A Jewish Childbirth Amulet for a Girl

MARGARETHA FOLMER

Introduction

The Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam houses a collection of childbirth amulets.¹ Fifteen of these are printed on paper,² and some twelve are hand-written. So far these amulets have not been published. Only one was previously known from reproductions.³ Most of the amulets from this collection date from the eighteenth century and probably were produced in Germany. In this contribution I should like to present one of the printed amulets from this collection.⁴ The amulet is a representative of a type that is known from several private and institutional collections.⁵ It contains a number of names, fixed phrases and biblical quotations, but the most remarkable element in it is the story which narrates an encounter between the prophet Elijah and the female demon Lilith.

1. This article is dedicated to my dear colleague Albert van der Heide, who introduced me to Lilith and the fascinating legends linked to her, while I still was a student in Leiden.

1. Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, Library Special Collections, Universiteit van Amsterdam.

2. D 2; D 3; D 4; D 20; D 23; D 24; D 25; D 27; E 63; E 64 and B 14–1; C 11; D 28; E 61; E 62.

3. The amulet was made by Abram bar Yaakov around the year 1700. Prints of it are known from several collections. The amulet has been reproduced in M.H. Gans, Memorboek: Platenatlas van het leven der joden in Nederland van de middeleeuwen tot 1940 (Baarn 1971) 139 and H. Brugmans & A. Frank, Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland (Amsterdam 1940) 476, 481. See also Y. Shachar, COLLECTION FEUCHTWANGER (Masoret we-Omanut Yehudit 3; Jerusalem 1971) no. 1; S. Sabar, ‘Childbirth and Magic: Jewish Folklore and Material Culture’, in D. Biale (ed.), Mediterranean Origins (vol. 1 of Cultures of the Jews: A New History; New York 2002) 5.

4. I intend to publish all the printed and handwritten amulets from the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in one volume.

5. For references, see note 22 below.
1. Childhood amulets

Childbirth amulets are protective amulets to be placed in the room where the woman had to give birth. An early magical handbook from the Talmudic period, *Sefer ha-Razim* (‘The Book of Mysteries’),\(^6\) prescribes that for this purpose four silver lamellae should be hung on the four walls of the room during childbirth. These amulets contain incantations against the female demon Lilith, who is believed to have the power to cause the death of the mother or her new-born baby, and they are thought to ward her off. Childhood amulets are known from all over the Jewish world. The earliest attestations come from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. We can only briefly refer here to Jewish Palestinian amulets from the fifth to the seventh centuries, the Jewish Babylonian magical bowls from the sixth to the eighth centuries and the mediaeval Jewish Palestinian amulets from the Cairo Geniza written on paper.\(^7\) In Venice in the early sixteenth century the first printed amulets appeared. In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Jewish printing presses of Holland and Germany produced a large amount of amuletic literature, according to Schrire ‘often of a grossly ignorant type’.\(^8\) Frequently these amulets were no more than a piece of paper with the printed text of Ps 121 and 91 on it and the words שדי or בשם שדי. These amulets are known by the name *shir hamloos tsetl*, *shimir tsetl*, *kimpet briv*, *kimpet tsetl*, שמירה לילדה and שמרויה. They had to stay in place for eight days in the case of boys, until their circumcision, or twenty days in the case

---

