

# A Comparative Analysis of Kabbalistic and Ismā`īlī World Cycles

Shinichi Yamamoto

## 1. Introduction

Ismā`īlism and Kabbalah have several idiosyncratic characteristics in common. For instance, both of them share as their esoteric doctrines the Neoplatonic emanation, the Gnostic Primordial Adam and the idea that letters played a formative role in the creation of the world.<sup>1)</sup> Among them the most remarkable is the doctrine of the world cycle or cyclical time.<sup>2)</sup> Several significant analyses have been undertaken to date, but their comparative research deals with only a small part of their similarities.<sup>3)</sup> The major reason is a dearth of clear historical evidence that can bridge the gap between Ismā`īlism and Kabbalah. Otherwise put, we have little material from either side that merits being compared in a philological and historical manner. My purpose in this paper, therefore, is not to search for an historical connection between them but to analyze logical structures in both Ismā`īlī and Kabbalistic world cycles. The heptad cycles in world history, paradigmatic perspective of religious laws and antinomism will be surveyed as similar but independent features.

And I will extend my observation to the later crystallization of their antinomistic proclivity. Their esoteric theories of cyclical time subsequently gave rise to messianic and eschatological movements: Nizārism and Sabbateanism. The former is one of the branches of Ismā`īlism in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; the latter had its root in Kabbalah and prevailed from the Ottoman Empire to all the Jewish communities. And last but not the least, both of them ended in failure without the terrestrial sovereignty of which they had dreamt becoming a reality. This is likely to be the inevitable consequence of realizing the theory of the world cycles. The present paper is the first to shed light on the common fate of the two messianic phenomena.

## 2. Cyclical Time in Ismā`īlism and Kabbalah

In Ismā`īlism the creation myth is extended to cover the whole monotheistic history. It is considered to be made up of six periods and a seventh period, just as God created the world in six days and afterwards rested on the seventh day. Each period was inaugurated by a prophet (*nabī*), also known

as an enunciator (*nāṭiq*), who announced a new revelation (*tanzīl*) to human beings. Each of the seven prophets was assisted by an executor of his will, also called a legate (*waṣī*). The legate transmitted the esoteric teaching to the seven Imāms. The last Imām became the new prophet at the onset of the next cycle. The prophets were as follows: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In the current sixth period, Muḥammad was a prophet and Alī was his legate; the last Imām who is to be designated as the seventh prophet will be a messianic figure called Qāim or Mahdī, in the final phase of human history. Thus the Ismā'īlī historical process consists of double septimal structures. There appear seven sets of prophets, legates and Imāms in seven periods. The seventh cycle is supposed to culminate in “the Great Resurrection (*Qiyāmat al-Qiyāmat*),” which Qāim will open as the herald of the new world.

Another key principle is the dichotomous viewpoints between “the period of Openness (*dawr al-kashf*)” and “the period of Occultation” (*dawr al-satr*); the former period represents the exoteric meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the Quran while the latter the esoteric meaning (*bāṭin*). The Quran used to be understood according to the esoteric meaning in “the period of Openness” and no laws were required at the outset, but the first demonic figure, Iblīs deprived Adam of the secret of the missionary (*da`wā*).<sup>4</sup> As a result, “the period of Openness” was over and “the period of Occultation” started, when exoteric and esoteric understanding could not be discerned. The seventh prophet Qāim would resume the primordial “Openness.” This cyclical time and the double meanings of the Quran were shared by other early mainstream theologians, such as Abu Yā`qūb al-Sijistānī (10c), Ḥamīd al-Kirmānī (d. 1017) and Nasir-e Khosraw (1004–1088).

