



Rebekka Voss. *Umstrittene Erlöser: Politik, Ideologie und jüdisch-christlicher Messianismus in Deutschland, 1500-1600*. Judische Religion, Geschichte und Kultur Series. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012. 272 pp. \$86.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-56900-9.

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## Messianism in Early Modern Germany: Between Judaism and Christianity

This book is a sensation—in more ways than one! Drawing on a wide variety of hitherto unknown sources (texts, pictures, and even a medal), Rebekka Voss gives an account of messianic movements and personalities in the Holy Roman Empire during the first half of the sixteenth century, with a special emphasis on Asher Lemlein. Her success is all the more surprising because Gerson Cohen had stated in 1991 that there was “not a single case of a messianic movement ... known from Ashkenazi Jewry until the beginning of the sixteenth century, and even that one instance, namely the call of Asher Lemlein, is an obscure and shortlived affair.”[1]

Voss starts with a critical reevaluation of all source material available on Lemlein. By combing and combining both Jewish and Christian reports, she sheds new light on some biographical details, but—what is more important—she shows that his movement had many more adherents and a greater impact than the “*damnatio memoriae*” (the condemnation of memory) of then contemporary polemics and later orthodoxy wanted the world to know (a phenomenon that recurs later with Sabbatianism!). The picture that emerges from this critical approach is not entirely new and definitely less dramatic than in the nineteenth-century accounts, but it gains in clarity. Voss shows that Lemlein had no messianic pretension whatsoever but understood himself as prophet of the Messiah. Recently discovered manuscripts (mainly from eastern European archives) show Lemlein to have been a Kabbalist, whose doctrines were widely received

and disputed throughout Jewish communities in Italy—and even by Christian Kabbalists. By interpreting Lemlein as sort of a “messianic mystic,” Voss’s study finally presents him in a “Scholemian” perspective, i.e., overcoming the divide between messianism and mysticism constructed by nineteenth-century historians.

Voss also deals at length with the so-called Lemlein medal, a cause celebre of nineteenth-century historiography. Found near Lyon in 1665, it depicts a classical, somehow Caesarian head surrounded by an unknown Greek word and a lengthy but obscure Hebrew inscription with messianic subtext on one side, with a Latin psalm and the year “D.III.M” on the other side. In the 1840s, Lepold Zunz and others managed to decipher the Hebrew text as an acrostic referring to R. Eliah Schabtai Beer. Carefully weighing numismatic, historic, and philological evidence, she concludes that the medal probably originated in Christian circles around 1500 and that they tried to use the messianic expectations triggered by Lemlein to convince Jews of the “*interpretatio christiana*” (the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in terms of Christian theology).

Especially intriguing is Voss’s reconstruction of the impact that Lemlein’s movement had on Christianity, not only on Kabbalists like Agostino Guistiniani but also on men like Johannes Pfefferkorn, the infamous author of anti-Jewish pamphlets in Reformation Germany, who had been one of Lemlein’s Jewish followers and con-

verted to Christianity out of messianic disappointment—a most interesting connection between Ashkenazi messianism and the Reformation discourse on Judaism. And this in fact is the even bigger surprise of the book: taking as her start considerations of Elisheva Carlebach and Andrew C. Gow, Voss is able to show how Christian apocalyptic and Jewish messianic discourses in sixteenth-century Germany were actually intertwined, even dependent in their mutual recognition. Not only were the hopes of the Jews (the coming of the Red Jews, appearance of the Messiah, fall of Rome, and conquest and return to the Holy Land) known to be the nightmares of the Christians (with the Jewish Messiah working as the antichrist) and vice versa in Jewish and Christian sources, but there were also even collaborations between Christian and Jewish apocalyptic groups and individuals. Voss describes in detail the case of the messianic movement around the Augsburg Anabaptist Augustin Bader (1530), who on the basis of Christian Kabbala developed messianic aspirations and sought (and seems to have gained!) support from Jewish communities in southern Germany. She analyzes how the suspected arrival of the Red Jews in 1523 found its echoes not only with the German adherents of David Reubeni and Shlomo Molkho, but also with important Christian theologians like Martin Cellarius and Wolfgang Capito. For merely exegetical reasons, Capito and Cellarius in 1528 developed the doctrine that all Hebrew Bible prophecies concerning the Jews would be fulfilled literally (including the peaceful reentering of Palestine by the Jews and the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, which they thought to be imminent), before the spiritual fulfillment in Christ could surpass these worldly events. In connection with Reubeni's mission in Germany, this led to a damnation of this millenarian doctrine in the Augsburg Confession of 1530.

Voss finally shows how Reubeni and his co-Messiah Molkho fit (or made themselves fit) into prophecies concerning Charles V as apocalyptic “Emperor of the End-

time,” which were shared by Christians and Jews alike. Taking up Christian themes, some Jewish prophecies described Charles V as precursor of the Messiah ben Josef—especially because he had liberated the Jews from the Protestants' hate! Voss thus demonstrates how apocalyptic expectations and “Realpolitik” could be combined by sixteenth-century thinkers, “weil eben Apokalypse und Endzeit keine utopischen Gedankenexperimente waren, sondern reale historische Ereignisse in einer nur wenig entfernten Zukunft” (because apocalypse and the end of the world were no utopias but historical events in an imminent future) (p. 191).

Not only does the book brilliantly tell the story of a shared “memory of the future,” but in its crossing of disciplinary boundaries between Jewish and Christian studies it also is part of a “histoire croisee” (entangled history). In fact, Voss's book and my own study on Bader and Christian messianism (theologian Habilitationsschrift, 2008) were written with close parallels: they deal with similar phenomena, often even with the same persons or sources, but literally look from different perspectives, for example, a Jewish studies scholar's and the church historian's angles. It is thus a most valuable contribution to early modern Jewish studies and an important step toward establishing a concept of shared history in early modern history of religion. In a disciplinary sense, Voss's scholarly book aims at a reexamination of the debate on Ashkenazi messianism in early modern Judaism; and it is at the same time a fervent plea to cross these limiting disciplinary boundaries.

#### Note

[1]. Gerson Cohen, “Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim,” in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History*, ed. Marc Saperstein (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 202-233, 206.

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