FRESH WATER FOR A TIRED SOUL: PREGNANCY AND MESSIANIC DESIRE IN A MEDIAEVAL JEWISH DOCUMENT FROM SICILY

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Introduction

Among the many treasures found in the Geniza of Cairo—a Geniza is a stockroom for manuscripts that have become unusable—one document is of particular interest within the framework of ‘Women and Miracle Stories’: the so-called ‘Messianic document’. Thanks to the eminent scholar Jacob Mann this text was rescued from oblivion and published in 1931 with a brief commentary.¹ Since its appearance it has attracted some interest in the scholarly world, and was edited a couple of times. This present study, while based upon previous editions of the text as well as upon previous historical analysis,² wants to push research one step further. In determining the historical circumstances of this text its significance is by no means exhausted. Strangely, the fact that in this text a woman receives a Messianic revelation, while she is making priestly gestures and is covered with a Talit (prayer shawl), has not received due attention. This narrative may shed new light upon the position of women within Judaism in relation to prophecy and charismatic authority.


The major thrust of this article is the analysis of the document as a story, told by two narrators concerning a miraculous event in which a certain woman plays a major role: her pregnancy is viewed as a Messianic sign for things to come. At the same time this woman’s actual position outside the revered space and institutional authority of Judaism confirms her eccentric position. This fact shows that miraculous events are not always authorised by religious authorities, but sometimes take place on a more basic level or even ‘on the fringes’.

History is no mere collection of facts that can be studied as ‘objective’ data, but it is structured as a narrative. This document is no exception to that. The miraculous events are embedded in a story written by a particular person for a specific circle of readers. It follows that this document can be studied in terms of rhetorical devices, stage-setting and dramatic effect. Departing from the perspective of the text as a narrative that uses miracles as a special device to convince readers of the Messianic urge of its content, this article charts the roles of the different personages, their speech-acts, their staging and localisation, and the overall gender patterns in this story.

The document is damaged but includes a title, and is written as a full-fledged story. Unfortunately the end is missing and the story is cut in the middle. Most of the first part, however, including the miracle story, has been preserved, which enables a careful analysis. Three interconnected stories can be distinguished and for convenience’s sake we divide the document into three corresponding parts: A, B and C. Part A tells the story of a certain charismatic woman in Sicily who has been pregnant for more than nine months and performs wondrously. Signs, letters and even the image of a small human being appear on her body and upon her clothes. The story ends up with her prayer for repentance and with an admonition to avoid fiery catastrophe, sword and persecutions. Part B is shorter; the scene takes place inside the synagogue of Catania and involves two men who receive a vision of an angel with a sword and a fire. They flagellate themselves. Part C contains another account by the same narrator about an imminent redemption. It relates the story of the hidden king who is waiting with his troops for a Messianic battle. This story is beyond the scope of this study, but is important as a further indication to the provenance of the text and the message contained in it. The first two parts of the document, though not equal in length, seem to complete each other and as such call for a careful literary comparison.
Genre

Our text is a travel account by a non-professional writer who may have written his story to inform people at home. The writer writes a poor Hebrew with occasional misspellings. The description of his itinerary may have been part of a letter meant to be dispatched. 3 Both letters and accounts of itineraries are suitable vehicles for Messianic reports because of the sudden character of the Messianic events and owing to the necessity to spread the rumours as quickly as possible. Quite often these reports themselves tell about other letters that are to be dispatched, just as in our document (story A and C). Messianic rumours combine a small-scale event in a remote corner of the world with a larger political framework, in which even the non-Jewish kings and rulers may play an important part. 6

These letters are often full of Messianic expectations that were frustrated afterwards. Hence one may assume that these documents were either quite embarrassing for the Jewish community at large, or dangerous as they may add new fuel to Messianic fervour. Both possibilities seem to be valid reasons for suppressing those kinds of texts. Their preservation in the Geniza is solely due to the occurrence of the sacred Name of God in the texts. Documents that take a more critical stand toward Messianic phenomena have a greater chance to survive in printed form, like Maimonides’ famous Letter to Yemen or Benjamin of Tudela’s Itinerary. Our text however, differs

3 Most scholars agree that the document represents a letter. However, Zeldes, “Ma’aseh muflah beSizilia”, p. 348 disagrees and considers it the remains of a book.


6 In case the writer himself believes in the Messianic upheaval, the non-Jewish ruler is pictured as a witness to the Messianic truth ‘à contre coeur’. Cf. the letter from the Cairo Geniza about a Jewish woman in twelfth century Baghdad, to whom Elijah, the Messiah’s precursor, appeared in a dream during a period of serious oppressive measures by the Moslem government. The chief Qadi warned the Caliph not to harm the Jewish people for this should not remain unpunished. However, the Caliph ignores the advice after which Elijah appears to him as well! Cf. S.D. Goitein, “A Report on Messianic Troubles in Baghdad in 1120–21”, Jewish Quarterly Review 43 (1952–1953), pp. 57–76.
from these, both in literary quality and in the uncritical adherence to the Messianic phenomenon that is described.

