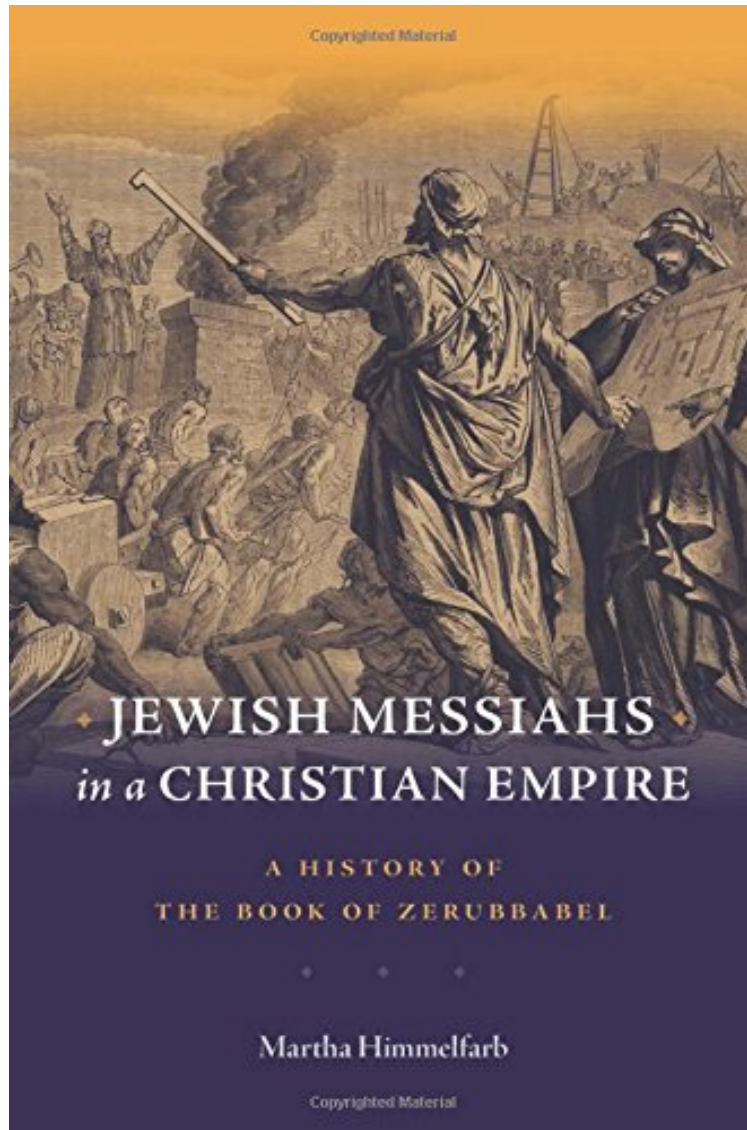


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# Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire: A History of the Book of Zerubbabel

Martha Himmelfarb

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The seventh-century CE Hebrew work *Sefer Zerubbabel* (Book of Zerubbabel), composed during the period of conflict between Persia and the Byzantine Empire for control over Palestine, is the first full-fledged messianic narrative in Jewish literature. Martha Himmelfarb offers a comprehensive analysis of this rich but understudied text, illuminating its distinctive literary features and the complex milieu from which it arose. *Sefer Zerubbabel* presents itself as an angelic revelation of the end of times to Zerubbabel, a biblical leader of the sixth century BCE, and relates a tale of two messiahs who, as Himmelfarb shows, play a major role in later Jewish narratives. The first messiah, a descendant of Joseph, dies in battle at the hands of Armilos, the son of Satan who embodies the Byzantine Empire. He is followed by a messiah descended from David modeled on the suffering servant of Isaiah, who brings him back to life and triumphs over Armilos. The mother of the Davidic messiah also figures in the work as a warrior. Himmelfarb places *Sefer Zerubbabel* in the dual context of earlier Jewish eschatology and Byzantine Christianity. The role of the messiahs mother, for example, reflects the Byzantine notion of the Virgin Mary as the protector of Constantinople. On the other hand, *Sefer Zerubbabel* shares traditions about the messiahs with rabbinic literature. But while the rabbis are ambivalent about these traditions, *Sefer Zerubbabel* embraces them with enthusiasm.

In the process of analyzing the most famous and detailed medieval Jewish apocalypse work and unraveling its many puzzles, Himmelfarb develops a striking new account of the history of Jewish messianism from the Bible to the Middle Ages. This book is groundbreaking and innovative, opening the way for a whole new era in the study of post-Christian Judaism. (Annette Yoshiko Reed, University of Pennsylvania)With admirable erudition, this wonderful book fills a gap in the history of Jewish messianism. It is an exceptional contribution to scholarship. (John J. Collins, Yale University)About the AuthorMartha Himmelfarb is William H. Danforth Professor of Religion at Princeton University.