Christ came, grafted on the same root, built on the same foundation⁹.

Just as the Church has been the same so has « the opposition which has been made to the Church of God in all ages, ... always been against the same religion, and the same revelation »¹⁰. Though he accepts Augustine's view of the unremitting conflict between the Church and God on the one hand, and the forces of Satan on the other, unlike Augustine, Edwards looks for the victory to be won in this world as we know it. In contrast to Augustine who held that the secular history of the City of Man is of no importance, Edwards held that the story of Redemption coincides with that of human secular life. Augustine's dismissal of social reform as a mere band aid applied to the gangrenous state of man which will be transformed only by God at the End was not echoed by Edwards who looked upon social and technological progress as signs of the approaching End itself¹¹. Finally, Augustine's assertion that the millennial predictions in the Book of Revelations are to be interpreted allegorically as referring to a change in the souls of man (20.9)¹², was rejected by Edwards in favor of an earthly millenium to be enacted on the stage of history.

A second line of inquiry as to the sources of Edwards' novel theory of redemption leads to the Old Testament. The Protestant Revolution set in motion a new study of Scripture motivated by the desire to penetrate the veil of typological interpretations and spiritual allegories which the Catholic Church had drawn over the biblical text. A major consequence of this new reading of Scripture was that the historical sections of the Old Testament again became historical. These intensely historical Old Testament narratives taken at face value strongly intimated that God works as much through history as through individual souls. Protestants found that they could no longer

ignore the many biblical passages that prophecy, in language that seems to apply to this world, a millennial age of peace and prosperity. Joseph Mede, the great biblical scholar of the Church of England began to see the Book of Revelations in the light of an improved understanding of Hebraic literary practices. Read without Augustinian presuppositions, it had an unmistakable historic ring. Its imagery and actions must be referred back to the contexts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Micah and others. These prophets dealt with events forming part of the history of the one church and its fate in the world. Thus it follows that the prediction of a future millennial state in the Book of Revelations is more than an allegory of the spiritual order-it is the stuff of history¹³. This Old Testament emphasis on history which enabled Edwards and his predecessors to bring the millennium down to earth passed into the post-biblical literature of the apocalypses, the New Testament and the rabbinic tradition. These sources all picture the millenium as preceding the Final Judgment-an ordering of divine priorities intended to stress the terrestrial character of the millennium in the framework of human history¹⁴. It is this scheme which Edwards adhered to in *A History of the Work of Redemption* departing from the standard doctrine of early eighteenth century New England.

However, the Old Testament and the New Testament, the apocalypses and rabbinic literature all stress the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from the historical present to the millennial future. In these sources we learn nothing of how the Day of the Lord on which present history ends is related to the new era. The classical Jewish and Christian view of the redemption sees no causal relationship between the coming of the millennium and human conduct. It is not Israel's or Christendom's repentance which brings about the redemption only the divine decree. The millennial redemption is tied to no idea of progress. It remains a miracle¹⁵.

The opposite is true of Edwards' concept of redemption. He sees the millennium as gradually evolving from the present state of mankind. For Edwards, the redemption involves no catastrophic upheaval. It is not brought about by the miraculous intervention of God but through an ameliorative process in which the divine spirit working through men slowly progresses toward the End of Days. There is a causal relationship between the coming of the millennium and the deeds of men.

This brings us to a third line of inquiry into Edwards' sources for his theory of redemption. It has been suggested that the source of Edwards' millenarian theory was the chiliasm which arose out of late

seventeenth century interpretations of Newtonian physics¹⁶. However, a closer examination of this seventeenth century chiliasm reveals that one of its main springs was the Lurianic Kabbalah. G. Scholem has indicated how the Lurianic Kabbalah of the sixteenth century sought to assuage the intense disappointment of Jewish millenarian expectations brought on by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the prolongation of Jewish exile throughout the world¹⁷. Briefly stated, Lurianic doctrine taught that the exile of the Jewish people had cosmic significance. Luria drew on the theories of Spanish Kabbalists who described the creation of the world as a series of emanations of divine light through which God manifested Himself. According to Luria, in order for a thing other than God to be created, God must retreat within Himself. Only afterward does He emit beams of light into the vacuum of limitation in order to build the world. God formed vessels to contain the the divine light so that it might take forms appropriate to functions in the material world. But through a cosmic accident the vessels were shattered and the light was dispersed. Much of it returned to its source but portions of it, « sparks, » fell downward and became encased in « husks » of the material world. Redemption will occur when man in partnership with God restores the sparks to their source. How will this be accomplished? Through the study of the Law and the practice of the commandments. Luria's message of consolation was that the prolongation of the exile was due to the imperfection of man and the imperfection of the world. This imperfection is being repaired day by day ; once it is complete redemption will come. Scholem sums up the import of the Lurianic doctrine in terms strikingly similar to Heimert's summary of Edwards' millenarian theory :

... the Messianic ideal, the ideal of redemption, receives a totally new aspect. We all work, or are at least expected to work for the amendment of the world and the « selection » of good and evil... This conception of redemption is no longer catastrophic ; when duty has been fulfilled the son of David, the Messiah will come of himself, for his appearance at the End of Days is only a symbol for the completion of a process... Thus it becomes possible to avoid the « travails of the Messiah. » The transition from the state of imperfection (which may still be very difficult) will nevertheless take place without revolution and disaster and great affliction¹⁸.

