

RBL 03/30/2000

**Schäfer, Peter and Mark R. Cohen, eds.**  
***Toward the Millenium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco***

Studies in the History of Religions 77

Leiden: Brill, 1998. Pp. vi + 450, Cloth, DGL 275.46/\$154, ISBN 9004110372.

Stephen L. Cook  
Virginia Theological Seminary  
Alexandria, VA 22304

This wide-ranging collection of learned studies of messianism had its genesis in a yearlong seminar on messianism at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1995-1996. The volumes' essays stem from papers presented in that seminar and at its concluding two-day international symposium held at the Institute and Princeton University. The volume focuses on the appearance of messianism in the Bible, and in early, medieval, and modern Judaism. Additional essays treat messianism in Greco-Roman writings, at points in the history of Christianity, and in several modern contexts, including contexts in India, Germany, and the United States. The essays appear in the chronological sequence of their topics. Clearly, the scope of this volume goes well beyond the biblical period. Nevertheless, the book's strides towards a fuller understanding of the general phenomenon of messianism, and of its many historical elaborations, shed significant light on messianism's biblical roots.

The book's 16 essays and their contributors are as follows: "Diversity and Interaction: Messiahs in Early Judaism," by Schäfer; "Messiahs and their Followers," by John G. Gager; "Messianic Elements in the Prechristian Greco-Roman World," by Christian Habicht; "Midrash and Messianism: Some Theologies of Suffering and Salvation," by Michael Fishbane; "Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist and the Origins and Dating of the Sefer Zerubbavel," by Joseph Dan; "Jewish Messianic Expectations towards 1240 and Christian Reactions," by Israel Jacob Yuval; "The Eschatological Imperative: Messianism and Holy War in Europe, 1260-1556," by Norman Housley; "The Millennial Moment: Revolution and Radical Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain," by Sara T. Nalle; "Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi: A New Approach to Sabbateanism," by Moshe Idel; "The Engenderment of Messianic Politics: Symbolic Significance of Sabbatai Şevi's Coronation," by Elliot R. Wolfson; "Salvation through Philology: The Poetical Messianism of Quirinus Kuhlmann (1651-1689)," by Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann; "The Messianic Claim of Ghulām Aḥmad," by Yohanan Friedmann; "Messianism in the Political Culture of the Weimar Republic," by Klaus Schreiner; "Lines, Circles, Points:

Messianic Epistemology in Cohen, Rosenzweig and Benjamin," by Robert Gibbs; "The Lubavitch Messianic Resurgence: The Historical and Mystical Background 1939-1996," by Rachel Elior; and "Patterns of the End: Textual Weaving from Qumran to Waco," by James D. Tabor.

Several helpful stances towards messianism emerged in the collection that bear highlighting. The volume's opening essays provide working definitions of the concept of "Messiah" that are sufficiently broad to encompass the diverse expectations of a Messiah in antiquity and in later Judaism, Christianity, and in secular ideologies. Both Schäfer and Gager take messianism to denote the belief in a salvation figure whose advent at the end of history will usher in a restored world of blessing and purity. The definition allows for a plethora of messianic figures with diverse identities and salvific roles. This accords well with the actual variety of messianic expectations in the history of Judaism and of Christianity as well as in other cultural contexts.

With only a few exceptions, the volume's contributors take a helpfully sympathetic approach towards their subject matter, the various Messiah figures of history and their followers. Mostly they do not minimize and denigrate messianic leaders and their movements as either socially marginal or psychologically irrational. (Of course, mainstream messianic yearning can lead to mass pathology and evil. This is clear from Klaus Schreiner's discussion of how messianic thought captured the political culture of the Weimar Republic.) The essayists provide a panoramic sampling of the many messianic configurations and constellations generated by messianic expectation over the past two thousand years or more. The diversity of messianic figures throughout history seems matched only by the fascinating variety of their action programs preparing for the new millennium. The seventeenth-century Christian Messiah, Quirinus Kuhlmann, evoked the messianic age by the force of his poetic words. The nineteenth-century action program of the Muslim Messiah, of Ghulām Aḥmad, was largely focused on refuting Christianity. The modern Lubavitch messianic resurgence in New York City combined a social program of meeting family-welfare and educational needs with a public messianic campaign aimed at forcing heaven's hand in revealing their leader as the Messiah.