**Historical background**

Jacob Mann rightly stated that it is extremely difficult to ascertain the period in which our text was written. He cautiously relegates the manuscript to the twelfth century, primarily for palaeographic reasons. The historical data in the text do not offer a definitive clue as to the date, but they are nevertheless significant. After publication, this text was hotly debated.³

A historical background emerges in part C, where our text tells about upheavals in different parts of Europe. Especially the last reference to a persecution of Jews in Germany, where priests intervened on their behalf, seems noteworthy to us. One gets the impression that these events happened in the not too distant past. Although this offers no definite clue for a date, some scholars claim that reference is made to the plight of the German Jews during the Crusades in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁸ Other scholars, however, argue in favour of the fifteenth⁹ or even the sixteenth¹⁰ century.

Another possible clue to the background may be sought in similarities between our text and the Messianic movement of the mystic Abraham Abulafia. Abulafia (born 1240) lived in Sicily from 1279 to 1291. The Messianic aura around his person is evident, although he may not have been explicit about his Messianic aspirations.¹¹ Abulafia's

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³ A clear overview of the historical possibilities is offered by Zeldes, "Ma’aseh mu`allah beSizilia", pp. 347–363. She argues strongly in favour of the fifteenth century, connecting it to a Sicilian document from 1456, which deals with Sicilian Jews who attempted to emigrate from Sicily to Jerusalem.


⁹ Krauss, "Zu Dr. Manns historischen Texten", pp. 274–287. See J. Mann, "Rejoinder", Hebrew Union College Annual 10 (1935), pp. 302–305, who strongly rejects Krauss' suggestion, stating that the Jews had already been expelled from Sicily at that time. Krauss' proposal for the Messianic activities of David Re'ubeni is rejected by Mann, who argues that the Jew had already been expelled from Sicily at that time and that David Re'ubeni had only loose connections with Morocco.

¹⁰ Aescoly, HaTenuot haMeshiḥiot beIsrael, pp. 240–247.

¹¹ His adversaries depicted him as such and if Abulafia did not claim to be the Messiah he was very close to it. Cf. M. Idel, The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia (New York, 1998), p. 140 and literature in notes 329–30.
visit to pope Nicholas III in 1280 to plead for improvement of the plight of the Jews may not be Messianic as such, but nevertheless reflects a high religious-political vocation similar to our document. The hidden Messianic troops in our text are somewhat similar to Abulafia’s vision in Sefer Ha’ot: “I saw a man coming from the west with a great army, the number of warriors of his camp being 22,000 men”. Of course the idea of hidden Messianic troops of either a militant or a spiritual nature is ancient indeed and rather widespread. Again, however, the fact that Abulafia and our text share a location as well as similar ideas and pictures may be significant.

Historically speaking both the thirteenth century and the late fifteenth century were periods of major persecution and suffering as well as heightened Messianic fervour in Sicily and southern Italy. From 1278 onwards, a vehement anti-Jewish campaign by the Dominican inquisition guided by the inquisitor-general Bartolomeo de Aquila is attested. High taxes for Jews and ample rewards for apostate

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12 Pope Nicholas III was the author of Vinea Domini (1278), in which the new orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans are charged with the mission to the Jews. He threatened to burn Abulafia but died the night before the latter’s arrival at Rome! After a month’s imprisonment by the Franciscans Abulafia was released.

13 G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York, 1974), p. 128 regards it as Messianic: the Jewish Messiah’s connection with the city of Rome is a traditional element in rabbinic literature. Nahmanides had affirmed in the Barcelona disputation of 1263 that the Messiah would go to Rome to ask for the liberation of his people.


15 Cf. Mt. 26,53: ‘twelve legions of angels’. Troops with these symbolic numbers are known from Qumran as well. Evidently these ideas are inspired by the Biblical account of the Israelite camps in the desert (Num. 31,4–5). Where our text speaks about the troops staying near the river one may be reminded of the rabbinic story about the lost tribes hidden across the river Sambatyon. Likewise the fifth century Church Father Commodianus refers to the return of Christ at the head of a host consisting of the lost tribes of Israel. This hidden, holy people is singularly virtuous. At the same time these saints will show themselves to be fierce warriors. See Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium, p. 28.

16 The connection between this mystic Abulafia and our text is not only of a geographical nature; Abulafia’s description of mystical phenomena bears a striking resemblance to those in our text. Experiencing letters, colors and liquid substance, as well as the mystic’s trembling and shaking, are familiar phenomena to Abulafia and his circle. Cf. Idel, The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia, pp. 96–97 (letters of blood), p. 75 (trembling, sense of oil). Idel does not note the similarity between Abulafia and our text. Elsewhere Idel advocates a connection between our text and that curious Messianic figure of gentile birth, Solomon Molko (sixteenth century). Admittedly, phenomena like “the form of a man clad in clothes white as snow” and a Talit covered with holy names, reveal a remarkable similarity.
Jews caused mass conversions. Royal restrictions upon the inquisition—it was not allowed to banish the Jews from society—could not prevent the downfall of Jewry in Southern Italy. In 1290 the Dominican friar Bartolomeo repeated the old accusation against the Jews of having murdered a Christian child. The result was a large-scale persecution and more mass conversions.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Jewish life on the mainland of Southern Italy seems to have disappeared except for the peculiar position of the neophyte, Jews converted to Christianity, comparable to the Marranos in Spain. Although the island of Sicily remained outside these vicissitudes, it cannot but have been affected by it. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 meant the end of Sicilian Jewry as well, for Sicily had been under Aragonese rule for two centuries already.

