

Theologian of Revolution or Adventurer? A Reassessment of Jacob Frank*

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In his classic study on Stanislaw II August, the last king of Poland (1764-1795), the French literary historian Jean Fabre observed in passing: “The attempt of Frank and his followers, which some hoped would bring about the mass conversion of the Jews, degenerated into an adventurer’s undertaking, and his coreligionists reacted to it, for the most part, with indifference.”¹ A number of scholars, thinkers and essayists in the twentieth-century, pre-eminently among them Gershom Scholem, have been fascinated with Jacob Frank’s mystical-“heretical” movement, have tended to attach to it an enormous historical significance, and saw in virtually every trend which intended to launch Jewish history on a new course, in whatever direction, a late outgrowth that, at least in some sense, evolved out of it. Pawel Maciejko is skeptical of these claims, and entertains a more sober view of Frankism, close to that of the French critic: his book intends to explain why a deflationary assessment, and a rejection of those approaches which shower upon Frankism too much interpretation, are in order. The author has conducted extensive research, expounds in every chapter a well-crafted argument, and excels at combining narrative and analysis. These strengths will no doubt make of the book a near-classic, to which every interested historian will refer as to the up-to-date and reliable version of the history of the Frankist movement. It is then all the more urgent to ponder whether

* Pawel MACIEJKO, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1753-1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 361 pp.

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¹ See Jean FABRE, *Stanislas-Auguste Poniatowski et l’Europe des Lumières* (Strasbourg, 1952), 34: “La tentative de Frank et de ses adeptes, dont certains espèrent la conversion massive d’Israël, dégénère en équipée d’aventurier et laisse indifférents la masse de ses coreligionnaires.”

this new presentation is superior to the older one or reflects a setback. For this reviewer, the book has a lasting value through the rich data it brings forth and the dense, always suggestive discussions that are based on them –it is rare to read a book where the reader feels to such a degree that every paragraph offers him food for thought–, but it takes historical research on Frankism and more largely on the trajectory of Jewish heretical mysticism and messianism in 18th-century Europe in the wrong direction.

The book revolves around one major thesis: Jacob Frank did not adopt one or the other course, at different turns of his life, under the spell of the theological views he inherited or devised; rather, he “responded” to circumstances and tried to make the best of them. Maciejko sums up himself his claim in the following terms (p. 230): “At the earliest stages of the Frankism, its leader already demonstrated admirable skill in accommodating his strategies and teachings to the expectations of various pressure groups... The development of Frankism in the late 1770s and the 1780s again attested to his abilities.” If Frank was not all things to all men, he became many very different things in accordance with the various social-cultural environments which he joined.

The first part of the book, encompassing chapters 1-5, deals with the history of the years 1756-1759, from the time the then thirty-years old Jacob Frank returned to Poland after he had lived since his youth in Ottoman territory until his and his followers’ conversion to Catholicism in the wake of the disputation between “Talmudical” Jews and the Frankist “heretics” that was staged in Lvov. It is primarily meant to demonstrate that in the end Frank had no choice: conversion was forced on him. Why different (but by no means all) circles in the Polish Catholic Church would want to use the Frankists as a helpful pawn in order to overcome opposition, in Poland or in Rome, to their campaign on Jewish ritual murder, if the latter were ready to give their own “testimony” on it, and then to bully them into conversion without condition, is self-evident. But the reasons why the Jewish community would depart, as Maciejko rightly observes, from an age-old attitude according to which Jews would try to bring dissenters back to the “fold” and would never entirely sever relations with them, are less easy to delineate. Maciejko deals at length with the views of the heresy-hunter Jacob Emden, whose relative appreciation of Christianity led him to promote the idea of a Christian-Jewish united front, intent to persecute the heretics in each camp –and to bring them to be burned at the stake (!). The main point remains why the representatives of the Jewish community in Poland, like the ‘intercessor’ (*Shtadlan*) Baruch Yavan (the factor of Count von Brühl, Prime Minister of King August III) adopted this line. It seems that the development of mystical circles

that defied the rabbinic establishment, not in secret meetings of like-minded individuals, but through open propagandizing, in the conditions of the outlying and difficult-to-control province of Podolia, was perceived by the ‘rabbinic class’ as a challenge that could not be met by the usual strategies.

