

REVIEW

Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman, Eds.

Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism

(Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,
2015), softcover, 442 pp.

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Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism is a collection of essays reflecting several years of conversation among scholars across several disciplines, loosely organized around the classic 1959 essay by Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism." The book contains 15 essays in addition to its introduction, divided into five parts and arranged roughly chronologically. They address a spectrum of related topics, including: the transformations of messianism in late antiquity and its emergence as a trope capable of dividing "Judaism" from "Christianity"; the claims of messianic figures throughout history; the messianic figure and hopes for a future redemption in modern Jewish thought; and contemporary controversies over messianic rhetoric as it is deployed by religious Zionists.

Befitting the volume's title, intellectual history predominates, with the majority of the essays devoted to analyzing "the messianic idea" in primary texts of the Jewish and also the Christian traditions as well as in the scholarship on those texts. Outstanding contributions at the beginning and end of the volume address important second-order questions about the scholarly construction of the subject which need to be reckoned with in order for the many other texts in the volume to be useful. In "Messianism between Judaism and Christianity," for example, Annette Yoshiko Reed examines the way it has often been taken for granted that messianism denotes difference, specifically the difference between Judaism and Christianity, and shows that this wall was laboriously erected

by both early church fathers (Justin, Tertullian) as well as by modern biblical critics and historians of religion (Baur, Graetz). Most important here is that the difference was not seen the same way from either side of the wall: initially, the construction of messianism-as-difference was a Christian project, with Jews looking elsewhere (to halakhic observance, for example) for defining differences. Later on, however, as Jews came increasingly to participate in a Christian intellectual environment, they adopted this view of messianism as a marker of difference as well. This is seen elsewhere in the volume, as in Emily Kopley's essay on "Arthur A. Cohen's Messianic Fiction," wherein "Cohen insists on the to-his-mind radical and necessary opposition between Judaism and Christianity, given that the former awaits redemption and the latter regards the world as already redeemed by Christ" (p. 375).

One could imagine a theologian dwelling on this trajectory, transforming it into yet another anxious project of definition and boundary-marking, but a number of the contributions point in other directions. Shaul Magid's "The Divine / Human Messiah and Religious Deviance: Rethinking Chabad Messianism" challenges the common idea that the belief of some members of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement in the messiah-ship of their deceased Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, is best conceived of as a Christianizing heresy. He suggests that not only does such messianism perhaps bear a closer resemblance to the occultation of the twelfth imam in Shi'ite Islam than to Christianity, but also that it draws on a number of well-known Hasidic sources and may represent a tradition stretching back to the Second Temple period. Michael L. Morgan (in "Levinas and Messianism") and Martin Kavka (in "Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem") both draw on Emmanuel Levinas to sketch pictures of messianism that emphasize the connection between political critique and personal, intimate encounter. Elisheva Carlebach makes a truly original contribution in "Seeking the Symmetry of Time: The Messianic Age in Medieval Chronology." She sketches out the intellectual history of ordinary people by examining the lived sense of time among medieval Jews who used

“chronographs” and “chronograms” to date their writings, creating a community of readers who emplotted themselves within distinct messianic chronologies.

Scholem’s worry in his 1959 essay that the Zionist movement of which he was a part might succumb to the temptations of messianic enthusiasm is clearly a preoccupation of this volume as well. Essays from Shai Held (“What Zvi Yehuda Kook Wrought: The Theopolitical Radicalization of Religious Zionism”), Motti Inbari (“Messianic Religious Zionism and the Reintroduction of Sacrifice: The Case of the Temple Institute”), David Shatz (“The Muted Messiah: The Aversion to Messianic Forms of Zionism in Modern Orthodox Thought”), and Menachem Kellner (“‘And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight’: Twisted Messianic Visions, and a Maimonidean Corrective”) all confront the contemporary reality of a politically empowered Jewish messianic settler movement and its role in promoting oppression and violence against Palestinians. This emphasis on a settler group such as Gush Emunim and its ilk is so common, in fact, that it leaves one wishing for an essay that might present the messianic elements of the Zionism that Scholem *defended*, the purportedly secular and non-radical Zionism that prevails inside the Green Line. This, in turn, could shed further light on what is in fact the more common “Religious Zionist” position, ably described by Shatz as having its roots in the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, which sees the creation of the State of Israel as “merely” providential and miraculous, rather than as a sign of the messianic advent. After all, regardless of one’s political stance on the Israel-Palestine issue (and there seems to be a range represented here), and beyond the intrinsic interest of contemporary messianic activism, it does not seem that messianic convictions are *required* for fanaticism, racism, hatred, occupation, or plain disregard for human life. The topical weight of the volume on these more radical forms of messianism is thus both welcome and slightly disappointing.

Several essays in the volume go off the beaten track to highlight new topics or provide unexpected insights into old ones.

Steven Weitzman's "He That Cometh Out" draws on psychology literature about "coming out" as LGBTQ in order to shed light on some puzzling descriptions of messianic claimants, including Jesus and Sabbatai Zvi, while Cosana Eram introduces "Isidore Isou's Messianism Awry," asking how a French-Romanian's avant-garde autobiography made use of messianic figuration. These pieces nicely complement the bread-and-butter intellectual-historical work of Kenneth Seeskin ("Maimonides and the Idea of a Deflationary Messiah") and Benjamin Pollock ("To Infinity and Beyond: Cohen and Rosenzweig on Comportment toward Redemption"), making for a varied volume that should have something for a wide range of students of "the messianic idea."