For the present it suffices to underline that our document, if it is indeed a letter from Sicily, may be an indication for the spiritual climate in lower social strata. Various elements in our document seem to correspond with elements from books and documents from ‘higher’ cultural circles, though differing precisely in their less sophisticated nature. Our document testifies to a hardly known popular culture in which the role and function of the charismatic woman is to be located. In this type of document, one finds her in full colours, although even here or maybe precisely here, she is veiled and hidden behind conventional forms and norms.

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18 In 1455 Jews from Catania and other towns in Sicily attempted to emigrate to Jerusalem but were discovered by the authorities and punished. C. Roth, The History of the Jews of Italy (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 243. In 1457 many Jews threatened to leave the town and in 1466 taxes were reduced by half. The Catanian Jews were finally expelled with the rest of Sicilian Jewry in 1492. Zeldes connects this event to our document; cf. note 7 above.

19 For high culture in Sicily compare S.M. Stern, “A Twelfth Century Circle of Hebrew Poets in Sicily”, Journal of Jewish Studies 5 (1954), pp. 60–79; pp. 110–113. Although the physical phenomena of our text and those in Abulafia are remarkably similar, Abulafia offers a much more sophisticated explanation, while our text remains cruelly ‘materialistic’.
Fresh Water for a Tired Soul—The Manuscript

A
(fol. 1, recto) Fresh water for a tired soul
When we, Michael the son of Samuel, and [...][20 came [to] Sicily, we
came to a Jewish community, and the name of the place was Catani[a
and we heard that there was] a woman, who had been prophesying
in San Torbo,[21 and we w[ent to that place to see] her, and she was
pregnant, and her nine months’ time had passed. And her husband’s
name was R’ Hayim, and we went to the synagogue and we experi-
enced[22] a good smell, [while she] was standing outside. And after the
prayer, a trembling seized her and she went home, and she fell upon
her face. And she sent for us, as we were in the synagogue, and we
went with her husband, and she told her husband: Thus was decreed[23]
over me by the Holy One, namely that all the community should
come and see me. And we saw her falling upon her face pleading and
crying, and she said to her husband: Let them bring me a shawl,[24]
and throw it upon me. And they brought a shawl, and as the shawl
was brought from the house, the following letters appeared on the
shawl she had already upon her: יָס (ani = I) [and] after it three yods
(“”) appeared thus, and in addition, on another edge of the cover
appeared יָס (ehad = one).
And the writing was saffron, and the letters were humid, and each
and every one standing there put his finger into it and nothing from
the humidity stuck on our hands. And she screamed: Cover me with
a shawl, [and they brought the shawl]. And we saw that shawl and
there was nothing on it, but once it was put on her, the letters יָס
and further י and further י appeared, and they said: take another
(shawl). And they took it and brought another one, and on it appeared
once more י י י י. And she [was lying down] in fear and trembling,
and she stretched out her left hand.

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[20] Mann reads another name here, but Zeldes checked the manuscript and left
the name out. Hence there are two persons: Michael the son of Samuel and the
anonymous writer.

[21] Zeldes, “Ma’aseh muffah beSizilia”, p. 348, identifies this place as Centorbi,
a small village near the eastern coast of Sicily.

[22] Lit.: We heard.

[23] Possibly passivum divinum, meaning either ‘decreed’ or ‘destined’. The Holy
One is God rather than some Messianic person like the sixteenth century Solomon
Molk. See Aescoly, HaTenuot homeshkilot betIsrael, pp. 243–244.

[24] Lit. מָזוּז (Talit): covering or praying shawl. See discussion below.

[25] For a possible interpretation of the various Hebrew letters see Mann, “A
Hiding in that hand a human image was seen, and something similar to saffron was flowing down. And we all who stood there, took it and tasted it, [and it tasted] like the taste of oil cakes, and its smell was good as flowing myrrh, and we heard in [her prayer]: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One, God is longsuffering and full of grace and [truth].

(verso) . . . . . . [we] all of us were pleading with [her and then] she lifted her hands [as] priests lift (their hands) [when they step upon the pulpit] and blood appeared on the shawl and then letters appeared . . . appeal[red] a stroke of blood, and in the stroke a circle . . . [and] we saw with our own eyes (8) the signs and the letters [that were on the shawls. And she told us: Give praise and thanks to the Lord, and repent [fully] you as well, and in all the places wherever you go through you will show the written words [and] the shawls and they will repent, because thus did the Holy One command me.

And on the Sabbath day after the prayer, we went with her husband to her house to eat together. Before we said grace after the meal, we saw her going up to her upper chamber and she fell upon her face and she was suffering. And we went up with her husband with his permission to see her, and we saw her as if she was eating, and her hands were in her lap. Then we saw her three fingers and they were oozing something similar to oil, and her husband took and gave each and everyone and we ate and it had the taste of honey and its smell was like flowing myrrh. And then she wiped her fingers in her headkerchief, and the entire headkerchief was humid as if it had been dipped [in water], and it had the taste of honey and its smell was very good, incomparable with any other smell [in the world]. And then she sat and started to pray: Lord hear, Lord our God [have mercy and compassion. And] she moaned and said: Woe to the wicked, and woe to them that do not [repent], since thus swore the Holy One before the angels and before Moses [our teacher]: The End is near, and if the wicked will not repent, behold [many] will perish in [s]word and in famine and in persecution, and if they will repent [they will escape] since My salvation is near to come. And that which I have been eating... the Holy One Blessed be He will give to Israel.

