

## Reviews

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### The heretical hope of Jacob Frank

*Benjamin Balint*

#### The Books of Jacob

*Olga Tokarczuk*

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*

*Riverhead Books (US)/ Fitzcarraldo Editions (UK)/*

*Text Publishing (Australia)*

In her latest book – the first to appear in English since she won the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature – Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk traces the picaresque adventures of the messianic pretender Jacob Frank.

Heinrich Graetz, the nineteenth century's leading Jewish historian, reviled Frank as "one of the worst, slyest, and most deceitful villains of the eighteenth century". Gershom Scholem, the twentieth century's most influential Jewish historian, called Frank "one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole of Jewish history ... a truly corrupt and degenerate individual ... a figure of tremendous if satanic power". In 1916, the 28-year-old writer S.Y. Agnon expressed undisguised aversion: "[He] and his gang were not a limb of the body of Israel; rather, they were a [pathological] excrescence. Praise and thanks to our doctors, who cut it off in time, before it took root in the body!"

What makes Jacob Frank so disquieting a figure? *The Books of Jacob* – published in Polish in 2014 and now appearing in Jennifer Croft’s beautiful, lithe translation – is woven on the weft of that question.

On the surface, the novel, populated by a large roster of real-life *dramatis personae*, hews close to historical fact. (“I write fiction,” Tokarczuk has said, “but it is never pure fabrication.”) The time is the second half of the eighteenth century. The setting is the borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – then the largest Catholic country in Europe and home to the largest Jewish community in the world. Feudalism is giving way to the era of the Enlightenment, with its emancipatory aspirations, its syncretism, its hopes of revolution.

Jacob Frank was born in 1726 in Podolia, in the south-eastern part of Poland, grew up in Wallachia (a region of Romania under Ottoman rule) and restlessly flitted as a salesman through Czernowitz, Smyrna, Bucharest, Sofia and Constantinople. According to his biographer Paweł Maciejko, Frank lived as an eternal outsider, “an Ashkenazi among the Sephardim, a Sephardi among the Ashkenazim, a Pole among the Turks, a Turk among the Poles, an unlearned boor among the sages, a sage among the simpletons”.

In 1754, Frank travelled with his wife, Hana, to Salonica, “filled at this time with every sort of mage and miracle worker”, Tokarczuk writes, with “some self-proclaimed Messiah or dark sorcerer offering instruction on every street corner”. There he first experienced the spasms of *ruach ha’kodesh* (the holy spirit), founded his own house of study and persuaded his first followers – paupers, vagrants, itinerant peddlers, miscellaneous mystics and “Christian ragamuffins” – that “the curtains between this and that world had been rent”.

The next year, Frank and his hangers-on crossed the Dniester River from Ottoman territory into the Polish Commonwealth, where he began to practise bizarre behaviour, or “strange deeds” (*ma’asim zarim*). In January 1756, for instance, at an inn in a town called Lanckoronie, Frank led a ceremony later described by the great Talmudic scholar Rabbi Jacob Emden:

And they took the wife of the local rabbi (who also belonged to the sect), a woman beautiful but lacking discretion, they undressed her naked and placed the Crown of the Torah on her head, sat her under the canopy like a bride, and danced a dance around her ... and in dance they fell upon her kissing her, and called her “*mezuzah*,” as if they were kissing a *mezuzah*.

Besides holding ecstatic seances, Frank publicly violated Shabbat, pronounced the name of God (*shem ha’meforash*) and boasted of sitting on a Torah scroll, “my ass naked”. Speaking in riddles and parables, he taught that the old dogmas and decrees – notions of sin especially – had been rendered obsolete. Frank and his followers rejected the Torah and the Talmud in favour of the esoterica of Kabbalah. To dismantle the old order and build the new, they felt that they must “wipe the Mosaic Tablets of their false commandments that keep them imprisoned like animals in cages”. Frank proposed instead “purification through transgression”.

The leaders of Polish Jewry rejected this false faith and excommunicated its leader. Tokarczuk has Rabbi Hayyim Cohen Rapaport of Lwów pronounce the Frankists “worse than the Pharaoh, than Goliath, the Philistines, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, Titus ...” The crisis culminated in two public disputations between the traditional Talmudists and the Frankists (or contra-Talmudists). In the first,

held in 1757, the Polish consistory court found the Frankists innocent of heresy, and ordered copies of the Talmud burned throughout Podolia. In the second disputation, convened in the Lwów cathedral in 1759, Frankists made cynical use of blood libels and of the sensational “revelations” by the most famous eighteenth-century Jewish convert to Catholicism, Jan Serafinowicz, who falsely claimed to have twice participated in ritual murders of Christian children. “When a people turns against itself,” says Rapaport in despair, “it means the sin of Israel is great.”

