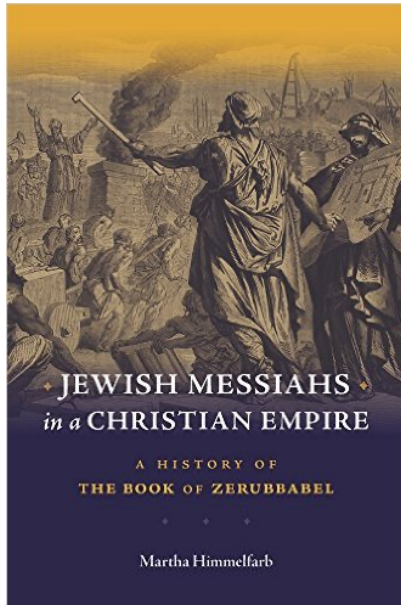


RBL 11/2021



Martha Himmelfarb

Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire: A History of the Book of Zerubbabel

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 220.
Cloth. \$39.95. ISBN 9780674057623.

J. Thomas Hewitt
University of Aberdeen

The Book of Zerubbabel, or *Sefer Zerubbabel*, is a curious late antique Jewish text. It relays a prophecy featuring a pair of messiahs, a warrior mother of a messiah, and a satanic foe born of a statue of a virgin. For such a fascinating and potentially historically significant text that has never received a book-length treatment (2), one would feel fortunate to find newly available, an annotated translation, critical introduction, and commentary by a leading expert. Martha Himmelfarb delivers each of these fundamentals in her latest book, but she also gives much more. Himmelfarb's earlier studies such as *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* and *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* might be considered required reading on the raveled relation between Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, and *Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire: A History of the Book of Zerubbabel* is a new contribution in a similar vein. As signaled by its subtitle, the book's primary concern is the *history* of *Sefer Zerubbabel*, not just the history of the text itself—why it was written, what traditions it drew upon, and how it was received—but also the broader history of the entangled messianisms of Judaism and Christianity to which *Sefer Zerubbabel* attests.

The book consists of six chapters framed on one end by an introduction and on the other by a conclusion and an appendix. Readers would do well to turn first to the appendix, where

they will find Himmelfarb's translation of *Sefer Zerubbabel* (based on the *Sefer Hazikoronot* manuscript). The translation is annotated with comments on various textual and interpretative difficulties, while in the body of the translation Himmelfarb provides parenthetical references to the sources of *Sefer Zerubbabel*'s profuse scriptural language. Given that all ancient messiah discourse, however variegated, is consistently characterized by the creative appropriation of scriptural language, these parenthetical references present essential evidence for understanding how *Sefer Zerubbabel* participates in the broader interpretative enterprise of messiah speculation. The introduction to the book begins with a summary of *Sefer Zerubbabel*'s narrative, highlighting elements that are distinctive among "Jewish messianic expectations" (5). These include a place of prominence for the mother of the Davidic messiah, a description of that Davidic messiah indebted to Isa 53, a fulsome account of the career of a second messiah son of Joseph, and the aforementioned antichrist whose mother is apparently a statue of the Virgin Mary. Himmelfarb then identifies two settings crucial for understanding *Sefer Zerubbabel*: Byzantine and Christian culture and politics, on the one hand, and Jewish, especially rabbinic, texts and traditions, on the other. The book's brief conclusion offers a useful recapitulation of its overarching argument that the relation between rabbinic literature and *Sefer Zerubbabel* is not one of dependence of the latter on the former but rather of independent responses to popular Jewish traditions, with the rabbis exhibiting ambivalence toward popular messianic hopes, while *Sefer Zerubbabel* embraces and develops them.

Turning to the body of the book, chapter 1, "Text and Context," offers the aforementioned critical introduction to *Sefer Zerubbabel*. Himmelfarb describes textual witnesses, between which there are some significant differences. She discusses formal features, contending that the book should be understood generically not as an apocalypse but as an imitation of biblical prophecy, an imitative effort evinced by the author's use of Biblical Hebrew rather than Rabbinic Hebrew. Himmelfarb dates *Sefer Zerubbabel* in the early seventh century, which fits the text's knowledge of the Byzantine Christian notion of the Virgin Mary as protector of Constantinople and the text's antipathy to the learned elite, antipathy akin to that found in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, also seventh century.

Chapters 2–5 survey the *dramatis personae* of *Sefer Zerubbabel*. Chapter 2, "The Mother of the Messiah," focuses on Hephzibah, warrior mother of the Davidic messiah and the ways in which her depiction is shaped by two streams of influence. First, Himmelfarb understands *Sefer Zerubbabel* not as putting a positive spin on the negative depiction of the messiah's mother found in the Yerushalmi (y. Ber. 2.4, 12–14) but as drawing upon a putative popular Jewish story of a more sympathetic messiah's mother, a tale to which the Yerushalmi account itself is a subversive rabbinic reaction. Second, *Sefer Zerubbabel*'s development of this popular myth of a nurturing messiah's mother into a tale of a warrior messiah's mother is best explained, according to Himmelfarb, as an embracing of popular