B
And she told us: Go to the synagogue, [and say the] prayer. And we went and prayed and we saw the curtain as if? . . . . . . good and strong and we saw also a fire entering the synagogue. (fol. 2, recto) And (it) went to the other corner, and two men from those [praying fell on the floor], and were beating themselves against the ground, and later when they [stood up from the ground] we asked them each separately:

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26 הושע; Mann suggests: הושע = she delivered.
27 Num. 11:8.
28 Ex. 30:23.
29 Or: my salvation.
What did you see? And the one [spoke and his friend] did not hear it. He said to us: We have seen the angel with [a sword in his hand, and in his] other hand a huge fire, and he intended to strike me. Similarly [the other was telling] and saying likewise.

C
Rejoice and be happy and return [fully], and fast and supplicate because of the message that came to us on the twenty eighth of the month of Tishrei on a Sunday. As I was writing these prophecies, not yet having completed them, behold, a stranger from Morea came . . .

After this the writer relates the story of how this stranger, a non-Jew from Morea (Southern Greece) told a local Jew, Leon, about the arrival of the ambassadors of the ‘hidden king’. This Leon told the Jewish community about it and eventually this Leon, Eliah the leader (Parmas) of the community, the teacher David and the writer interviewed this stranger. The man told that the hidden king had sent letters to the king of Spain, of Germany and all the other kingdoms with the command to aid his ambassadors on their mission to gather all the Jews and to take them to Jerusalem. The Jews should support each other financially and sell whatever they possessed without any concern as to their living in Jerusalem. These ambassadors were due to arrive at Sicily, according to this non-Jew. In addition to that he had been an eyewitness to an upheaval in Spain where a certain bishop (hegemon) did not consent to the departure of the Jews for Jerusalem unless they had parted with their money first. They agreed. The ambassadors, he explained further, belong to the hidden ones, two hundred horsemen and twelve leaders, with credentials signed with twelve golden seals. Each of them represented twelve thousand warriors. The kings of Spain, Germany, Hungary and France were sorely afraid and brought together both money and soldiers to buy off the ‘hidden ones’, or else to fight them. Upon the ambassadors’ arrival in Spain the king received them with great pomp in the company of local Jews riding on horseback. However, the ambassadors refused to enter the city but remained outside near the river, supplied with food and drink by the king.

All this the non-Jew declared to have witnessed himself and he said that the ‘Marchese’ would bring instructions to the leaders (of Sicily) how to act. In addition to that he told about an uprising of Germans to kill the Jews, which, however was averted by priests who warned the mob that great evil would befall all the world if the Jews were attacked. After another interview the next day this non-Jew assures that the ‘Marchese’ will arrive (in Sicily) together with the ambassadors.30

Here the manuscript breaks off.

Narrative Devices

There is a remarkable difference between story A about the charismatic woman and story B about the two men, the first being considerably longer and thus more complex. The two men report only briefly their unanimous vision of the angel with a sword in one hand and a huge fire in the other. The story about the woman portrays a more subtle experience and contains several elements of revelation. Although one would perhaps expect to find a subtle, but hidden and shortened account of a female charismatic event over against a more dominant, longer and highlighted male charismatic event, the size and presentation of our document displays the contrary. Obviously the woman’s account is much more elaborate than that of the men.

A closer comparison of comparable details in the two stories is illuminating. The revelation in story A is much more physical and of a more bodily nature than the revelation in story B. Over against the fiery angel’s apparition, the woman “stretched out her left[1] hand. Hiding in that hand a human image was seen”. Furthermore, the story features a complex and somewhat miraculous childbirth scene, including a variety of signs: the woman is over nine months pregnant, she is suffering from pain, lying in her suffering, palpitating and oozing liquids with a certain ‘good smell’, with a particular colour and of an oily quality. A perceptive reader will be reminded of a situation of childbirth although the final results remain mysterious. The image seen on her left hand is an image of a man, not of a baby. Nevertheless it seems safe to conclude: a small image became visible, accompanied by mysterious circumstances taking place in the intimate realm of the inner part of the home.

Acting Persons

Whereas story A is considerably longer than story B, in both stories the visionary persons remain anonymous. The two travellers present themselves: Michael the son of Samuel and the writer, whereas in story A the charismatic woman is the anonymous wife of R’ Hayim.