The heptad cyclical time as a historical process was not a unique idea discovered merely in Ismā'īlism. The Jewish version of world cycle (*torat ha-shemittot*) began occupying a certain position in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Kabbalistic literature in Catalonia. The Kabbalists such as Nahmanides and Menahem Reccanati saw this idea as an esoteric doctrine.<sup>5</sup> Afterwards, *the Book of Shape* (*Sefer ha-Temunah*), the most significant book regarding the world cycle, was composed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by an anonymous author in southern France or more possibly in the Byzantium.<sup>6</sup> It discusses not only the world cycle but also the meaning of the shapes of the Hebrew letters. Throughout the history of Kabbalah, this doctrine has been a quintessential theory for part of the Kabbalists, who argued not only about terrestrial time but also about cosmic eschatology. In general, they postulated that one world cycle has seven thousand years and recurs seven times. They amount to forty-nine thousand years; and another millennium follows them. It is called “the Great Jubilee (*ha-Yovel ha-Gadol*).” The world, all told, amounts to fifty thousand years.

In this case as well, it is obvious that they got this idea from the biblical creation and one of the

divine commandments given to Moses and the Israelites.<sup>7)</sup> And as understood from the term *shemittah*, which comes after seven times seven years in the fiftieth or jubilee year (*shenat ha-yovel*), the Israelites were supposed to return their possessions such as slaves and fields to how they used to be, or to liberate them from their working period.<sup>8)</sup> In addition, unlike the Isma`ili world cycle, the Kabbalistic version has another later source: the Talmud. Many of the exponents of this theory refer to the following Talmudic dicta. The Talmudic rabbis, drawing on the biblical passages cited above, extended the earthly cyclical time to cosmic history. “R. Kattina said: Six thousand years shall the world exist, and one (thousand), it shall be desolate, as it is written, ‘And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day’ (Isaiah 2:11).” And, “Tanna debe Eliyyahu teaches: The world is to exist six thousand years. In the first two thousand there was desolation; two thousand years the Torah flourished; and the next two thousand years is the Messianic era.”<sup>9)</sup> According to these passages, the world lasts for six thousand years. Afterwards, the world will collapse during the final thousand years.

The Kabbalistic innovation in the world cycle is the introduction of plurality into the Torah. According to the Bible, God gave the Torah to Moses at Mt Sinai. Some Kabbalists revealed that this Torah *is* valid only in our seven-thousand-year generation. Rather there *was* and *will be* other Torahs that have other legal dimensions. Thus the Mosaic Torah in our period will become void at the end of seven thousand years; the new Torah will determine the future paradigm. The crux of this idea is that the current Torah lacks purity and wholeness because of God’s stern judgment, in which the prohibitions in the biblical law have their origin.

The Ismā`īlī version is unclear about the number of years and itemizes heroic figures instead, whereas the time scale is more unequivocal and no biblical figures are mentioned in *the Book of Shape*. Be that as it may, there is a striking similitude between Ismā`īlī and Kabbalistic cyclical time. The heptad cyclical time has eschatological and messianic hue in the both versions.

Furthermore, esoteric understanding of their canons gave birth to an antinomistic idea; both of them presume that the current canon or interpretation is legitimate exclusively in the current world cycle only. Their relativistic perspectives postulate plural paradigms changeable from cycle to cycle, and the meanings of the Quran and the Bible are not an ever-lasting single norm. In the case of Isma`ilism, on the one hand, the earliest theologians believed that Muḥammad ibn Ismā`īlī would reappear as the Qāim, abrogate the current *sharī`at*, and bring about “the Great Resurrection”. This antinomistic tone took clearer shape in the teaching of Duruz in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards Nizārism in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, both of which denounced the eternal validity of the *sharī`at*, and the latter put an emphatic point on the abolition of all the traditional laws. On the other hand, the

Kabbalistic world cycle and its antinomistic interpretation were adapted and elaborated by Sabbateanism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The self-proclaimed messiah, Sabbatai Tzevi was believed to abrogate the Mosaic Torah (*Torah de-Beriah*) and bring about the new Torah (*Torah de-Atzilut*) in the face of the dawn of the new era. Some of his followers took it to mean that they were discharged from the yoke of the commandments only through believing their messiah.

