Martha Himmelfarb

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Sefer Zerubbabel is “the first Jewish text in which the complementary roles in the eschatological drama of two different messiahs (...) are described in some detail,” and it is “deeply informed by its encounter with Christian messianism” (144). Nobody is better qualified to write the first book-length study of Sefer Zerubbabel (hereafter SZ) than Martha Himmelfarb (Princeton University). Over the past three decades she has enriched our knowledge of this curious document by publishing a series of articles on various interpretative problems of the text. In this new and encompassing study of SZ, she presents us with the ripe fruits of her long involvement with this fascinating piece of late antique Jewish eschatological speculation. SZ is a Hebrew text written in the early decades of the seventh century CE, after the Persian conquest of Jerusalem but before the rise of Islam. After an introductory chapter, containing *inter alia* a sketch of the contents of SZ, Himmelfarb presents a survey of the bewildering transmission history of the text:

The witnesses consist of four manuscripts, a printed edition earlier than at least two of the manuscripts, a nineteenth-century edition based on two manuscripts of which the current location is unknown, four fragments from the Cairo genizah, and a fragment copied as part of a larger manuscript (13).

These witnesses fall into two groups, a longer and a shorter recension, and within these groups none of the witnesses is identical with another. The differences between them are so great that Himmelfarb concludes that SZ is not an authored work in the usual sense and this situation “makes SZ a poor candidate for a critical edition” (21). And as yet there is no critical edition. She
believes that sz “would be better served by a synoptic edition, which would help to clarify the ways in which the text developed and changed over time” (21). She takes as a working text the long version in the oldest manuscript, now in the Bodleian Library, where sz has been incorporated into the Sefer ha-Zikhronot by Eleazar b. Asher Halevi (fourteenth century); this manuscript is an autographon. She further argues that, even though the content of sz may be termed apocalyptic, it is not an apocalypse since the author “would have been unaware of the existence of such a literary genre” (22)—a somewhat debatable claim—but that, rather, it is presented as a prophecy: the book of Ezekiel was its most important model, as indicated by both terminology and a series of motifs (e.g., vision at the Chebar canal). Finally, Himmelfarb discusses matters of language (strong effort to write biblical—not rabbinic—Hebrew) and dating (most probably between 615 and 630 CE).

Chapter 2 deals with Hephzibah, the mother of the Messiah. This unique figure is presented as a powerful female warrior who saves Jerusalem from destruction by defeating its enemies. Himmelfarb convincingly argues that this motif is to be explained against the background of the Byzantine use of icons of the Virgin Mary as apotropaic amulets in war situations. Her strongest weapon is a staff of salvation that belonged to a series of patriarchs (Aaron!). Her son is the Davidic messiah Menahem ben Ammiel (but there is also another messiah descended from Joseph). Her counterpart is a beautiful statue of a virgin (Mary), found in “a house of disgrace and merry-making” (= church). This statue is the wife of Satan to whom it bears a son called Armilos (= Romulus? = the Christian “messiah” = the Antichrist). Himmelfarb interprets this motif as a parody of the narrative of the virgin birth of Jesus. There is much more to be found in this rich chapter, inter alia, a discussion of rabbinic traditions about a mother of the messiah and the disappearance of her baby messiah.

Chapter 3 discusses the remarkable fact that Menahem, although a valiant warrior, is also presented in sz in terms drawn from the Suffering Servant of Isa 53. Himmelfarb sees the story of an unsightly messiah imprisoned in Rome in sz, and the similar story in b. Sanh. 98b, as “independent developments of popular traditions about a suffering messiah” (78), with little precedent in Second Temple Judaism, but with a long Christian history. The messiah awaits the eschaton in Rome: “Until he is able to begin his mission of redemption, the messiah too is subject to the evil empire, but when ultimately he bursts forth from his imprisonment, Roman rule will be at an end” (76). Since “Rome” here stands for the “new Rome,” i.e., Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, the anti-Christian pointe is unmistakable.

Chapter 4 deals with the motif of the messiah’s vicarious suffering (again based upon Isa 53, but not in sz) in some piyyutim and Pesiqta Rabbati in