[31] See also note 38.
In story B both charismatic men remain anonymous, whereas in story C the local leaders are mentioned by name. Apparently the stories emphasise communal authority over against the authority of the actual visionary persons, or in other words: the leaders of the community are better known than its charismatic members. The visionaries are rather channels of the prophetic message and they carry no personal mark.\footnote{For a similar phenomenon, see Goitein, “A Report on Messianic Troubles in Baghdad”, pp. 73–74, where most actors in the story (father, matchmaker) bear a name whereas the prophetess remains anonymous.}

Both the woman and the men fall on their faces upon receiving their message. In story A, the act of falling precedes a dramatic scene, possibly of ecstasy or perhaps a scene of actual childbirth. The woman falls twice, first as she enters her home returning from the synagogue and once again after lunch as she goes to her upper chamber. Both men in story B fall and they do so within the synagogue precincts following the fire vision there. From a literary perspective there is a certain symmetry in the two stories (1 person × 2 falls / 2 persons × 1 fall).

Locations

Regarding the change of locations, the stories are again mutually illuminating. The two men function within the synagogue, they receive their vision as well as its interpretation within the same location. The woman’s story on the other hand emphasises several times that the woman’s actions pertain to the home sphere. After prayer she goes home, and invites her husband and the visitors to come from the synagogue to her home. At the end she sends her entire audience back to the synagogue, which sets the scene for story B. In the middle of story A, the woman retreats even more by ascending to the upper chamber. The travellers get permission to intrude into her private realm. Does this difference merely reflect a difference in appropriate social behaviour according to gender? Or should one assume a contextual difference? The fact that the woman calls from the private realm to the multitude outside might have a special meaning. Although the three stories are each of them Messianic, the locations differ. The home-oriented inner message of the woman in story A may serve as a literary foil for story C, which is internationally and even universally oriented.
Pursuing this track further, one might even read the whole document as tripartite, developing from the inner private sphere, through the communal synagogue to the universal world, as a dynamically structured trilogy. Of course the story of the charismatic woman would then be reduced to a mere literary device, but this does not seem to be justified. The stories convey the impression of a historical account and of a series of events that have really taken place. Perhaps the writer used conventional patterns of gendered behaviour to ‘cloak’ his own Messianic prophecy.

Speech-Acts

Let us now turn from the images to the actual verbal messages in the first two stories of the document. In story B, the two men report their personal impressions and fears. Each in his turn says: “He intended to strike me”. The woman in story A, on the other hand, is introduced in the beginning of our document as a woman who prophesies. In the course of the story she utters many words of wisdom and direction. She calls for her husband; then she explains to him that the Holy One has decreed that her intimate events and their meaning should be revealed to the world. In her ecstasy or suffering, she orders to bring the shawls, she prays the Shema, connecting it to the mercy qualities of God (Ex. 34:6), and she calls for praise and repentance in the name of the Holy One. Eventually she once again invokes the name of the Holy One and of other heavenly figures (angels and Moses) and prophesies against the wicked, calls for repentance and gives some concrete practical instructions to return to the synagogue.

The men, although in the public realm of the synagogue, use private and personal words, in contrast with her more oracular performance. She manages to co-ordinate the whole scene, not unlike some women are able to do during childbirth, and she experiences her vision in an articulated national scope, or even as a cosmic struggle between good and evil. She is a messenger of the Holy One by her powerful words, which are accepted by both the narrator and the leaders of the community. In this respect her revelation is transferred from the private sphere to the utmost public realm.

Ironically, the female role turns out to be much more universalistic and powerful than the roles of the two men. The two revelations are described as dual, opposite scenes. One is tempted to think
of a carefully constructed story which uses male/female oppositions to highlight the Messianic message. Perhaps, however, it is rather a testimony of the community’s acceptance of an extraordinary revelation by an exceptional woman in a time of heightened Messianic fervour.

**Gender-Relations**

The overall impression throughout the entire document is of conventional gender patterns. In this story a traditional husband/wife relation is central. As it was pointed out above, the woman bears no name, she being presented as secondary to her husband. Throughout the entire wondrous event the husband maintains his masterly, landlord position in his house. The visitors accompany him to his home. His wife addresses him, as if to get his permission, in order to reveal her private condition. Though she claims a vision and instructions from heaven, the story does not suggest in this respect a breach in the conventional gender relations. The same constellation of relations is repeated at dinner, where the visitors join the husband inside the house. The wife is in charge of the home, but male visitors come at his invitation, and not due to her prophecy, though the narrator suggested in the beginning that their visit to the town is due to rumours about her visionary capacities.

Then they join him at his permission to see her in her upper chamber, and again the husband offers each visitor a taste of her oily fluids, as if offering a dessert after dinner. A similar sense of conventional gender relations can be detected in the placid division between the female realm outside the synagogue and at home, and the clearly male realm within the synagogue. This division is not challenged, but rather becomes part of the dynamics in the Messianic message. In the end the males are sent out of the female visionary space back to the synagogue, i.e. to the male realm as if to carry out in the appropriate place what has been ordered.

One should keep in mind that this vision is presented against a traditional background devoid of any critical attitude as to gender relations. Only then the following questions become relevant: do the actual gender relations in our story reflect more than androcentric story telling? Can we detect here traces of a female protagonist’s strategy to be seen and heard? Did the woman refrain from assuming full authority (as would befit a prophetess) as a conscious strategy,
or should this be explained as a well-known phenomenon of women often failing to assume authority and adapting themselves to dominant gender division without criticism? In other words: to what extent does this story reflect—consciously or unconsciously—a woman’s ‘own’ voice? These questions are important even when no definite answer can be provided.

