



The Lost Messiah: In Search of the Mystical Rabbi Sabbatai Sevi

John Freely

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The Lost Messiah is the astonishing story of Sabbatai Sevi, a seventeenth-century rabbi who through the mysticism of the Kabbalah convinced vast numbers of Jews throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa that he was the long-awaited Messiah. Most of his followers were enraged and stupefied when he embraced Islam (on threat of execution from the Turkish Sultan), but many others continued to believe him. Some even converted to Islam themselves, creating the sect known even today as the Dönme – outwardly Muslim, yet clinging secretly to Judaism. A few Sabbatians still secretly hold true to their beliefs, patiently waiting for their Messiah to return and lead them to redemption; they believe that Sabbatai is not dead but merely hidden from human view, despite more than three centuries having passed since he was last seen.

When John Freely came across the name of Sabbatai Sevi in an old Jewish bookshop in Istanbul, he was instantly fascinated by the story and journeyed to Izmir, the principal Aegean port of Turkey and Sabbatai's first home. Brilliantly evoking the vanished world of the seventeenth-century Jewish Diaspora in the Ottoman Empire, his narrative moves to the ghettos of Venice and Rome, the bazaars of Cairo, and the rabbinical schools in Jerusalem and Safed. The result of thirty years of research and travel, THE LOST MESSIAH deftly interweaves the work of respected scholars – especially the scholarly writings of Gershom Scholem – along with Freely's own firsthand knowledge of ancient and contemporary Turkey and its environs. Ranging from the Sultan's palaces in Istanbul to the synagogues of North Africa and out to the isolated Jewish communities of the Yemen and even the remote reaches of Albania, Freely's remarkable story takes us deep into the esoteric world of Jewish mysticism and the messianic cult which still inspires belief today.

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