The Church and the Jewish community became thus objectively –and, to a point, subjectively– allies. Maciejko entitles his chapter dealing with the issue: “How Rabbis and Priests Created the Frankist Movement;” he follows here on the steps, as he himself points out, of the Jewish ‘Enlightener’ (*Maskil*) Jacques Calmanson, who highlighted this collusion in the memorandum, written in French and typically entitled *Essai sur l'état actuel des Juifs de Pologne et leur perfectibilité*, which he penned in 1796 for Count von Hoym, the minister in charge of the Polish territories that had been annexed to Prussia with Poland’s last partition.² It is perhaps apposite to quote at some length the relevant passage of this rather rare text:

Jalouse de ses progrès, craignant de voir diminuer l’empire qu’elle s’était assuré sur les esprits, la classe des lettrés [= the ‘rabbinic class’] se ligua contre cet adversaire redoutable [Frankism], dans lequel le Corps entier et chaque membre séparément voyait un ennemi également à craindre. Mais comme le crédit qu’il s’était ménagé parmi les gens du commun, qui forment toujours la majeure partie, et le grand nombre de ses prosélytes [*sic*], ne permettaient pas pour l’instant une attaque directe, ces lettrés s’adressèrent aux Évêques, qu’ils eurent soin d’avance de mettre dans leurs intérêts. Ce fut la première fois peut-être qu’on vit des Rabins [*sic*] juifs se réunir à des Évêques Catholiques, contre leurs propres concitoyens.³

The pretext brandished, Calmanson goes on, in order to justify such an alliance and to get the support of the Polish secular authorities, was that the religious challenge of the Frankists could develop into a political oppositional stance; but the real reason, he says, was different: the rabbinic establishment was waging a war on behalf of its own status.⁴ Calmanson hated the rabbinical leaders, who maintained,

² For a brief presentation of Calmanson (who had been physician of the King of Poland Stanislaw II August), and a more detailed discussion of his views on Hassidism, as voiced in the *Essai*, see Marcin WODZINSKI, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland. A History of Conflict* (Oxford-Portland, Oregon, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 27-31.

³ Jacques CALMANSON, *Essai sur l'état actuel des juifs de Pologne et leur perfectibilité* (Varsovie, 1796), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18: “La raison ou plutôt le prétexte qu’ils donnèrent alors de cette union singulière, les motifs allégués pour obtenir ces secours qu’ils réclamaient, c’était que

he thought, the masses in a state of ignorance and gullibility, and despised the Frankists even more intensely. But it is worthwhile to note that, in his view, the expansion of Frankism could have seriously damaged the hegemony of the rabbis, and the Polish government missed an opportunity to promote “reform” among Jews, which could have blossomed if it had backed Frank.⁵

Whatever the case, granted that both the Church and the Jewish community pressured the Frankists into converting, it does not follow that the Frankists did not have their own reasons to convert, or that at least Frank and his closer circle, under the spell of the Sabbatean ideology, did not see in the conversion forced on them an opportunity to further their own agenda, and a blessing in disguise. Moreover, the Frankist leaders tried –unsuccessfully– to make their conversion dependent on the readiness of the Church to let them remain a separate group within Polish Catholicism: they may have realized that their followers were not prepared to change their mores and ways of life and to adopt those of their new environment all of a sudden, and that their entry into the Polish society had to be implemented through progressive stages; but this endeavour at least gives substance to the “suspicion” that in fact they were faithful to their own programme: to go through all religions, in order better to defile them and to wear them out. But according to Maciejko –if I understand him correctly– this

