



Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666 - 1816 (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

By Ada Rapoport-Albert

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Women are conspicuously absent from the Jewish mystical tradition. Even if historically some Jewish women may have experienced mystical revelations and led richly productive spiritual lives, the tradition does not preserve any record of their experiences or insights. Only the chance survival of scant evidence suggests that, at various times and places, individual Jewish women did pursue the path of mystical piety or prophetic spirituality, but it appears that they were generally censured, and efforts were made to suppress their activities. This contrasts sharply with the fully acknowledged prominence of women in the mystical traditions of both Christianity and Islam. It is against this background that the mystical messianic movement centred on the personality of Sabbatai Zevi (1626 - 76) stands out as a unique and remarkable exception. Sabbatai Zevi addressed to women a highly original liberationist message, proclaiming that he had come to make them 'as happy as men' by releasing them from the pangs of childbirth and the subjugation to their husbands that were ordained for women as a consequence of the primordial sin.

This unprecedented redemptive vision became an integral part of Sabbatian eschatology, which the messianists believed to be unfolding and experienced in the present. Their New Law, superseding the Old with the dawning of the messianic era, overturned the traditional halakhic norms that distinguished and regulated relations between the sexes. This was expressed not only in the outlandish ritual transgression of sexual prohibitions, in which Sabbatian women were notoriously implicated, but also in the apparent adoption of the idea - alien to rabbinic Judaism - that virginity, celibacy, or sexual abstinence were conducive to women's spiritual empowerment. Ada Rapoport-Albert traces the diverse manifestations of this vision in every phase of Sabbatianism and its offshoots. These include the early promotion of women to centre-stage as messianic prophetesses; their independent affiliation with the movement in their own right; their initiation in the esoteric teachings of the kabbalah; and their full incorporation, on a par with men, into the ritual and devotional life of the messianic community.

Their investment with authority was such as to elevate the messiah's wife (a figure mostly absent from traditional messianic speculations) to the rank of full messianic consort, sharing in her husband's redemptive mission as well as his divine dimension. By the late eighteenth century, a syncretistic cult had developed that recognized in Eva - the unmarried daughter of Jacob Frank, one of Sabbatai Zevi's apostate messianic successors - an incarnate female aspect of the kabbalistic godhead, worshipped by her father's devotees as 'Holy Virgin' and female messiah. This was the culmination of the Sabbatian endeavour to transcend the traditional gender paradigm that had excluded women from the public arena of Jewish spiritual life.

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- Rank: #778402 in Books
- Published on: 2015-12-31

- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .80" w x 9.10" l, 1.24 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 400 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

'Not only breaks down many stereotypes about the roles of women in Judaism and Jewish society, but it is also a major contribution to understanding how Sabbatianism and Frankism spread and operated . . . rich in original ideas and insights. While many of the topics call for further research, the rich documentation Rapoport-Albert brings to bear on the topics leave little room for doubt that a call for changed gender roles, to a greater or lesser degree, was a central element in the Sabbatian and Frankist movements. It is a very stimulating contribution to the literature on Kabbalah, on modern religious movements, on gender history, as well as on conservative responses.' Shaul Stampfer, Religious Studies Review 'Exhaustively researched and brilliantly written . . . One aspect of Frankism on which Rapoport-Albert is especially good is the peculiar tension between sexual libertinism and asceticism.' David Biale, Jewish Review of Books 'A fascinating book . . . Rapoport-Albert shows with great scholarly detail that women were actively involved in the Sabbatian movement . . . Some of the details in this volume are startling, but the work opens up an intriguing and valuable window to the status of women in east European Jewish life.' Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Journal 'A book of importance for all those interested in gender issues related to Jews and Judaism, as well as for those engaged in the study of Jewish mysticism. It further challenges people engaged in the study of Jews and Judaism in the early modern period to pay careful attention to the ways in which Sabbatian believers influenced historical developments both in direct and dialectical ways.' Ira Robinson, IsraBlog: Canadian Institute for Jewish Research 'A breakthrough in this field, interpreting previously known sources in a way that sets up new research areas that have been overlooked or ignored . . . 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.' Michal Galas, H-Judaic 'To be congratulated for demonstrating that Jewish messianic mysticism, far from being an arcane scholarly domain of interest only to textual specialists, is a topic of key significance to anyone interested in the processes through which the corporatist boundaries of eighteenth-century European society travelled.' Adam Sutcliffe, Eighteenth-Century Studies 'An important work in the history of Sabbatianism and Jewish women's studies. Highly recommended.' Daniel Schiede, Association of Jewish Libraries Review 'Impressive.' Joshua Schwartz, Ancient Traditions, New Conversations (Yeshiva University Law School blog)

About the Author

Ada Rapoport-Albert is Professor Emerita of Jewish Studies and former Head of the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at UCL (University College London). Born in Israel, she studied at UCL, and has also taught at the Oriental Institute in Oxford and as a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School, Stanford University, Columbia University, and the University of Munich. She is the author of various studies on the history of hasidism, and the editor of *Hasidism Reappraised* (Littman Library, 1996), *Essays in Jewish Historiography* (1988), *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky* (with Steven J. Zipperstein, 1988), and *Let the Old Make Way for the New: Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Eastern European Jewry* Presented to Immanuel Etkes (with David Assaf, 2009).

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