

#### 42. THE EGYPTIAN SCROLL OF 1012

When a medieval Jewish community was delivered from great danger through a seemingly miraculous occurrence, a local fast, sometimes followed by a holiday, was instituted in commemoration of the event. Occasionally, when a man with the gifts of a writer was present, the event would be perpetuated in a megilla, or scroll, so called after the biblical Scroll of Esther, which served as a literary model for such creations.

Egyptian Jewry produced several such scrolls.<sup>1</sup> The one reproduced here must have been particularly popular, for a number of copies of it have been found in the Geniza and are preserved today in four different libraries.<sup>2</sup> It describes how, in January 1012, the Jews of Egypt were saved from a dangerous persecution through the sudden intervention of the caliph al-Hākim, who is praised in superlative terms as a prince of justice and wisdom.

In the same year, however, and clearly after the megilla had been written, the caliph ordered a persecution of Christians and Jews, the like of which had never occurred in Islam before. He ordered their houses of worship to be demolished or confiscated and gave them the choice between converting to Islam and expulsion. Under these circumstances the popularity of the Scroll of 1012 calls for comment. It might be explained thus: The great persecution by al-Hākim was all-comprising - for Christians it actually seems to have begun several years earlier - , but for several reasons, not the last being the great number of Christians and Jews in the country, it was not followed through systematically and, consequently, also not terminated by any dramatic event. It simply petered out. Christians and Jews were permitted to

return to their domiciles and their religions and to rebuild their churches and synagogues. The Arabic historians provide no definite information about this point. But since the Geniza has preserved a marriage contract, properly written in Fustat on April 5, 1015,<sup>3</sup> and a document showing a well constituted court in September, 1016,<sup>4</sup> the persecution cannot have lasted very long. Nothing spectacular could be reported about its termination. Thus, the scroll of 1012, which also was not without literary merits, served as a text for the remembrance of a period of great afflictions, which were overcome without lasting damage.

Rulers were sacrosanct. When they did something good, only the most glowing superlatives could do justice to their merits. When they brought misery and disaster over their subjects, they were but tools of God's wrath, and nothing could be done about this. The popularity of the scroll of 1012 reflects this medieval attitude towards the person of the ruler: let us remember the good and forget the rest.<sup>5</sup>

The author of this megilla was Samuel the "Third", that is, a member of the Jewish High Council, or yeshiva, of Jerusalem, who ranked highest after its head and the president of its juridical court. A title page preserved says so expressly, and this testimony is confirmed by inner evidence. Samuel was a religious poet with a tremendous output - the over four hundred items of his preserved by chance in the Geniza certainly were only a fraction of his creation, and he wrote also several penitential poems and liturgies for the fast day instituted in January 1012; the similarities in style between them and the scroll are unmistakable.<sup>6</sup> Just as painters used to show

themselves in their creations as unobtrusive figures, thus Samuel mentions himself in the scroll in passing. This was entirely appropriate, since he was a distinguished visitor in Fustat, and as "Third" the most high ranking Jewish personality in the town.

The introductory reflections about sin, suffering, atonement, and salvation have been mostly lost. The story itself is preserved in its entirety.

# This happened in the days of the king called "our lord who judges with the word of God"<sup>7</sup>, who governs the land of Egypt and rules over the ends of the earth in east, west, north, and south.<sup>8</sup> His kingdom is strong and mighty and his throne is higher than that of his fathers and forefathers. He was thirteen years old when he ascended the throne and he governed all his empire with marvelous insight and wisdom, needing no vizier or counselor.<sup>9</sup> Countless traitors conspired against him and many rose against him in rebellion. But God crushed all of them under his feet, for he loved justice and hated wickedness. He appointed judges in the land and ordered them to act with justice and to make righteous decisions. He removed evildoers from power and detested crooked people of blame worthy conduct. He loved men of reason, and adhered to the establishment of order and the way of the good. In his great love for justice he appointed even as executioners, underlings of the courts, and night watchmen only "truthful witnesses" (persons of good reputation) - something which no king has ever thought of and which no ruler has done before.<sup>10</sup> Everyone knows that he is not avid of silver and gold and shuns extortions and oppression.

Then, on the third of the month of Shevat of the year 4772 of the creation of the world,<sup>11</sup> which is the year 1323 of the cessation of prophecy<sup>12</sup> and the year 943 of the devastation of the Holy Site,<sup>13</sup> Paltiel,<sup>14</sup> one of the cantors of the community was gathered to his fathers and the Israelites assembled to pay him the last honor. Carrying his bier they passed through a street on their way to the cemetery when the Egyptian mob became aroused, hurled stones on them, cursed them, and crowded menacingly around them.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, false accusations were raised against them and untrue testimonies were written out. Denunciations, humiliations, derision, and slander proliferated. There was much shouting, the mob became emboldened and threatened to kill.<sup>16</sup>

The governor sent his henchmen and underlings and the qadi his messengers and "runners",<sup>17</sup> and these pursued the persons who tried to turn away from the cortege, apprehended and ill-treated them. Some escaped and hid, others were robbed of their clothing or bought themselves free with money, others again were manacled and their feet were put in chains. Twenty-three persons were taken into custody in two different prisons and stayed there overnight under great privations and without food or drink. They had to give some of their clothing as payment for their stay in prison.<sup>18</sup>

Of members of the Sanhedrin<sup>19</sup> there was among them a very old man, poor, humble, and god-fearing, namely, the Third of the Fellows, called Samuel b. Hosanna.