There are as many differences as similarities between the world cycle of Ismā'īlism and Kabbalah. Among them the most crucial is that in the Ismā'īlī version seven eras have already occurred in the history as we know it, whereas in Kabbalah the cycle in which we are now living is one of the seven cycles. Even so, each of the cycles has its own paradigmatic law, and it is to be abrogated at the end of the current cycle and renewed for the forthcoming redemption. This antinomistic idea triggered messianic and eschatological phenomena in both Ismā'īlism and Kabbalah. In the following chapters, I will offer a brief analysis of them in order to prepare the further investigation.

### **3. The Case of Nizārī Ismā'īlism**

In 1164, Ḥasan II (d.1166), a leader of Nizārī Ismā'īlism, proclaimed the end of “the period of Occultation” and the beginning of “the Great Resurrection” in front of his followers at the fortress of Alamūt in today’s Qazvin Province, northern Iran.<sup>10</sup> According to Ḥasan II’s teaching, “the Great Resurrection,” an accredited doctrine of early Ismā'īlism, had come and he was the Caliph of “the Qāim of the Resurrection.” The believers were able to attain the true sense of religious laws (*bāṭin*) through the ‘hidden’ Imām, and furthermore *sharī'at* had been abrogated in “the Great Resurrection.” According to Corbin, the observation of *discipline de l'arcane* at Alamūt was a triumph of the spiritual exegesis (*tawīl*) and a return to the truth (*ḥaqīqat*) on the emergence of “the Qāim of the Resurrection” (*zohur-e Qāim al-Qiyāmāt*).<sup>11</sup> However, to Corbin’s view it must be added that this proclamation was indubitably immersed in antinomistic eschatology.

In the words of Rāshid al-Dīn Ṭabīb (d. 1318), a contemporary Persian historian, when Ḥasan II proclaimed the coming of the new era: “He mounted the pulpit, which faced toward the Qibla and declared to the comrades: someone had come to him in secret from the leader, that is the supposed Imām, who was missing and nonexistent, and had brought an address, for their enlightenment, setting forth the doctrines of their faith. Then from the top of the pulpit he presented a clear and eloquent epistle, and at the end of the address he said, the Imām of our time sends you blessings and compassion, calling you his specially selected servants. He has lifted from you the burden of the obligation of the *sharī'at* and has brought you the Resurrection.”<sup>12</sup> And a Nizārī source extols the grandeur of Ḥasan

II: “Our Lord (*mawlā-nā*), the Qāim of the Resurrection, [...] is the Lord of all things in existence; he is the Lord who is the Absolute Existence (*wojūd-e motlaq*); He is all, there is no existence outside of him; all that is comes from him. He opens the gate of his mercy, making all, by the light of his knowledge, see, hear, speak, and live in eternity.”<sup>13)</sup> In this passage “our lord” indicates Ḥasan II as Imām and Qāim.<sup>14)</sup> He addressed the audience: “If they firmly believed, and seek for the Truth, they shall attain perfect knowledge (of Imām); they will know that Our Lord the Qāim of the Resurrection always is present in the world, always was, and always will be.”<sup>15)</sup> Even if the stories are embellished to dramatize the event, it is highly possible that Ḥasan II embarked on the spiritual revival of the original Nizārī Ismā‘īlism.

The breach of the *sharī‘at* was regarded as a symbolical action to marking the end of the legal period (*dawr-i sharī‘at*) and the dawn of “the Great Resurrection.” The announcement took place during Ramaḍān. Although Muslims are supposed to fast to commemorate the revelation of the Quran to the prophet Muḥammad, after Ḥasan II had delivered a solemn address in Arabic, “then he set up a table and seated people to break the fast; they made merry and exulted in the manner of the ritual festivals. He said, today is the Festival. Even after that the *malāḥida* [heretics] called the 17<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān the Festival of Resurrection; on that day they used to show their joy with wine and repose, and used to play and make entertainment openly.”<sup>16)</sup> According to Hodgson, it might have been more suitable to change the day of Alī’s death to the day of the resurrection of the dead and the advent of the Imām, and put an end to the rule of *taqiyya*.<sup>17)</sup>