Was Edwards familiar with Kabbalistic ideas ? In sixteenth and seventeenth century England Kabbala was in the air. Kabbalistic ideas adapted to a Christian framework reached the intellectual circles of the western world through Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494), the Italian renaissance scholar whose Hebrew tutors introduced him to

the Kabbalah. Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), the leading humanist and Hebraist of the period, was a serious student of Kabbalah who wrote two books on the subject which were widely read and reprinted. Through the direct influence of Pico Della Mirandola on English scholars studying in renaissance Italy and through the indirect influence of Reuchlin, whose books reached England in the sixteenth century, such diverse English intellectuals as Everard Digby, the opponent of the humanistic logic of Peter Ramus, Arthur Golding, the great Elizabethan translator and the poet and statesman Sir Philip Sidney came in contact with the Kabbalah.

With the mystical ground thus prepared Lurianic ideas took seed in seventeenth century England. Robert Fludd, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, Francis Bacon, John Owen and Archbishop John Tillotson (whose literary style Edwards greatly admired¹⁹) were among those familiar with Kabbalistic ideas or actually engaged in the study of Kabbalah. John Milton knew and made use of the Lurianic idea of God's self-limitation (*tzimtzum*)²⁰. Similarly, the Cambridge Platonists, Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, utilized for their own designs the Lurianic doctrine of God's self-limitation, the breaking of the vessels (*shvirat ha-kelim*) and the ingathering of the sparks (*tikkun*)²¹. Marjorie Nicolson sums up the impact of Jewish mysticism on the literature of the period as follows :

Kabbalism as a form of thought permeates much seventeenth century literature ; it is as impossible to separate it sharply from other ideas of a particular author as it is to help define exactly the particular brand of Platonism he held. By the seventeenth century, Kabbalism had become so fused and intermingled with other ways of thinking that we look for it less in defined doctrine and creed than in an attitude toward a question²².

To which Joseph Blau adds :

Now if this « attitude » of which Professor Nicolson speaks is to be distinguished from the general trend of Platonic mysticism, it can only be on the basis of the emphasis on ethical conduct as a guide along the paths toward a transcendental God²³.

This is precisely the attitude of Jonathan Edwards. Pery Miller cites the following passage in which Edwards describes the act of creation in terms strikingly reminiscent of both the Neo-Platonic and Lurianic symbolism of divine emanation.

But the diffusive disposition that excited God to give creatures existence, was rather a communicative disposition in general, or a disposition in the fullness of divinity to flow out and diffuse itself... Therefore to speak more

strictly according to truth, we may suppose, that a disposition in God, as an original property of his nature, to an emanation of his own infinite fulness, was what excited Him to create the world ; and so that the emanation itself was aimed at by Him as a last end of the creation... ²⁴

However, Edwards saw the ethical implications of this mystical act of creation and it is this element which provides the affinity between this segment of his thought and the Lurianic Kabbalah. Miller comments on the moral conclusion Edwards drew from this idea of creation :

The lesson for the creature... is not to enlist God in the service of his private pleasures, or to pray that he be given house and land and estate, but to reflect the diffused light of God... as a jewel that gets all its radiance from the sun reflects back the light of the sun ²⁵.

However, there is more direct evidence to indicate Edwards' familiarity with Lurianic ideas adapted to a Christian framework. Edwardian scholars now accept as patent fact that Edwards drew heavily on the insights of the Cambridge Platonists which he turned to his own design ²⁶. His « Catalogue » of books includes the works of Cudworth and More which contain Lurianic doctrines ²⁷.

It is also possible that Lurianic ideas reached Edwards via the German Pietists with whose works he was familiar. Karl Mannheim has indicated how Anabaptist chiliasm was attenuated by the German Pietists of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Among these Pietists, Anabaptist millenarism gave way to a « waiting and anticipation » of the millennium ²⁸. Their concept of continuous and uniform progress from the beginning to the end of history, a concept identical with Edwards' view of the redemption, may very well derive from Kabbalistic ideas which they absorbed from their mentor, the great German mystic Jakob Boehme ²⁹.