Though initially regarding themselves as a new type of Jew, the Frankists were soon seized by a hope: “That once they are baptized, they will cease to be Jews, at least as far as anyone can tell. They will become people – Christians.” Most of those who wished to flee their own foreignness believed that just as Sabbatai Tzvi had crossed over to Islam a century earlier, Frank (whom they called “the Lord”) would achieve salvation through Christianity. They called this “walking to Esau”, after the Biblical figure identified with Rome and Christianity. This led to the largest voluntary apostasy in Jewish history: Frank and thousands of his followers were baptised in 1759.

Rabbi Emden urged the Catholic leaders in Poland to reject the Frankists:

In truth, even according to the Gospels no Jew is permitted to abandon his Torah ... The Nazarene and his apostles did not come to abrogate the Torah, heaven forbid, for as it says in Matthew that the Nazarene says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Torah; I have not come but to fulfill it. Even if heaven and earth will be abolished, nevertheless even one letter or jot from the Torah will not be abolished but will abide.”

With varying degrees of whispered suspicion, Poles regarded the converts as orphans or superstitious savages to be taken into the church's bosom, or (as Tokarczuk has one priest say) as "so many dogs shooed from a yard who will seek shelter under any old roof at all". The Poles wondered, too, about the unpredictable Frank, a man possessed of such great powers of persuasion: Was he a holy fool? A debauched psychopath? A boorish libertine? Or a miserable Messiah who descended to the darkest depths in order to ascend to the highest spheres?

Not long after the mass conversion, Frank was denounced to church authorities, found guilty of proclaiming himself the Messiah, and confined for the next thirteen years in the fortress-like Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, home to the Black Madonna icon. Frank came to believe that the divine presence was captive in that venerated image of the Virgin Mary. "I was put here," he said, "because this is where the *Shekhinah* is imprisoned, on this new Mount Zion."

Liberated by Russian troops in 1772 and issued with passports by the three states partitioning Poland (Russia, Prussia and Austria), Frank fled with his retinue into exile: first to Brünn, Moravia (now Brno in the Czech Republic), and later to a disused castle in Offenbach, Germany. In his declining years, Baron von Franck, as he was by then known, was plagued by disappointment despite his life of opulent luxury. "Who among you have ever truly believed in me? You are all fools. I've been struggling over you in vain. You've learned nothing."

On Frank's death in 1791, bells rang out from all the churches of Offenbach. He left his followers with a question that teetered between religion and nihilism: if the Messiah had already come, why did history remain fundamentally unaltered and unredeemed?

Gershom Scholem contended that the Frankists helped ease Jews out of the ghetto and into nineteenth-century liberalism. “When the flame of their faith finally flickered out,” he writes in his essay “Redemption Through Sin,”

they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply complete and indifferent sceptics ... Their “mad visions” behind them, they turned their energies and hidden desires for a more positive life to assimilation and the Haskalah, two forces that accomplished without paradoxes, indeed without religion at all, what they, the members of “the accursed sect,” had earnestly striven for in a stormy contention with truth, carried on in the half-light of a faith pregnant with paradoxes.

To this day, Poles debate the Frankist ancestry of famous figures, including the poet Adam Mickiewicz and the composer Frédéric Chopin. In her 2007 novel *Flights*, Tokarczuk told of a nineteenth-century traveller who smuggled Chopin’s heart back to Poland under her skirt. In *The Books of Jacob*, she recounts the afterlife of Frank’s skull:

Many years later, under unknown circumstances, it made its way to Berlin, where it underwent detailed measurement and research and was labelled a prime example of Jewish racial inferiority. After the Second World War, it vanished without a trace – either it was destroyed in the turmoil and chaos of war, crumbling to dust, or else it is still lying around somewhere in the underground storage facility of some museum.

All of the preceding is fact. Aware that narrative, including history, is necessarily imprecise, however, Tokarczuk tells the story of Frank by ingeniously interweaving narrators both reliable and unreliable – and it is here that *The Books of Jacob* spreads its majestic wings and lifts from fact into fiction. The novel’s most reliable narrator in is the all-seeing and ever-present Yente, Frank’s grandmother, whose gaze moves effortlessly through space and time. In the opening scene, she swallows an amulet, a paper bearing the Hebrew word for “waiting” (*hamtana*), and becomes permanently suspended between this world and the hereafter. Just as the *Shekhnah* is trapped in matter, so is Yente tethered by the dissolved word.

