



The Lost Messiah

By John Freely

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The extraordinary tale of Sabbatai Sevi, the 17th century rabbi who believed, and convinced many others, that he was the Messiah Rabbi Sabbatai Sevi is one of the most controversial religious figures in all history. In *The Lost Messiah*, acclaimed author, John Freely, follows Sevi's trail and the traces of the Jewish cult that grew up around him—one that still inspires belief today. Brilliantly evoking the vanished world of the 17th century Jewish diaspora, the narrative interweaves the work of respected scholars—including the pioneering writings of Gershom Scholem—with information garnered from Freely's own travels from Sevi's birthplace in Izmir, on the Aegean coast of Turkey, to the ghettos of Venice and Rome, the bazaars of Cairo, and the rabbinical schools of Jerusalem and Safed.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Historian and travel writer Freely retraces the 17th-century rabbi Sabbatai Sevi's steps from his birth in Izmir (in Turkey) to his exile and death in Dulcigno (in northern Albania) in this plodding and workmanlike account-part travelogue, part detective story and part religious history.. Sevi traveled through the Ottoman Empire declaring himself to be the Messiah; he claimed to be born on the Ninth of Ab, the traditional birthdate of the Messiah, and fervently studied the mystical texts of the Kabbalah. Although he gathered some followers, most thought he was a madman and a fool. When he began to declare that fast days should become feast days, that women could read from the Torah and that Jews could pronounce the sacred name of God (YHWH), the rabbis in Istanbul drove him out of the country. Sevi became the target of even greater animosity when he converted to Islam. After his conversion he maintained a syncretistic religious lifestyle, trying to convert his followers to Islam, yet still proclaiming himself the Jewish Messiah. After his death, many of his followers declared that he had not died but that his presence was hidden, and that he would appear again at the end of time. Drawing upon the writings of Gershom Scholem and others, Freely offers a fascinating glimpse into a little-known chapter of Jewish religious history. However, he depends too heavily on secondary source material, encumbering his own writing with lengthy quotations that fail to illuminate Sevi's exciting story.

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From [Booklist](#)

The idea of a messiah who will come to offer salvation and heal the world remains one of Judaism's most enduring yearnings. Freely focuses on one who assumed the mantle of Messiah. In the mid-seventeenth century a messiah appeared, a rabbi named Sabbatai Sevi. As Freely describes him, Sabbatai would be described in modern terms as manic-depressive. In his own time, his "illuminations" (which alternated with moods of deep despair) and his knowledge of the Torah and kabbalah allowed Sabbatai to attract followers. When the respected Nathan of Gaza, serving as Sabbatai's John the Baptist, proclaimed him the Messiah, his fame grew throughout the Jewish world. Freely, quoting extensively from primary sources, follows Sabbatai's movements up to his shocking conversion to Islam, which, perhaps even more shockingly, did not dissolve all of his support. Freely paints a portrait of the Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire that brings time and place alive. He is less successful in describing Sabbatai the man. Although Freely makes us understand the circumstances that made the masses long for a messiah, he fails to show how Sabbatai, a not particularly appealing figure, could have successively assumed that role. Still, this volume gathers the threads of many sources into one fabric, providing a valuable interweaving of history and biography. *Ilene Cooper*

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Review

'Everything I believe in has come from the Kabbalah' - Roseanne Barr

Users Review

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