In conclusion, it appears that to adequately account for the sources of Edwards' *A History of the Work of Redemption* we must turn to Augustine's view of a continuous conflict between the forces of the Church and the forces of Satan, to the emphasis on history in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphe, rabbinic literature and the New Testament and finally to the concept of gradual and continuous progress which grew out of the Lurianic Kabbalah and was adapted to a Christian framework. By whatever channels Lurianic ideas reached Edwards, their impact on his millenarian theory provides support from the American experience for Scholem's contention that the concept of redemption as achieved by man's unassisted and continuous progress is rooted in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

NOTES

- ¹ Quoted in *The Great Awakening*, edited by Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis and New York : Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), p. 20.
- ² Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption in Works* (Worcester, 1808) II, 330-331.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-241 ; 308-309 ; 391.
- ⁵ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 63.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 68.
- ⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by M. Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1881) II, 49.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 326-328.
- ⁹ Edwards, *Work*, II, 315.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ¹¹ Edwards shared the views of his contemporaries in England who pictured the millennium as growing out of the human struggle to eliminate injustice. Daniel Whitby in his *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* first published in 1703, summed up the new concept of the millennium : « In a Word, to fortel Times of Peace and Plenty to succeeding ages, to raise the expectation of a People whose Backs are bowed down, and have been long enslaved and afflicted is very suitable to this divine Oeconomy... » Whitby, *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (London, 1760) 2 : 713).
- ¹² *City of God*, pp. 363-368.
- ¹³ Richard Baxter, the celebrated English divine and non-conformist in a book dedicated to Increase Mather affirms the new view of an earthly millennium to be brought about not by God's wonders and marvels but by the established laws of nature, physical and human. In his dedication Baxter notes with regret that « the chief Writers for the Millennium (i.e. the new concept of the millennium) are Conformists and men of the greatest Learning and Piety... as Jos. Mede... » Baxter, *The Glorious Kingdom of Christ, Described and Clearly Vindicated* (London, 1691), Dedication.
- ¹⁴ IV Ezra 11:1-12, 59; II Baruch 36,1-11; 39,1-40; *Mekilta Wayassa* 5 to Exod. 16,29 (ed. Friedmann), 51a; *b. Shabbat*, 118a; Matthew 24,8 and the Book of Revelations. Cf. George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1950) II, 323-325 ; 338-368.
- ¹⁵ G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York : Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 7-14.
- ¹⁶ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, p. 61.
- ¹⁷ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York : Schocken Books, 1941), p. 246 ff.
- ¹⁸ Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 47-48. The Lurianic view of man's role in the process of redemption was preserved by Luria's disciple Hayim Vital. See *Sefer Etz Hayim* (Warsaw, 1891), Chap. XXXIX,1 (vol. II, p. 130) and *Sefer Pri Etz Hayim* I,1 (Dubrowno, 1804), p. 5 a. Luria's evolutionary concept of the redemption was combined with a sense of its imminence. Like Edwards two hundred years later, Luria believed that his generation was living through the last stages leading to the redemption. Hasidism, on the other hand, underscored the gradualist aspect of the Lurianic redemption. Characteristic is the statement of R. Naphtali Ropshitzer : « By our service to God we build Jerusalem daily. One of us adds a row, another only a brick. When Jerusalem is completed, the Redemption will come. » *Ohel Naftali*, ed. Zeidman and Ausnit (Lemberg, 1912), p. 21.
- ¹⁹ Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York : American Book Co., 1935), p. cx.

- ²⁰ Joseph L. Blau, « The Cabala in English Literature, » *The Review of Religion* VI (1942), 146-168 ; Cf. Joseph L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabbalah* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1940), *passim*.
- ²¹ More formulated the concept of Tzimtzum as follows : « Extendere possunt et contrahere, sine ulla extensionis augmentatione aut dependitione, sed sola in alium situm expansione et retractatione. » See his *Enchiridion metaphysicum* 28,6. Cf. August Schulze, « Der Einfluss Der Kabbala auf die Cambridge Platoniker Cudworth und More, » *Judaica* XXIII (1967), pp. 88-89 ; 95-96 ff.
- ²² Marjorie Nicolson, « Milton and the *Conjectura Cabbalistica*, » *Philological Quarterly*, VI (1927), 1 f.
- ²³ *Review of Religion*, VI (1942), p. 162.
- ²⁴ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland and New York : World Pub. Co., 1965), p. 301.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards : A Reappraisal* (Garden City : Anchor Books, 1966), p. 4.
- ²⁷ « Catalogue, » Yale MSS. A list of books, articles and quotation which Edwards began during his college years and continued throughout his theologic career.
- ²⁸ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York : Harcourt Brace and Co, 1936), pp. 223-224.
- ²⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 237-238 ; August Schulze, « Jakob Böhme und die Kabbala, » *Judaica* IV (1948) and XI (1955), pp. 12 ff.