Special Themes

Pregnancy and Childbirth

Central in story A is the woman being pregnant. What is the meaning of this fact that so strongly determines the images and sensory perceptions of her revelation? The metaphor of pregnancy indicating Messianic expectation combines both the elements of ‘the signs of the time’ (suffering, birth pangs) and of calculation: a fixed time, a kairos (birth). It explains why this metaphor is firmly rooted in Messianic religious imagery. The Messianic contrasting experience of the present pain and the expectation of new life in the near future are embodied in pregnancy and childbirth. Without pain no birth; the pain is in itself an announcement of redemption.\(^33\) Paul uses the same metaphor when he speaks about “the creation that groans in birth pangs” (Rom. 8,22). The Talmud knows of the expression המנהו מושי (chevele Ha-Mashiah), the birthpangs that precede the Messiah’s advent. “The son of David will come after the tyranny will have unfolded Israel for nine months”, the Talmud states\(^34\) in symbolic language. Roman idolatry and tyranny that embitter Israel’s life are compared here with the period before giving birth, in which no new life is yet to be seen. Curious rabbinic statements become more comprehensible, if we understand this idea of the birthpangs that precede the Messianic advent: “Let the Messiah come, but I don’t want to see him!” In a more elaborate passage the Talmud interprets the text in Jer. 30,6: “See, if a man gives birth? Why do I see every man putting his hands on his loins like a woman in labour?” Obviously Jeremiah does not intend to say that a man can be in birthpangs, but in a remarkable gender-bending the Talmud

\(^{33}\) In Dutch the word ‘verlossing’ means both ‘redemption’ and ‘giving birth’, similar to ‘delivery, deliverance’ in English.

\(^{34}\) Bab. Talmud Sanhedrin 98b.
explains: The 'man' that gives birth refers to God! The Almighty is like a woman in labour, suffering because of the plight of the people of Israel and because of all the injustice on earth. But this same suffering points towards the Messianic future. These rabbinic examples demonstrate clearly the possible Messianic connotations of the childbirth metaphor.

Our text uses pregnancy as a metaphor for Messianic expectations, but at the same time as an actual event, as if the woman is really pregnant, her pregnancy being no mere symbolism for Messianic expectations, but in itself a Messianic sign. Very striking in this respect is the story of a Messianic upheaval in Baghdad in the twelfth century referred to above. The prophet Elijah appeared to a woman and told her that Israel's redemption was near at hand. This woman led an ascetic life and consented to be married only after considerable pressure. She resumed celibacy prior to her vision. Our document should be contrasted with this idealisation of celibacy, which may be common in Christianity but is rare (although not wholly absent) in Judaism. Despite some similarities our text is very remote indeed from these ascetic trends as it regards pregnancy (hence: being bodily, female and fruitful) as a suitable vehicle for divine messages.

Questions remain concerning the actual event. Is this woman in labour or in ecstasy? Is she experiencing an imaginary delivery, or is she setting the stage to prophesy? Does she perhaps transform a sad miscarriage into a Messianic sign?

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35 See above note 6.
37 In encautic and ascetic Christian sources celibacy is a condition sine qua non. Time and again young women on the eve of their marriage are prevented from 'consummation' by a saint or an apostle (e.g. Acts of Thomas 6-16; The Story of the Saints Nereus and Achilleus, in the Legenda Aurea). However, there are some remnants of this ascetic tradition in Judaism as well: cf. the traditions about Moses’ abstention from intercourse from Sinai on (Sifre Numeri § 100), though Moses’ example is not to be emulated according to the Rabbis. For ideas of celibacy within mediaeval Judaism, see A. Maimonides, Highways of Perfection, ed. S. Rosenblatt (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 147: “it is an error to think of someone or of oneself as a saint because he gives up marriage or fasts continually... while he is remiss in certain commandments”. Does Abraham Maimonides disapprove of celibacy in general here or only if one should be neglecting the commandments?
38 It was interesting to note that female readers of previous drafts of this article were inclined to read it as a miscarriage or an unfortunate childbirth, while male readers were quick to jump on to the symbolic meanings of pregnancy and childbirth.
The Talit – Clothing and Covering

The shawl is a prominent feature in our story, and contains elements that may constitute a direct challenge to conventional religious attitudes concerning woman’s behaviour. The story has two words for the clothing and covers that are put upon the woman during her vision. The one is the מַלּות (Talit). Later on in the narrative the woman wipes her fingers with her מָזִיר (Mandalin). The Talit was translated by ‘shawl’ and the Mandalin by ‘headkerchief’. Wearing a Talit is customary for men during prayer. Ever since the early rabbinic literature it is generally accepted that women do not wear it though it is not explicitly forbidden.

Furthermore, one of the peculiarities of the Sicilian Geniza documents is the long list of various sorts of textiles known and used in the Jewish local language. Bearing those facts in mind, may one assume that the choice of this particular word Talit for the covering contains specific religious overtones? Does the woman turn to this garment as a sign and a symbol of her particular position?

The Talit as a symbol for eschatological expectations is not unknown. The excited Jews in Byzantium gathered wearing their Talits and did not do any work, i.e. they simulated a long Sabbath. But in our text the symbolic function of the Talit would be strongly determined by the woman wearing it. Does this woman resort to this male symbol as a means to provoke, or should one understand it as a mere popular eschatological symbol?