Jewish messianic hopes so as to reshape them in response to the previously mentioned Christian notion of Mary as a martial defender. Chapter 3, “The Messiah Son of David and the Suffering Servant,” turns to Hephzibah’s son, the Davidic messiah Menahem. Himmelfarb’s discussion of this first of Sefer Zerubbabel’s two messiahs is wide-ranging, but her central argument is analogous to that concerning Hephzibah. While both the Bavli (b. San. 98a) and Sefer Zerubbabel depict a suffering servant messiah (a messianic interpretation of Isa 53 arguably absent elsewhere among texts predating Sefer Zerubbabel), the two messianic portraits should be regarded as “independent developments of popular traditions” (74, 78). Furthermore, while the rabbinic development of those traditions serves to dampen said popular messianic hopes, Sefer Zerubbabel’s story of Menahem endorses them. Chapter 4, “The Servant-Messiah beyond Sefer Zerubbabel,” is a continued study of the idea of a Jewish messiah based on Isa 53. After describing two texts contemporary to Sefer Zerubbabel (“Az milifnei vereishit” and Pesiqta Rabbati) that also show a positive interest in the notion of the messiah’s vicarious suffering despite an awareness of the notion’s importance for Christians, Himmelfarb provides a more extended analysis of Targum Jonathan’s very different messianic interpretation of Isa 53 in which the messiah’s suffering is eliminated entirely. Himmelfarb contends that this elimination is “an attempt to protect Isaiah 53 as a messianic prophecy” (97–98) in response to polemics against readings of Isa 53, Christian *and* Jewish, in which a more-than-human messiah physically suffers (see 70–71; Origen, *Cels.* 6.75). This “attempt to protect” implies for Himmelfarb the significance of a suffering messiah in Judaism predating Sefer Zerubbabel and thus supports her postulation of a popular Jewish tradition, taken up by Sefer Zerubbabel, about a suffering Davidic messiah. Chapter 5, “The Dying Messiah Son of Joseph,” turns to Sefer Zerubbabel’s second messiah, Nehemiah. Unlike the text’s account of the suffering messiah son of David, its full account of a dying messiah son of Joseph is a *novum* in Jewish literature prior to the Muslim conquest. Nevertheless, Himmelfarb contends that this dying messiah is not Sefer Zerubbabel’s invention. While she remains unconvinced of the existence of any traditions about a messiah son of Joseph in Second Temple non-Christian literature, Himmelfarb does find allusions to such a figure in rabbinic literature (Genesis Rabbah and the Bavli). Her contention concerning the relation of Sefer Zerubbabel to these rabbinic texts is again analogous to the arguments of chapters 2 and 3. Both the rabbis and Sefer Zerubbabel are aware of popular Jewish tales about a messiah son of Joseph, but the rabbis were wary of such stories while Sefer Zerubbabel embraced them.

Finally, chapter 6, “Sefer Zerubbabel after Islam,” provides a chronologically broad “sketch” (122) of the text’s reception through late antiquity and the Middle Ages, up to the seventeenth century when it was used to support the movement of Shabbetai Zvi, “the most important Jewish messianic claimant since Jesus” (120). Himmelfarb argues that the longevity of interest in Sefer Zerubbabel was due not to its perceived authority but to those

elements of its narrative that are absent from rabbinic literature: a messiah son of Joseph who dies for the Jewish people and an eschatological antichrist.

Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire is a masterful study. As the first book-length treatment of Sefer Zerubbabel, Himmelfarb's book is obviously essential for those interested in the text or its historical settings (and were her book one among several such treatments, I suspect it would be one of the most consequential). However, for those whose interests are broader than, or adjacent to Sefer Zerubbabel—whether messianism, ancient scriptural interpretation, apocalyptic and eschatological traditions, the place of rabbinic Judaism in broader Jewish culture, or the relation between the so-called parted ways of Judaism and Christianity—Himmelfarb's book would be an invaluable case study. It would serve as a warning about the often-underestimated complexities of ascertaining historical settings, streams of influence, and extra-textual traditions. It would also serve as a model of cautious, subtle, and creative reasoning, which does not shy away from responsible historical reconstruction in the face of limited evidence. In particular, *Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire* reminds us that, just because two texts contain similar traditions, it does not mean the later one is dependent on the earlier one. There may be other, unconsidered sources to which both texts are indebted. Moreover, Himmelfarb rightly challenges the simplistic presumption that ancient Jews could never have accepted and adapted a given idea merely because it was prominent in Christian thought. Divergence and convergence may occur in tandem.

These strengths define the quality of Himmelfarb's book, but that excellent book is not without its weaknesses. Some of these limitations are rather minor. For instance, I find endnotes cumbersome, and, more importantly, I would quibble with the use of both "anointed" and "messiah" to render *mašīaḥ*, since when this is done "messiah" tends to connote a specialized meaning that is more a reflection of modern scholarly tradition than ancient messiah texts. Other weaknesses are more significant. One such issue is the difficulty with reconstructing "popular Jewish traditions" for which we have no direct evidence (115). While I have just commended Himmelfarb for her willingness to postulate unconsidered sources of influence, and while Himmelfarb presents evidence sufficient to warrant appeal to extratextual traditions, her study would be enhanced by a more fulsome hypothesis of what precisely those traditions consist of, why direct evidence for them is unavailable, and why Sefer Zerubbabel and the rabbis respond to them differently. A second concern has to do with the historical situations that may have prompted the messiah speculation of Sefer Zerubbabel. Himmelfarb argues powerfully for Sefer Zerubbabel's affinity for popular Jewish messianic hopes, which were received less enthusiastically by the rabbis, and her account of the impact Byzantine Christian veneration of Mary on Sefer Zerubbabel is fine-grained and more than plausible. After Himmelfarb's introduction, however, she does not return to consider more substantially how "the disappointment of

the expectations raised by the temporary end of Christian rule in Jerusalem” in the early seventh century (30) relates to Sefer Zerubbabel. How specifically were the hopes expressed in Sefer Zerubbabel a balm to that disappointment? And why was it that popular Jewish tradition could offer that balm while rabbinic Judaism could not? To pose these questions, though, is really to acknowledge again the strength of Himmelfarb’s *Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire*, for these unanswered questions are really conceivable only in the light of what Himmelfarb has masterfully demonstrated.