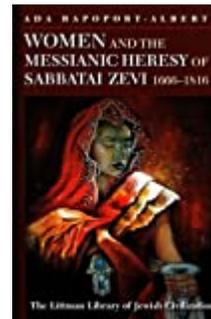




Ada Rapoport-Albert. *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816.* Translated by Deborah Greniman. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011. xvi + 386 pp. \$64.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-904113-84-3.



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Female Messiahs in Judaism

In recent years, the study of Sabbatianism and its final phase, Frankism, has experienced a renaissance. The movement was first studied on a large scale by Gershom Scholem; currently many books and articles are being published which seek to undermine his “authority” on the subjects but these rarely offer new approaches or interpretations. Ada Rapoport-Albert’s book is a breakthrough in this field, interpreting previously known sources in a way that sets up new research areas that had been overlooked or ignored.

Rapoport-Albert examines the role of women in Sabbatianism by incorporating a number of innovative studies on women in Hasidism. She begins with the theme of women in Sabbatianism by arguing that women are the factor that distinguishes this mystical-messianic movement from others: “One of Sabbatianism’s most distinctive and persistent features was the high visibility of women within its ranks. They were among the movement’s earliest and most ardent supporters—championing the messianic cause, proclaiming its gospel, and from time to time emerging as its chief protagonists” (pp. 11-

12). She then adds that if one wants to look for the roots of “feminism” in the premodern period it can be found precisely in Sabbatianism, not Hasidism. It is this statement that she tries to prove within the pages of her book.

In the first chapters she examines all the available sources that mention the involvement of women in Sabbatianism. She includes the works of Jewish authors (Jacob Sasportas, Barukh of Arezzo, Leib ben Ozer, Jacob Emden, and others) previously available to authors, but through her interpretation adds new meaning and dimension. She also points to the non-Jewish sources as contributions. For example, the Dutch clergyman Thomas Coenen, who, when describing the behavior of the Jews in Smyrna during the activity of Sabbatai Zevi, points out that a “great number of prophets came to light at that time, men and women, youths and young girls, and even children” (p. 16).

According to Rapoport-Albert, female prophets occupied an important place in Sabbatianism that Scholem underestimated. Interestingly, all of the those mentioned

in this book who supported Sabbatai Zevi came from the Turkish empire or the Sephardic diaspora except for Sarah, the third wife of Sabbatai Zevi. She became a prophet before she became a wife of the Messiah and had come from Poland and acted as a prophet in Italy and the Middle East. To detect the possible origin of this phenomenon, Rapoport-Albert examines the place of female prophets and visionaries in Judaism in different epochs, starting with the Bible and then rabbinic literature through the documents of the Cairo Geniza and Ashkenazi Hasidism. She devotes a lot of time to women from the circle of Lurianic Kabbalah, especially in the writings of Haim Vital. Also important to the author, are the circles of *conversos* (those who had converted but continued to secretly practice Judaism), which later provided many supporters for Sabbatai Zevi. In a broader context, she also looks for a relationship between different denominations and sects in Protestantism and the Bektashi Sufi group and the impact they had on Sabbatai Zevi and the Sabbatians of Thessaloniki. According to the Rapoport-Albert, female prophets were present in Sabbatianism from its inception to its collapse, but the scale of their participation differed at various times.

Another interesting subject examined in the book is virginity. In addition to various sexual practices and prostitution, commitment to preserving virginity was paradoxically one of the main characteristics of Sabbatianism. This is attributed to Christian influences on the doctrine. Rapoport-Albert draws attention to the religious activity of women in Sabbatianism that was expressed through sexual relations with other women's husbands (various partners) and seen as being an active part in the work of *tikkun* (rectification). She suggests that "we may well suppose that their active involvement with Sabbatianism gave these women a new sense of power and self-worth" (p. 90). This commitment was also noticed by opponents of Sabbatians. The author addresses their criticisms of the *herem* (ban). For example, in Brody and the Va'ad Arba' Aratzot (Council of the Four Lands), accusations were directed against "the men and women," which Rapoport-Albert highlights as being rare in earlier cases of this sort (pp. 102-103). From this it follows that women in Sabbatianism were seen as a threat equally with men. One might guess that these *herems* were formed also for the admission of women to study Torah, but above all for the Zohar and Kabbalah. Women

in Sabbatianism and then in Frankism were admitted to such egalitarian practices, but as is pointed out, innovations have gone even further, extending the study of Kabbalah to non-Jews. Rapoport-Albert asks why this came about and whether it was influenced by a universalist and syncretic doctrine of redemption that also included non-Jews. She also asks how this could be related to the conversion of Sabbatians to Islam and Christianity (p. 155).

According to the author, egalitarianism appeared in full in the immediate vicinity of the "sisters" and "brothers" of Jacob Frank, and especially in the messianic incarnation of Eva Frank (pp. 157-174). In search of foreign influence in the conception of the Jewish female Messiah, Rapoport-Albert turns also toward the Orthodox Church, especially the Old Believers. Possible influences have already been discussed by Scholem, who described the parallels among Orthodox sects (Khlysty) and Hasidism. In the chapter "The Mother of God': Frank and the Russian Sectarists" –based on original sources and multilingual studies–Rapoport-Albert also draws attention to the relationship between Old Believers and Frankists, pointing to many similarities. However, she believes that the emergence of the idea of the Redemptive Maiden in Frankism was influenced primarily by the traditions drawn from Jewish mysticism and inspired by the cult of the Black Madonna in Czestochowa.

In the concluding chapter, she suggests that in Sabbatianism we are dealing with two tendencies: egalitarian and libertine. The first strove to equalize the status of men and women, and was characterized by, among other features, women's participation in the messianic campaign of Sabbatai Zevi. The second was associated with dropping the "weight of tradition and law." This second theme is often seen by observers as only being associated with the right to sexual relationships. Rapoport-Albert argues that in Hasidism, whose adherents feared a situation similar to that which had occurred in Sabbatianism, neither tendency took root.

In conclusion, Ada Rapoport-Albert's book is a thorough analysis of sources. It is very well documented and very inspiring. The book should not only be studied by those who are interested in Sabbatianism and gender studies, but also those interested in the historical study of religion, ideology, and ideas.

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