However, despite this widely accepted description, there is no report of their indulging in any immoral and libertine customs. As Daftary attentively notes, the historical account of the declaration of “the Great Resurrection” is based on some Persian historians and Nizārī works of later times, and no contemporary internal sources have survived from Ḥasan II’s days. Considering the fact that many Nizārīs continued to follow the *sharī‘at* after the declaration, the later historical reports do not suffice to determine the actual influence on the whole community.<sup>18)</sup> Thus a more crucial sense should be added to their symbolic banquet. The revolution that Ḥasan II tried to bring about might not have been the virtual abrogation of all the law, but a new hegemony over Ismā‘īlism through would-be Caliphate. He believed that the claim of the true sense of religious laws would give a firm grounding to the newly established authority of Nizārism.

#### **4. The Case of Sabbateanism**

In 1665, Sabbatai Tzevi (1626–1676), an Ottoman Jew from Smyrna (modern-day İzmir),

proclaimed himself the long-awaited messiah, supported by his prophet Nathan Benjamin Ashkenazi (1643–1680), also known as Nathan of Gaza. Nathan gained fame as a remarkable Kabbalist in Gaza, where Sabbatai Tzevi called himself “the anointed of the God of Jacob (*Meshiah Elohe Ya'aqov*).” This proclamation was caused not only by Nathan’s conviction in Sabbatai Tzevi’s messiahship but also by Sabbatai Tzevi’s mystical interpretation of Nathan’s glossolalic prophecy.<sup>19</sup> But Nathan of Gaza was no less an intellectual propagandist of their messianic scheme than a numinous medium. He wrote a fair number of letters and penitential documents, calling for repentance to hail Sabbatai Tzevi as the messiah, to many Jewish communities from North Africa to Europe. The Kabbalist with great erudition and the messiah with spiritual charisma certainly gave vent to the eschatological atmosphere of the period.

In 1666, there happened a catalytic event; Sabbatai Tzevi, who should have brought about redemption to all believers, converted to Islam. At this juncture, Sabbateanism as a mass movement was over, and the historical threshold of ‘heresy’ was laid down. However, for the Sabbatean Kabbalists, his apostasy was not a mere setback in the least but a symbolic mission that only the true messiah could perform. Those who did not surrender their belief in Sabbatai Tzevi tried to discover the secret of this seemingly tragic denouement. No wonder Nathan was amongst them. He penned several Kabbalistic treatises in the aftermath of the apostasy, declaring that not merely Sabbatai Tzevi but all believers who still believed in him would be redeemed in the coming messianic age. In the new stage of history, the current commandments (*mitzvot*) also known as *Torah de-Beriah* were to be abolished and the new Torah, or *Torah de-Atzilut*, would be given to them. So-called Sabbatean antinomism had roots deep in the esoteric idea of the double Torahs. The antinomistic foundation that Nathan laid originated from the classic Kabbalistic doctrines. One of the most remarkable is the impact of the antinomistic theory of the world cycle.<sup>20</sup>

Nathan wrote that the appearance of Sabbatai Tzevi was a good omen for the new *shemittah*, and the redemptive era was about to commence. Sabbatai Tzevi was notorious for his blasphemous behavior and transgression of commandments, but Nathan justified this on the grounds that the true messiah was free to break the old prescriptions and customs. So Nathan depicted Sabbatai Tzevi as a transcendental persona who could stand between good and evil. However, it is noteworthy that he never recommended conversion to the followers. On the contrary, he advised them not to approach their messiah when he received the heavenly illumination so that they could eschew being converted to Islam.<sup>21</sup> In Salonika, he taught Kabbalistic piety to his disciples, but there is no trace of antinomistic or unlawful inclination.