les dogmes enseignés par Frenck, n’avaient jamais été tolérés en Pologne, et que si l’on ne parvenait point à en arrêter le cours, ceux qui les propageaient, abusant de cette indulgence, finiraient par diriger leurs coups contre le Gouvernement lui-même. Cette espèce de prédiction pouvait se vérifier; cependant ce n’était pas le vrai motif qui avait réveillé le zèle de cette classe privilégiée. – Négligés par ce gouvernement, et souvent persécutés par ceux qui en dirigeaient la marche, les Juifs ne prendront jamais son parti, qu’autant qu’ils verront leur intérêt; et c’est une des principales raisons qui militent en faveur d’une réforme, à l’aide de laquelle la nation juive soit comme incorporée à ce peuple au milieu duquel il vit, sans lui tenir par aucuns rapports directs.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23: “Si le gouvernement avait su mieux connaître le genre de talents de Frenck, il aurait pu, si je ne me trompe, en tirer un parti avantageux; il aurait pu diriger à un autre but, cette ambition qui le dévorait, et la rendre utile à l’État comme à la nation juive, tandis qu’au contraire elle a tourné au détriment de l’un et de l’autre. Au lieu de réprimer l’essor qu’il voulait prendre, de lui donner des entraves, de solliciter contre lui des persécutions il fallait seulement le surveiller, et lui imprimer comme à son insçu le mouvement que le calcul des circonstances et l’intérêt du moment pouvaient rendre nécessaire. *L’enthousiasme qu’il avait su propager aurait peut-être évité à l’administration l’embarras et l’incertitude d’une réforme qui alors se fut opérée d’elle-même, et qui dans les conjonctures actuelles coûtera des peines immenses, ne pourra s’effectuer qu’à la longue, et sera toujours précaire, à moins qu’on ne parvienne à lui donner une base solide et durable*” (my italics).

attempt was less a reflection of aspirations nurtured on the basis of a radical Sabbatian theology than a version –or, as he prefers to say, a “mirror image”– of a Protestant approach to mission, devised by the Halle Pietists in the 1730s and by the Moravian Brethren in the late 1750s: an approach according to which, through a transference into Protestantism of the Jesuit strategies in China and in other places, the Jews who would convert should keep the right to live as Jews in all the matters that are not directly linked to religious beliefs.

The chapters 6-9, which make up the second part of the book, deal with the history of the Frankists as outwardly Christians in Central Europe, during the near half-century from their conversion to Catholicism to the death of Eva Frank, Jacob’s daughter and inheritor of his messianic mantle (as well of his status as a manifestation of God). Maciejko’s main theme here is that Jacob Frank reconfigured himself, in the new circumstances, as one of those “adventurers” and “charlatans” typical of the 18th-century. There is indeed much that connects Frank with other “adventurers” or “charlatans” (a label that should not be taken as self-understood, and that is as ambiguous and in need of real elaboration as that of “impostor” for the 17th-century). Maciejko seems to have derived his inspiration on the topic from the admirable chapter on adventurers in Stefan Zweig’s essay on Casanova, included in his book *Three poets of their life*,⁶ and his own discussion is illuminating. It is nevertheless a pity that, although he endeavours to use the descriptions of the trajectories of “adventurers” or “charlatans” in a neutral way, as fitting a historical-sociological analysis, he does not always refrain from resorting to those terms in a spirit of disparagement, coming thus close to the old literature on Frank regularly denouncing him as a swindler.⁷

⁶ Stefan ZWEIF, *Drei Dichter ihres Lebens. Casanova. Stendhal. Tolstoi* (1928) [English translation: *Adepts in Self-Portraiture: Casanova, Stendhal, Tolstoy*]. See the essay on Casanova, ch. 3. Much material that is relevant to Maciejko’s themes is found in the work in French of the Russian literary historian Alexandre STROEV, *Les aventuriers des Lumières* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