The collection's opening essays make clear the variety of early Jewish messianic expectations in late biblical times through the first century C.E. What later became the mainstream idea of a Davidic Messiah-king originally competed with other strong expectations, including hopes for priests, prophets, primal humans, and supernatural beings as Messiah figures. These various expected Messiahs fall along a fascinating continuum from those having a rather passive role to those with a very active role in bringing in the millennial era. Surveying the broad spectrum of early Jewish messianic hope renewed my appreciation for the Hebrew Bible's rich and multifaceted potential for inspiring messianic expectation.

The question of the Messiah's ontological status arose in one way or another in several of the collection's essays. The Messiah is a human or human-like figure, but that figure may also manifest a sacral, supernatural, or even divine form. The expectation that the Messiah will have a divine form has roots in the sacral kingship of the Hebrew Bible and in Daniel's "Son of Man." The latter figure is a supernatural, heavenly being according to Schäfer.

The idea of a divine Messiah made a significant appearance in the seventeenth century among the followers of Sabbatai Şevi. Elliot Wolfson's essay notes that some Sabbatians expected a fully divine Messiah; and the mystical Messiah himself claimed that in the future he would ascend to the level of God. Indeed, Wolfson argues that his coronation and wearing of the Islamic turban signified a "transfiguration" of Sabbatai Şevi. In this act, he realized in himself the unity of the divine. (Wolfson's focal argument is that the transfiguration effected cosmic redemption by overcoming gender dimorphism. It restored the primordial unity of female and male.)

In her essay, Rachel Elijor comments on how the modern Lubavitch followers of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson described this Messiah in terms that Jewish tradition reserves for God alone. In the 1980s and 1990s, they pictured the Rabbi as the Divine Infinite wrapped in a physical body. After his stroke in 1992, the Rabbi's followers expected God to imminently transform him into the omnipotent eternal divine reality in their immediate presence.

Due in part to my own theological location, I was interested to compare the various remarks and discussions in the collection about belief in a suffering or dying Messiah. Schäfer claims that this notion appeared in early Judaism only with 4 Ezra around 100 C.E. In contrast, other contributors observed how already at Qumran, the thanksgiving hymns draw on a messianic sense of the Servant Songs of Isaiah. James D. Tabor argues that, like David Koresh, Qumran's Teacher of Righteousness takes up the role of the figure in Isa 50:4: "You, my God, have appointed me as a holy counsel to the weary. You have taught me Your covenant, and my tongue is as one of Your disciples" (1QH 15:10). Michael Fishbane notes that the hymns at Qumran apply the language of Isaiah 53 to the sufferings of the Teacher of Righteousness. 1QH 11:24-25 reads, "With whom shall I be counted? What is my strength? I have taken my stand within the domain of wickedness, and I am with the wretched by lot. The soul of the poor dwells with great tumults" (cf. Isa 53:11-12). Schäfer's treatment of biblical messianism does not include discussion either of these Servant Songs or of related biblical texts, such as Psalm 22 and Zechariah 9 and 13. Fresh, revised work is needed on these latter texts and the messianic import of either their original historical sense or of their canonical shape (*Nachgeschichte*).

Michael Fishbane's essay explores old rabbinic notions of a suffering Messiah based on this group of biblical passages, especially Isaiah 53. Fishbane's essay argues that

teachings of a suffering Messiah are deeply authentic to classical Judaism. Pre-Talmudic, midrashic tradition correlated Isaiah 53 with other antique, biblical texts to develop the notion of a Messiah who suffers meritoriously for all human sinners. Fishbane suggests that it only impoverishes the Jewish theological tradition to deprecate these messianic views as Christian forgeries and interpolations into Jewish texts.

One appearance of the theme of messianic suffering in later Jewish history emerges in Wolfson's essay about Sabbatian messianism and Sabbatai Şevi's apostatizing act of wearing the Muslim turban. At one level, the donning of the turban appeared to this Messiah's supporters as an act of self-sacrifice. With this act, he descended to the depths of impurity and evil in order to redeem the cosmos.

Again, in 1992, when Rabbi Schneerson suffered his stroke, a vocal majority of his followers interpreted the event as messianic suffering. Based on Isaiah 53, the group related their leader's adversity to the redemptive suffering of Isaiah's Servant of God. The Rabbi's suffering could only be an atonement for sin and a preparation for the messianic age.

In this review, I have only been able to trace a few of the threads in this collection that may be of interest to biblical scholars. Other scholars of religion and of history will find no lack of other engaging threads and themes. An index of sources and an index of subjects will help readers zero in on their individual interests.