In order to understand his true intention, we need to refer to his version of the world cycle. Nathan

revealed his idea in *the Book of Creation (Sefer ha-Beriah)*, which was authored around 1670. He did not calculate the number of years for the messianic days probably because everything became obscure after Sabbatai Tzevi's conversion. Instead, his emphasis is on the pure belief in the messiah and the penitential effort for the messianic era. In *the Book of Creation*, he remarks: "When the affair of the gates finishes (the world will have come to the end), fifty thousand generations, which will arrive in the seven world cycles of the Jubilee, will also finish. [...] The details of years in each generation are not discerned because some expand them and others reduce them. [...] There is no preciseness. For all the issues are dependent upon what human beings choose. [...] Even the number of two thousand years is not determined. The number is likely to dwindle in accordance with that of the generations."<sup>22)</sup> Nathan obviously reconciles himself to the virtual failure of his messianic agenda. He no longer insisted on immediate redemption; the modest attitude toward the messianic era in the future is more discernible in this passage.<sup>23)</sup>

Some of the followers of Sabbatai Tzevi, unlike the majority of the Sabbateans, converted to Islam in Salonika and changed their traditional Jewish customs and calendars into the original Sabbatean version. They claimed the coming of the new *shemittah* and the life of *Torah de-Atzilut*. But Nathan's interpretation of the world cycle conforms to the fact that many of the Sabbatean Kabbalists chose to remain in Judaism after the messiah's apostasy.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is practically impossible to demonstrate the influence of Ismā'īlism on Kabbalah. Ismā'īlism flourished in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Yemen from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the Kabbalistic world cycle appeared in northern Spain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The origin of *the Book of Shape* might be Provence or Byzantium in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The two trends do not in the least overlap in terms of time and geography.

However, the intriguing fact about this theory is that both of them caused antinomistic messianic movements, which finally resulted in the failure and frustration of their messianic scheme. Both Hasan II and Sabbatai Tzevi could not realize true redemption. Afterwards, their successors attenuated the radical doctrines and adapted themselves to the status quo or the unredeemed reality. This is the unavoidable terminus of the antinomistic theory of the world cycle.<sup>24)</sup>

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**Notes**

- 1) The divine archetype of Adam has a Gnosticistic origin. The Great Human (*Insān Kabīr*) and its emanated beings in the Ismā'īlī hierarchical theory is, however, a fusion of Gnostic and Arabo-Persian Neoplatonic versions. Corbin points out the similitude between the Angel Zervān of Mazdaism and the Spiritual Adam (*Adam Rūhānī*) of Ismā'īlism. Henri Corbin, *Temps cyclique et gnose ismaélienne* (Paris, 1982), 49. In this regard, the Primordial Adam (*Adam Qadmon*) in Kabbalah is likely to be placed as a subsequent development of the Ismā'īlī spiritual human. The Gnostic origin of the Primordial Man is argued by Scholem. Gershom Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (Berlin, 1962), 123–126. On the *Kūnī-Qadar* cosmogony, Halm draws on Abu Yā'qūb al-Sijjistānī's *the Book of Pride*. See Heinz Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der Frühen Ismā'īliya: Eine Studie zur Islamischen Gnosis* (Wiesbaden, 1978), 53–66; 209–213. On the version of Abū 'Isā al-Murshid's, see Samuel Miklos Stern, *Studies in Early Ismā'īlism* (Jerusalem, 1983), 6–26. Suffice it here to state that the creative power of the Hebrew alphabets are prevalent in kabbalistic literature from *Sefer Yetzirah* through *Sefer ha-Zohar*.
- 2) Specifically on the parallel of the doctrine of the world cycle between Ismā'īlism and Kabbalah, see Shlomo Pines, “Shī'ite Terms of Conceptions in Judah Halevi's Kuzari,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980), 243–247; Gershom Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 400; Sarah Heller Wilensky, “Messianism, Eschatology and Utopia in the Philosophico-Mythical Trend of the Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah” [Hebrew], *Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Zvi Baras (Jerusalem, 1983), 230; Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2003), 21–23.
- 3) Some scholars have assumed the influence of Ismā'īlism upon Kabbalah. Shlomo Pines, “La longue recension de la Théologie d'Aristote dans ses rapports avec la doctrines ismaélienne,” *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 22 (1954), 7–20; Moshe Idel, “The Sefirot above the Sefirot,” *Tarbiz* 51 (1981–82), 270–273; Amos Goldreich, “The Theology of the Iyyun Circle and a Possible Source of the Term ‘*Ahadut Shava*’” [Hebrew], *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Joseph Dan (Jerusalem, 1987), 149–156.
- 4) Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismā'īlīs against the Islamic World* (Chicago, 1955), 232.
- 5) On the general introduction to the kabbalistic world cycle, see Gershom Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, 407–420. Moshe Idel categorizes three types of time in Judaism, one of which is cosmic cyclical time with, or *macrochronos* in his terminology. Kabbalists offered variegated types of world cycle theories. On more bibliographical information, see Moshe Idel, ““Higher than Time”: Observations on Some Concepts of Time in Kabbalah and Hasidism,” *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism: That Which is Before and That Which is After*, ed. by Brian Ogren (Leiden, 2015), 179–185.
- 6) The place of composition of *the Book of the Shape*, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy: A Survey*