⁷ The parallel between Frank and Cagliostro seems to have been a usual rhetorical figure. See for example the passage in the last chapter of Julian von Brinken’s book: “There is not any more an ambitious baron Frank or a Jewish Cagliostro at whom every goy that one would meet could point the finger, and think: here is the master of an occult realm,” see Gershom SCHOLEM, “Julian von Brinken romanhafte Erzählung über die Frankisten,” in G. NAHON & Ch. TOUATI eds., *Hommage à Georges Vajda* (Louvain: Peeters, 1980), 477-503; or the French translation of the essay in Gershom SCHOLEM, *De la création du monde jusqu’à Varsovie* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 199-221, see 212. On what Casanova called his ‘kabbalah,’ see the recent detailed study of Jean-Marc MANDOSIO, “Un ‘esprit familier’ au siècle des Lumières: Paralys et la cabale divinatoire de Casanova,” in *De Socrate à*

But again, granted that Frank behaved as a “charlatan-adventurer,” meeting the requirements of the role, it does not follow that he did not authentically harbour the theological convictions of a Sabbatian “nihilist”: the merit attached to secret *qua* secret (independently of its content), the proneness to lie and to betray, the view of double-dealing as a religious commandment, were all preparing one to slip into the part of the adventurer.

The last chapter is probably the least satisfactory in the book. It is certainly useful to learn how the Frankist “court” in Offenbach, near Frankfurt, was depicted in various reports and in local or far-away newspapers, and a casual remark on Frank and his “masquerade” is of interest if the neighbor from Frankfurt who jots down a note happens to be Goethe. But Zalman Shazar rightly remarked –in a piece that Maciejko does not quote, presumably because what he would label as a neo-romantic essay has no place in serious scholarly discussion– that we cannot content ourselves with the shallow impressions of those who “saw haphazardly with the eyes of strangers devoid of understanding, and did not fathom the heart.”⁸ Maciejko’s main purpose at this juncture, it seems, is to scale down the historical significance of Frankism and its offshoots: which is understandable as a reaction against what he sees as the vastly too far-reaching, theoretical and conjectural claims of the previous historiography. He had thus already made it clear in an earlier chapter that he is not inclined to attach much weight to the relations that developed between the Frankists and the mystical branches of Freemasonry during the 1780s. He is now willing to grant that there occurred in Frankism a shift from religion to politics at the time of the French Revolution: but not in the sense that the religious revolution initiated by the Frankists spread into the political field; only in this minimal sense that different governments feeling then threatened by “secret societies,” in the wake of the fuss around the Bavarian *Illuminati*, added the Frankists to their list of potential enemies.

Along the whole book, but especially in its last part, Maciejko brings forth three contentions, which he emphatically presents as giving the gist of his own original

Tintin, anges gardiens et démons familiers de l'Antiquité à nos jours, sous la dir. de J. –P. BOUDET, Ph. FAURE et Ch. RENOUX (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 209-248. On Casanova’s attitude to magic, see the rich and nuanced discussion of Angelo MAINARDI in his *Il demone di Casanova: il grande avventuriero tra misteri iniziatici e perverse seduzioni* (Roma: Tre Editori, 1998), ch. 5.

⁸ See the quotations of Goethe and Bettina von Arnim, in MACIEJKO, *The Mixed Multitude*, 238-239, and Zalman [RUBASHOV] SHAZAR’S essay, ‘*Al Tile Bet Frank: Rishme Ofebach*, first published in 1923, and republ. in *Ore Dorot* [‘Light of Bygone Generations’] (Jerusalem, 1971), 154-166; the passage quoted above is on p. 156.