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39 This Greek word is probably one of the many traces of Greek introduced to Sicily via the Arabic occupation of Sicily until the eleventh century.
40 Toselṭa Kiddushin 1:8, Sifre Num. 115, Bab Talmud Menahot 43a, Jer Talmud Berakhot 3:3 (6b); Jer Talmud Kiddushin 1:8 (61c). In a thirteenth century discussion the Talit is mentioned as an example of goods, that a man may give to his bride as a symbol of their marriage, marriage being a kind of ‘acquisition’. (Responsa Chatam Sofer, Vol. 1, b, Lema: Teshuva 21.). It is curious that a woman receives a Talit as a present. The Talit may denote a useless property of no value for the woman, since she does not wear it. However, even as a ‘useless’ gift the Talit is still legitimate as a present in the official marriage ceremony. According to the ruling of Hillel, who established the regular custom ever since, the marriage ritual is valid even by the exchange of one penny.
M.T. Wacker maintains that the procedure of covering oneself, taking off and piling up many veils constitute a strong symbolic performance for women's conscious claims to power and participation. Is one justified to read a similar motive in this present account? Even if one accepts the Talit as an emancipatory symbol, it should be admitted that in our story this symbol remains well hidden behind conventional veils.

The Priestly Gesture

The priestly raising of the hand deserves attention as well. Once again one encounters in the story a specific gesture reserved to men but in this case attributed to the woman during her vision. Just like the Talit, the priestly blessing accompanied with a specific posture of the fingers is the prerogative of male priests and not of priestesses or daughters of priests. The priestly gesture is one of the specific synagogue or public realm activities, to be carried out only in a full community with a minimum of ten men (minyan). The rabbinic discourse even deliberates whether women are to be included in receiving the priestly blessing. Should one interpret the woman's gesture as a sign of consciously breaking away from conventional gender roles? Or should one understand it as part of the androcentric story using well-known symbols for this charismatic event, while forgetting or ignoring the fact that the protagonist is a woman?

The Reading of the Shema

As the woman produces or gives birth to the little image in her left hand, she is heard to be praying. Her prayer includes the first verse of the Shema (Dt. 6:4), and a part of what is called the thirteen qualities of God (Ex. 34:6). Here we elaborate upon three elements concerning the reading of the Shema.

a. Although the reading of the Shema could be a private prayer, the reading of the divine qualities belongs definitely to a community service. The reading of the Shema, too, could be a formal public

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45 Sifrei Num. 39; ibid. 43.
prayer activity namely the so-called הוראת עלי שמע (pores 'al Shema'), when a leader reads one verse at a time and the community responds. The document shows a small break here, followed by the descriptive statement: "[we] all of us were pleading with [her]". Does this imply her activity being public or private?

b. Rabbinic tradition from the Tannaic period throughout Jewish history attributes to the Shema an ecstatic mysterious potential. The Shema is understood as the declaration of the kingdom of heaven, for Rabban Gamaliel it is the key to the kingdom of heaven. The Shema is recited at the end of the Day of Atonement and is the summit of the religious experience of the day. It constitutes the last words of any dying person.

Hence the occurrence of the Shema in our story is no mere accident. Does the story mean to tell us that the woman is acting as a leader in prayer as she communicates her vision to her audience? Or do they all join in her private moment of childbirth or 'birth of prophecy'? The recital of the Shema can be seen as a public ceremony, but also as a private voice of intimate prayer.

c. Furthermore, rabbinic law knows of restrictions as to the leaders of the ceremonial Shema reading. Small children and the blind are officially disqualified, though not all rabbinic authorities agree in this respect. Tractate Sofrim possibly even implies that women are part of the restriction. If one understands our story as referring to a formal occasion, one cannot but underscore the implications for the challenging of traditional gender roles and relations. Does this account imply a critique of male religious prerogatives? Or is this an example of an androcentric story about an exceptional woman which is devoid of revolutionary potential precisely because of its exceptional nature?

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46 Maimonides, Mishne Tora Hilkhot Tefila uNesiat Kapaim, 8:5.
47 Mishna Berachot 2:2; Sifrei Num., 115; Deut. Raba, 2:28; Tanhumah, Lech Lecha 1.
48 Mishna Berachot 2:5.
49 Mishna, Megila 4:4; 4:6; Tosefta Megila 3:16.
50 Tanhuma, Toldot 7. See the exhaustive treatment in T. Marx, Halakhah and Handicap: Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability (Utrecht, 1993), passim.
51 Tractate Sofrim 10:7. It may be argued, however, that the mentioning of women there does not refer to the beginning of the passage.
The Rhetoric of Miracles

Miracles are embedded in stories, and every miraculous event is told as a miracle story. Our research on this text about a miracle occurring to a woman requires taking the story-element into account as well. Miracle stories have a strong rhetorical potential and serve to persuade the listener of a religious truth. The miracle's proof is an essential element in the story. Hence one of the rhetorical elements in the composition of a miracle story is the investigation and probing of any event before declaring it miraculous. The proof is an intrinsic part of the story telling in any miraculous event, and it plays a very prominent part in the present document as well. Considering we are dealing with a tripartite story, comparison of the different proofs enables us to get a clearer picture of the woman's story. Let us first make an inventory of the proof elements.