On the next morning,<sup>20</sup> on the fourth of Shevat at the third hour after sunrise, they were taken out of the prison and conducted around the bazaars where they were terrorized by thousands and myriads of clamoring crowds, so that the earth burst by the uproar. All the low-bred and lawless rabble thronged around them, and finally they were dragged cruelly towards the place of execution and robbed of most of their clothing, to be killed instantly.

They were only ten cubits away from that place when a voice called from behind: "Bring them to the king's palace", whereupon some underlings dragged them towards the place of execution and others to the palace. But the king gave orders to put them into the prison which is in the palace compound, where their feet were put into iron.

All the Jews in Egypt were in great danger, they were forced to keep themselves out of sight in their houses or in hiding places and could not show themselves on the streets. The people of Fustat meant to appropriate their possessions, to take their lives, and to wipe them out from above the face of the earth. The Jews turned everywhere for help, but no one came to their rescue. They kept fasts and mourning, lamentations and wailing, together with their wives, sons and daughters, and even the women who were expecting or nursing participated. Their fear and terror waxed daily, but there was no solution and no way out.

Then their poor and destitute and some of their women and boys took courage and, endangering their lives, went early in the morning of Thursday<sup>21</sup> to the gate of the palace, threw themselves to the ground, spread dust over their heads, invoked God with a loud voice, prostrated themselves and called out: "Help, our lord and king."<sup>22</sup>

When their cries were heard before<sup>23</sup> our lord, the king, he became aware of their distress and had compassion with their misery. God turned his heart so that he spared them as it is written: "The heart of a king is in God's hand, like water channels, he turns them wherever he will."<sup>24</sup> He found out that the written testimonies were false and that of the two hundred alleged witnesses only four had been examined and they had been proved to be suspect and unacceptable.<sup>25</sup> Thus their lies and calumnations became evident, and the king - may he live forever - is a king of justice, who detests all falsehood, and the foundation of whose throne is compassion.

Thus, when the people, their women, and poor, cried for help,<sup>26</sup> the king had pity with them and ordered to let the prisoners free. The chains were removed from their feet <sup>and</sup> the stocks from their necks, and they were dismissed from the prison. The king ordered also that their clothing should be restituted to them to the last thread and sandal thong, which was done.

They left the palace compound and circumambulated the gates of the palace, blessing the king, wishing him a long life, enjoyment of his rule, strength to his armies, conquest of the easts and wests<sup>27</sup> of the world, and destruction and annihilation of his adversaries.

Then they met their brethern who had demonstrated, and all together entered the city and the bazaars of Fustat.<sup>28</sup> Those who had hid came now into open and all those who had fled and concealed themselves joined them in their procession through the bazaars, blessing the king.

Finally they entered the Great Synagogue<sup>29</sup>, took three Torah scrolls<sup>30</sup> out of the holy ark and said many prayers of thanks <sup>and</sup> giving to the living God and repeated blessings over our lord, the king. They read



the great Hallel,<sup>31</sup> and the rejoicing was great. The leaders of the people fixed these days, namely the third to the fifth of Shevat, as yearly days of fasting and penitence. The pious,<sup>32</sup> took upon themselves to fast three days and the rest of the people one day, namely the day when they were apprehended. On one of the following sabbaths all the Jews of Fustat would be assembled following a public announcement, when the fast day would be instituted in remembrance of these wondrous occurrences with thanksgivings to God and blessings for our lord the king.<sup>33</sup>

In all the towns and villages of Egypt and the caravanserais<sup>34</sup> on the ways and in Alexandria the Jews had been in danger to be attacked, robbed, and murdered. When this became known to the king - may he live forever - , he sent word everywhere not to do harm to Jews, where upon their persecutors kept back and did not touch them. The Jews assembled in the synagogues, fasted and vowed to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, to praise God and to bless our lord.<sup>35</sup>

(The scroll concludes with a short prayer of thanksgiving.)