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- (New Haven, 2010), 290–291.
- 7) Exodus 20:8–11.
  - 8) Leviticus 25:8, 10
  - 9) The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a.
  - 10) On the eschatology of Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, I refer to Henry Corbin, “Symboles choisis de la Roseraie du Mystère, de Mahmūd Shabestarī,” *Trilogie Ismaélienne* (Paris, 1961), (3)–(21); Jorunn J. Buckley, “The Nszari Ismailites’ Abolishment of The Sharia: During the “Great Resurrection” of 1164 A.D./559 A.H.,” *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984). 137–165. On the historiography of Nizārism during the Alamūt period, I refer to Hodgson, *Ibid.*; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge University Press 1990. 324–434.
  - 11) Corbin, *Ibid.*, (5).
  - 12) Hodgson, *Ibid.*, 149–150. Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭabīb’s *Jāmi` al-Tawārīkh* (1310) is one of the earliest records from Alamūt period. Farhad Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis* (Lanham, 2012), 87–88.
  - 13) *Kalam-i Pir: a treatise on Ismaili doctrine, also (wrongly) called Haft-Babi Shah Sayyid Nasir*, edited in original Persian and translated into English by W. Ivanow (Bombay, 1935), 61. See also Corbin’s translation in Corbin, *ibid.*, *Trilogie Ismaélienne*, (12).
  - 14) *Kalam-i Pir*, 56.
  - 15) *Ibid.*, 62.
  - 16) Hodgson, *Ibid.*, 150. See also 155–159.
  - 17) In the time of “the Great Resurrection,” they thought that there was no need to dissimilate their religious identity. *Ibid.*, 156.
  - 18) Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 390–391.
  - 19) Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, 1976), 203–223.
  - 20) As far as I know, among Nathan and his disciples’ writings, the only reference to *the Book of Shape* is found in the epistle of Abraham Peretz. Gershom Scholem, “The Commentary on Psalms from Sabbatai Tzevi’s Circle in Adrianople,” *Researches in Sabbateanism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1991), 156–157. Abraham Peretz’s understanding of the world cycle is congruent with that of Nathan.
  - 21) Gershom Scholem, “The Epistle Magen Abraham,” *Researches in Sabbateanism*, 94.
  - 22) Nathan Benjamin Ashkenazi, *The Book of Creation* Part. 2, 29b–30a. Ms. Berlin Oct. 3057. My translation is based on the unpublished draft typed by Chaim Wirszubski. Gershom Scholem Library Catalogue R. 5079.1. in the National Library of Israel.
  - 23) For more details on Nathan’s retreat to a moderate attitude toward messianism, see Shinichi Yamamoto, *The Origins and Developments of Sabbatean Antinomism*, Doctral Dissertation [Japanese] (University of Tokyo, 2011), 25–113.
  - 24) This paper is just a part of my ongoing research of the world cycle and its repercussion on Nizārī Ismāʿīlism and Sabbateanism.