In story A, one of the bystanders puts his finger in or on the appearing wet letters, but nothing seems to stick to it. Later on the speaker testifies and says: "We saw the Talit and nothing was on it, and then letters appeared". Yet further on they taste from the saffron-looking moisture and the storyteller claims: "we saw with our own eyes". In the upper chamber the woman's husband gives the visitors once more a bit to taste. Thus the proof consists of a concrete employment of various senses, touch, smell, taste and sight. Likewise the prophetess charges them to take with them the Talits as well as the testimonies that they were supposed to write in order to show them together, so that people from far away should see and repent.

In story B, the people see the vision, but the main proof is the fact that both men, while interrogated separately, tell the same story. One may regard this as a quasi-juridical proof.

Story C is dealing with written material and henceforth the nature of the proof changes. The writings are sealed with ten seals, the letters are written in Yehudit, presumably Hebrew, as a proof of authenticity. At the end the messenger takes a vow of truth, and there is an attempt to identify these writings with previous secret information from the so-called Genuzim, the 'hidden ones'. Here the type of proof is legalistic in nature rather than personal.

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An ascending scale in the presentation of the miracles becomes patent. The scale runs from the private realm through the interpersonal to the written and impersonal, and from sensory perception to the more constructed, non-sensory perception. One is even tempted to say there is a shift from nature to culture, and from the direct and simple to the indirect and complex. However, this deserves some additional reflection. Precisely the dichotomy between nature and culture is hotly debated nowadays, as these elements often presuppose unconscious gender dualism in combination with scales of value. The unconscious equation of nature with female and of culture with male is precisely one of the ideologies of male dominance irrespective of how the ‘call of nature’ is perceived, negatively or utopian. One should be careful then to apply the distinction nature-culture to our story. Abulafia’s mysticism demonstrates that sensory elements are not lacking in male religious experience either! It would be a mistake to conclude that the woman’s prophecy is considered less elevated and less legitimate than the other two prophecies. Her prophecy takes place in the private realm, but the proof of her wondrous behaviour is concrete, direct and generally accessible. What is more, the woman herself orders the evidence of proof to be showed and spread to the outside world.

As has been said before, in this document men and women move along conventional guidelines. The demand for proof in this possibly popular document does not break away from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Nevertheless one should pay special attention to one type of proof in the female protagonist’s story. The prophetess herself calls for the audience to collect her shawls and carry them with a written story (דּוֹרֵה). In other words, the storyteller probably suggests that the woman herself is not satisfied with her private set-up. Should one attach particular importance to that element by assuming here two different levels of participation? On the one hand the storyteller presents a conventional reading of the woman’s situation. On the other hand and in spite of himself he testifies to her wish that her prophecy be written down and spread over the world. Unwittingly, he allows a female voice to come through and to be heard.

Conclusions

The analysis of characters and activities is dependent on the story-telling structure of the document. If the document is a letter to be dispatched and multiplied in various Jewish communities, there may be some significance in the fact that the woman’s story is longer and more detailed and the first one in this short series of three stories. Would our story carry a different significance if it were a chapter in a book or part of a longer story?

However, the story is told by an eyewitness as part of a sequence of events, not as a separate story. Part A occurs first, and practically invites the following short event B. The third event C occurs simultaneously. We noticed the movement from intimate privacy to the public realm. The question at hand is: To what extent is the woman’s story part of a rhetorical device? Does the woman only serve the overall purpose of the story, or does she herself direct the story? She may, however, just as well be considered a tool serving as an opening to the ‘real important’ world prophecy. But she may as well be regarded as the embodiment of the relevance of world history and of national agitation. In that case she is the real agent and catalyst of the story.

If our document is part of a lost book, as Zeldes claims, it would be slightly more probable that the story is fiction. The female element might then be interpreted as a literary device, using conventional gender images. If, however, one is rather inclined to regard the document as a letter, preserved in the Geniza not because of its content but only for religious reasons, then one may give more credence to the woman’s actual performance as a prophetess. However, both as a literary fiction and as a historical event, the significance of this female protagonist remains undisputed.

Here then is a story of a woman with a strong vocation but without any official means to share her insights with the community, for she belongs and remains outside the synagogue. She interprets her concrete or imaginary pregnancy as a Messianic sign. Her charismatic behaviour appears to be an adequate channel, since her claim is heard and recognised by the community. In her excitement she is pushing her traditionally determined limitations as far as possible by permitting unsolicited intimate contacts (with permission of the husband, her own consent or refusal remaining unknown), as a means to spread her vision and message. She may even resent this intrusion,
which may explain her screaming and her asking to be covered by extra shawls. During this private affair she applies some other strategies to widen her horizons by adopting specific male gestures, hereby perhaps claiming more credibility and authority. This in turn gives her the opportunity to speak up and to be heard in her own circles and beyond. True to her vision she attempts to break through her cultural limitations by exploring wider horizons. We do not know if the storyteller noticed this message. Still, the fact that he delivered it is remarkable. It shows at least that emancipatory stances may have been imagined and reverberated earlier and more often than we usually think.