Notes

1. See Mann, I, pp. 31-32; II, p. 30-32.
2. Bodl, MS Heb. e. 95, f. 54; BM or 5560 A, fs. 5-6, TS 8K10; Mosseri HB; ed. Mann, II, 31-37, 432-436 = HUCA, III, 258-262, see also Shaked, Bibliography, p. 226. TS K6, f. 134 does not contain an Arabic version of the megilla, but forms its title page. Correct MII, 31, n. 1, accordingly.
3. TS 16.245. Fragmentary, as usual. Between Mu'ammala and Ghulayb. She most probably is identical with Mu'ammala, daughter of Hayyīm, who married in 1013, TS 6Ja, f. 2, ed. H. Hirschfeld, JAR, 16 (1904), 574, for that name ("the one hoped for") has not been met with by me elsewhere. In TS 6Ja, f. 2 the locality of the wedding is not preserved.
4. TS 13J1, f. 3, described in detail in Med. Soc., I, p. 362.
5. See Med. Soc., II, pp. 348-351.
6. M. Zulai, Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry, 3 (1937), 163. M. Wallenstein, Unpublished Piyyutim from the Cairo Geniza, (Manchester, 1956), pp. 80-81. Schirmann, New Poems, 64-65.
7. A literal Hebrew rendering of the official name of the caliph: al-Ḥakīm bi-amri 'l-lāh.
8. "Sea", for "south" is very strange in Egypt, where "sea", baḥrī, means north. The phrase is taken from Psalm 107:3. An explanation of the usage there is attempted in my Bible Studies (Tel Aviv, 1963), pp. 160, 236-237.
9. According to the Muslim historians, al-Ḥakīm was eleven when he became caliph and fifteen, when he had his tutor assassinated and tried to rule in person, see Lane-Poole, History of Egypt, pp. 123-125.



10. Text gardōn (Heb., going back to Latin gradus, place of execution); pelīlīm, Exodus 21:22, understood as meaning court of justice. Heb. "truthful witnesses" renders Ar. ʿudul. The translation proposed by J. Mann, HUCA, III, p. 259, n. 7 "for cases of capital punishment, ordinary jurisdiction, etc." is impossible. Judges, at any time and anywhere in Islam, had to be ʿudul. For night watchmen see Med. Soc., II, p. 86.

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This description of al-Ḥayīm, which is not devoid of factual information, underlines the puritan strain in the caliph's bizarre character which is discernible also in the reports of the Muslim historians.

11. Coinciding with December 31, 1011.
12. Meaning the "era of the documents", which began in Sept., 312 B.C. (and not 311, as printed in Med. Soc., I, p. 355). The "era of *the* prophets" was then replaced by that of the sages.
13. The Temple of Jerusalem was burnt by the Romans in 70 A.D., but according to medieval Jewish chronology in 68.
14. The writer intended to spell Paltiel not Putiel, see Mann, II, p. 36, HUCA, III, 256.
15. Christian and Jewish funerals in Muslim countries were often molested or even outrightly attacked by fanaticized mobs, see Med. Soc., II, p. 285.
16. The nature of the accusations is not stated, because the standard lies on such occasions were known to everyone, namely, that the non-Muslims had cursed the prophet of Islam and ridiculed Islamic religion. <sup>t</sup>At that time the persecution of the Christians was already in full swing; thus it is not surprising that the mob was annoyed to see Jews moving around in a large funeral procession unmolested.

17. A Heb. rendering of Ar. raqqāsīn, the underlings of a qadī, see Med. Soc., II, p. 370.
18. In medieval prisons, in England as well as in Egypt, one had to pay for one's stay in a prison as one does for a hotel, see Med. Soc., II, p. 373. The writer emphasizes that most of the 23 prisoners did not carry any cash with them because a funeral of non-Muslims in a Muslim city was frequently an occasion for trouble.
19. A Greek word having the same meaning as yeshiva, namely High Council, see Med. Soc., II, p. 196.
20. The fourth of Shevat was a Tuesday.
21. The idea was also that the prisoners should by no means left to their misery during the Sabbath.
22. The poor, women, and children are objects of compassion. Islamic ethics and etiquette prescribe that their cry for help must be listened to.
23. The cries were not heard by the king in person, but were related to him by his servants.
24. Proverbs 21:1.
25. The Heb. phrase nōge'im be'edūtham normally designates an interested witness, here in a more general way one not acceptable according to Muslim law.
26. This is a technical term for a demonstration calling on a ruler to rectify an injustice.

27. This shows that the blessings were said in Arabic and not in Hebrew. For in Ar., but not in Heb., one can put "east" and "west" in the plural, meaning the regions of both east and west, that is, the whole world.
28. The caliph's palace was in Cairo, about two miles north of Fustat. They returned now to Fustat where they could show themselves openly without fearing anything.
29. This was the synagogue of the Palestinians (where the Geniza was located).
30. The maximum to be used at any holiday service.
31. Psalm 136.
32. For hyhdym "Jews" probably the <sup>original manuscript</sup> had hyhydym "the pious", which, graphically is almost the same. The copyist wrote "the Jews" because he had the Book of Esther, 9:27, in mind.
33. A statute was binding only those who were present at its promulgation or had been advised of it and not protested.
34. Caravanserais (Ar. funduq, Heb. nesib, known to me only from here) are repeatedly referred to in the Geniza for Alexandria, but not for "the ways", because the delta was so densely populated that a traveler normally found nightly rest in a town or village.
35. The Jews outside Fustat did not accept the special fast of Shevat but fasted for some weeks on Mondays and Thursdays, the usual weekly fast days in Judaism and Islam, see Med. Soc., II, p. 342.