Tokarczuk’s most unreliable narrator is Nahman, a former student of the Baal Shem Tov who imperceptibly shifts from being Frank’s master to his friend, then his ardent disciple. “I remember that I got goosebumps at the sight of him, I felt my body tremble, and I experienced a love greater than I had ever felt for anyone before.” Ostensibly writing *The Life of His Holiness Sabbatai Tzvi*, Nahman in fact secretly jots down Frank’s doings and dicta. “Nahman’s stories are not always to be believed,” Tokarczuk cautions, “even less so when he writes them down ... He has a propensity for exaggeration. He detects signs in everything.”

Nahman experiments with three narrative modes. First, the objective: “I believe that what I describe really happened, and that it happened that way once and for all.” He comes to see this way as “false”. Second, the subjective: “I focus on my own experiences ... Then everything is more about me than it is about Jacob, his words and acts are made to pass through the sieve of my tangled vanity.” Nahman dismisses this perspective as “pathetic”. Finally, he learns to “surrender to the guidance of my own Hand, my own Head, Voices, the Ghosts of the Dead, God, the Great Virgin, Letters, Sefirot”.

In the end, Nahman surrenders to the knowledge that, like Yente, who remains neither dead nor alive, Frank and his flock are neither Jewish nor non-Jewish. “We are foreigners’ foreigners,” says Nahman, “Jews’ Jews.” But that is perhaps not such a terrible fate. “There is something wonderful in being a stranger,” Nahman tells himself, “in being foreign, something to be relished ... Only foreigners can truly understand the way things work.”

In each of her books, Tokarczuk approaches a subject from the periphery, as though she too were a foreigner. *The Books of Jacob*, her masterpiece, was published in Polish with an elaborate title (in homage to the title of a volume by Father Benedykt Chmielowski, the first Polish encyclopaedist): *The Books of Jacob, or the Great Journey across Seven Frontiers, Five Languages and Three Great Religions, Not Counting Several Minor Ones: Narrated by the Dead, Their Story Being Completed by the Author According to the Method of Conjecture, Expressed in Several Books, but also Assisted by the Imagination, Which Is Humanity’s Greatest Natural Gift: A Record for the Wise, A Reflection for My Compatriots, An Instruction for Laypersons, Entertainment for Melancholics*. The title, like the vast novel itself, points towards a religiously and linguistically plural Polish past. Its frontier-crossing characters speak a polyphony of Yiddish, Turkish, Polish and German (none of them with any precision) and inhabit multiple identities (none of them clear-cut).

When the novel won Poland’s highest literary award, the Nike, Tokarczuk said in a television interview, “We have come up with this history of Poland as an open, tolerant country, as a country uncontaminated by any issues with its minorities. Yet we committed horrendous acts as colonisers, as a national majority that suppressed the minority, as slave-owners and as the murderers of Jews.” (The ancestors of those murderers figure in the novel;

Tokarczuk has a Catholic clergyman say: “It’s an odd thing that the Tatars, the Aryans, and the Hussites were all expelled, and yet somehow no one thinks to get rid of the Jews, although they are the ones bleeding us dry. Abroad they even have a saying about us: *Polonia est paradus Judaeorum.*”)

The interview occasioned a wave of hate mail and death threats, as though readers sensed that beneath the surface, the novel carries a subtle but subversive commentary on both present-day Polish homogeneity and the entanglements of the Polish-Jewish past in a country that became for its Jews not a paradise but an inferno.

According to Tokarczuk, messianism became the most paradoxical of those entanglements. “For people brought up in Polish culture,” she has said, “messianism is important – our Romantic literature was soaked with it.” Yet because messianism is at root a Jewish idea, Polish culture rests on an impossibility: “that you can take a Jewish idea to build Polish identity and exclude Jewishness”, as Tokarczuk put it in a 2018 interview for *PEN Transmissions*, the magazine of English PEN.

Identity is fluid and imprecise, and its imprecision disquiets those who seek purity. One of the novel’s ancillary characters writes to Father Chmielowski: “Maybe the whole art of writing, my dear friend, is the perfection of imprecise forms.” In *The Books of Jacob*, Olga Tokarczuk has mastered that art. ≡