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## **Book Review: From Lowly Metaphor to Divine Flesh: Sarah the Ashkenazi, Shabbatai Tsevi's Messianic Queen and the Shabbatian Movement**

***From Lowly Metaphor to Divine Flesh: Sarah the Ashkenazi, Shabbatai Tsevi's Messianic Queen and the Shabbatian Movement***

By Alexander Van der Haven

(Menasseh ben Israel Institute Studies 7. Amsterdam: Joofd Historische Museum, University van Amsterdam, 2012.)

Historians, theologians, and sociologists have written extensively about the rise and fall of Shabbatai Tsevi (Tzvi), the seventeenth-century Turkish Jew whose aesthetic practices and charismatic charms ultimately seduced hundreds of thousands of followers (to this day!) in the Orient and Occident, into believing his messianic proclivities. In the pre-Twitter and pre-Facebook days, his high-profile rock-star lifestyle and ultimate apostasy by conversion to Islam turned the Jewish world like a gyroscopic *dreidel*. While scholars, particularly Gershom Scholem, have exhaustively studied his life and impact on mainstream Judaism, there is ample new digging to do into the past to explore the role of women, especially in Jewish spiritual life of the time. What better subject than the first (but not only) Mrs. Sabbatai Tsevi, aka Sarah "The Ashkenazi"?

Feminist studies posture that a woman is not usually *behind* ever successful man, but is more often in front or to his side, so we must at least appreciate Alexander Van der Haven's scholarly gesture in focusing the premise of this monograph. Yet, we are hungry for the "mundane" facts about how she spent her days, who were her female acquaintances, what is it like to be the wife of the messiah, etc. In this case, the book will be disappointing. Perhaps Ada Rapoport-Albert's *Women and the Messianic*

*Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. 2011, UK)

will be a better option; it is definitely longer.

These were very fiery times, due in no small part to the pogroms and other massacres that befell the Jews of Europe. The book, however, also hints at alternative lifestyles, similar to free-love movements and predatory spiritual cults of the 1960s in the USA. There was no lack of people, particularly Jews and Moslems, and especially women, who were seeking and experiencing religious ecstasy from the Occident to the Orient. Disappointingly, however, this book seems more of a *Kinsey Report* about the impact of sexual behavior and reputation on the development of personal and social identity during this period.

Alas, if you want a juicy, *chutzpah-dicke* narrative – such found in every episode of the “The Real Housewives of ... *Wherever*” TV show, you are definitely out of luck. Today’s Hollywood media content is all character driven, and we certainly have the basics for a deep franchise, but we are left to our imaginations about the color of the bed silks or the wafting fragrances of the boudoir.

If there was ever a marriage “made in heaven”, theirs was it. By all accounts, (mostly he-ar say vs her-say) Sarah claimed to have been destined to marry the messiah, and about a year after their betrothal, March 13, 1664, Shabbatai declared himself as such, satisfying an urge from his own visions. In fact, what we are told as fact about Sarah, however, generally (no little black book) is that she had a wild, promiscuous life before she met Shabbatai. While they wed in the presence of a rabbi and witnesses, the relationship was never consummated with a sexual relationship. It might be inferred that Sarah agreed to this arrangement. It would be great if someone found letters or notes, perhaps like “My Man”, a piece by Paul Rudnick in *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2012, posing as a first person (anonymous was a woman) account by Mrs. Melissa Christ, Jesus’ “wife”.

If this were Hollywood production, enter the Best Supporting Male Actor: Nathan, another “Ashkenazi”, a king-maker type who proclaimed himself Elijah, herald of the messiah. Nathan not only wrangled Sarah’s confidence, but he began to manage and enrich Shabbatai’s messianic brand.

Perhaps the devil was and is still in the details when it comes to high-profile personalities. By all accounts, the Shabbatian movement did rock the Jewish world. It is no wonder that, despite the current proclamations and denials that the seventh Chabad-Lubavitcher Rebbe was *THE* one we have been waiting for since Tsevi, everyone is being cautiously optimistic. (And we must remember that it was Chaya Mushka Schneerson, his wife, who carried the bloodline.)

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