contribution to the study of Frankism: in the main, it is not a continuation of 17th-century Sabbatianism, but a new, largely independent phenomenon; it is not a unified movement, but rather, the label artificially assembles loosely-related groups and circles; it is essentially syncretistic. The two first claims should be unambiguously rejected: they are not even worth any discussion. Scholem brought together a number of his studies on Sabbatianism (in Hebrew) under the title *Studies and Texts concerning the history of Sabbatianism and its Metamorphoses*.⁹ This title says it all: there is indeed something that can be described as Sabbatianism, and at the same time, as a matter of course, in a history of more than a century and a half, it changed significantly. It is no less obvious that Frank, seeing himself as the ‘third’ in a troika of deified figures, was deeply aware of what he owed to them, but also necessarily saw a particular significance in his own appearance, in ways that downgraded his predecessors to the station of forerunners, or even dismissed them outright as prophets who ultimately failed to “show the path.” The suggestion is made that Scholem was led to believe in the substantial continuity and homogeneity of the Sabbatian movement by his naive acceptance of the depictions of the heresy-hunters, always prone to denounce a formidable and identical-to-himself foe (just as, one might add, scholars in the mid-20th-century admitted the existence of “Catharism” as a movement based on a stable set of religious beliefs, whereas many scholars of the last generation doubt that there ever was such a thing as a “Cathar religion”). Nothing could be further from the truth. As to the differences between various Sabbatean or Frankist milieus, Scholem delineated them so clearly that Maciejko is here only repeating Scholem without acknowledging it.¹⁰ The third point—that Frankism seeks a syncretistic synthesis between the monotheistic religions—is also hardly news. Scholem showed in a masterful analysis published in 1941 that the idea of a syncretistic blending of religions was at the heart of the doctrine professed by Brukhyah Russo, the Sabbatean leader in early 18th-century Salonica, and that later Sabbateans wavered between a syncretistic understanding of their openness to the three monotheistic religions and a “nihilistic” logic that viewed them as valuable and urged to adopt each of them—in order ultimately to pass beyond them and to reach the realm of spiritual freedom.¹¹

⁹ *Meḥqarim u-meqorot le-toldot ha-Shabtaut ve-gilguleha* (Jerusalem, 1974).

¹⁰ Compare MACIEJKO, *The Mixed Multitude*, 248, 254 with Gershom SCHOLEM, “Redemption Through Sin,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 135-136.

¹¹ See Gershom SCHOLEM, “Brukhyah, the leader of the Sabbateans in Salonica” (heb.), *Zion* 6 (1941), republished in his *Meḥqare Shabtaut* [‘Researches in Sabbateanism’] (Jerusalem, 1991), 321-388, and see especially 352-359; and see, on the same issue,

In the last page of his book, Maciejko asserts that he aimed to offer a “more nuanced perception” of Frankism by “focusing on [its] religious aspect.” What is remarkable is that he did exactly the opposite. He has a lot to say on the attitudes of Catholics or traditional Jews towards Frank and his followers, and on those sides of the lives of the Frankists that could be grasped by outside observers. On these issues, his book is not simply a “welcome addition,” but a major contribution, an outstanding achievement. On the inner world of the Frankists, their spiritual longings, he has conversely very little to say. It would not be accurate to say that the one source which opens a window on Frank’s theological reflections, the *Book of the Words of the Lord* –a book available in its Polish original version as well as in Hebrew and English translations– is here conspicuously absent, since some excerpts of it are used in the discussion, in chapter 6, on the encounter between Catholic mariology and the specifically Frankist notion of a feminine goddess: still, it is scrutinized only marginally. My guess is that Maciejko was dissatisfied with the scholarly approach, in the last generation, that dissected Sabbatean texts in remarkable, indeed admirable, depth but was rather indifferent, to say the least, to their historical context, and then decided to make a fresh start: the attempt is certainly commendable. But one ignores the theological underpinnings of a movement such as Frankism only at one’s peril.

for example, Chaim WIRSZUBSKI, “The Sabbatean Kabbalist Moshe-David of Podhajce” (heb.), *Zion* 7 (1942), republ. in his *Between the Lines. Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, and Sabbatianism* (heb.) (Jerusalem, 1990), 189-209.