

The First Female Jewish Author

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Abstract: It is well-known that from the beginning, Jews played a not insignificant role in the development of the “science” of alchemy. It is much less well-known that one of the earliest identifiable alchemist authors of whose work fragments have been preserved was a Jewish woman named Maria. Not only is she the first non-fictitious alchemist of the Western world, but she is the first Jewish woman in history to have written and published under her own name. Yet no existing work on the history of Jewish literature makes any mention of her.

MARIA ALCHEMISTA, THE FIRST FEMALE JEWISH AUTHOR

It is well-known – though not undisputed – that from the beginning Jews played a not insignificant role in the development of the ‘science’ of alchemy.¹ It is much less well-known, however, that one of the earliest identifiable alchemist authors of whose work(s) fragments have been preserved, was a Jewish woman with the name of Maria.² This long neglected author – the credit for whose rediscovery goes to the late Raphael Patai – is important in more than one respect. Firstly, Mary is the first non-fictitious alchemist of the Western world (most of the ‘ancient alchemists’ are mythical personalities, such as Ostanes, Hermes Trismegistus, and Pibechius);³ and secondly, she is the first Jewish woman in history we know to have written and published under her own name.⁴

Although her work(s?) – which she wrote in Greek – are lost, extensive quotations and excerpts from them have been preserved in the works of later Graeco-Roman alchemists, most notably the famous Zosimus of Panopolis (Egypt, early 4th century C.E.), who held her in the highest possible esteem.⁵ It is impossible to say exactly when and where she lived, but Egypt and the period from the first till the second, perhaps third century CE are reasonable guesses.⁶ We know of the existence of other Jewish alchemists in Greco-Roman Egypt, but most of them are

¹ R. Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, Princeton 1994; for a critical review see R. Fontaine in *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 49 (1996) 364f.

² See R. Patai, ‘Maria the Jewess – Founding Mother of Alchemy’, *Ambix* 29 (1982) 177-197.

³ R. Halleux, ‘Alchemy’, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford 1996³, 52f.

⁴ See B. Suler, ‘Alchemy’, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2 (1972) 546, and P.W. van der Horst, ‘Mary the Jewish Alchemist’, in C.E. Evans, S.E. Porter, eds, *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, Downers Grove/Leicester 2000, 679f.

⁵ For the texts of the fragments one can consult both M. Berthelot & Ch.E. Ruelle, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, vols. 2-3, Osnabrück 1967 (repr. of Paris 1888), Index s.v. Maria; M. Mertens, *Les alchimistes grecs*, vol. 4: *Zosime de Panopolis: Mémoires authentiques*, Paris 1995, Index s.v. Maria. Patai presents most of the fragments in English translation.

⁶ Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, 60.

unknown to us.⁷ Only Mary rose to great fame among the alchemists of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, which is primarily due to her invention of several types of ovens and boiling and distilling devices made of metal, clay, and glass, and to her extraordinary skill. As Zosimus informs us, Maria taught that ‘the inner, concealed nature of the metals could be discerned by a complex alchemical process that was revealed to her by God himself and that was to be transmitted only to the Jewish people’.⁸ Her most famous invention (or at least description) is that of what was later to become known as the *balneum Mariae*, a water bath consisting of a double vessel, of which the outer one is filled with water while the inner vessel contains the substance which must be heated to a moderate degree. The French expression *au bain Marie*, still used in every kitchen today, derives from it. One wonders how many cooks today are aware of the fact that this *Marie* was a Jewish alchemist!

Zosimus usually refers to her as ‘Maria’, but sometimes as ‘Maria the Hebrew (*Hebraia*)’, or even ‘the divine Maria’ (others call her ‘the Hebrew prophetess’). Her Jewishness is also apparent from the fact that she says that the Jews are the chosen people and that only they, not the gentiles, could know the deepest alchemistic secrets. She is reported to have told others not to touch the philosophers’ stone with their hands, ‘since you are not of our race, you are not of the race of Abraham’. Mary’s claim that alchemistic procedures were revealed directly to her by God laid the foundation for a long tradition of alchemist esotericism. From the quotations by later authors Mary appears as an erudite person, well versed in the traditions and lore of her science (she is, for instance, the first to mention hydrochloric acid), for whom alchemy was more than an attempt at transmuting base metals into gold: it was a comprehensive religious worldview, that assumed an essential unity underlying all of nature, and in which the God of Israel acted as guarantor of this unity. In the alchemist traditions of subsequent centuries, Mary became identified with Miriam (i.e., Maria), the sister of Moses.⁹

⁷ For an anonymous alchemical treatise by a Jew see for instance A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, Paris 1946, 254.

⁸ See L.H. Feldman & M. Reinhold, *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans*, Minneapolis 1996, 46.

⁹ On these later traditions see Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, 74ff.

The second important aspect of her work is that we do not have any other writing from antiquity of which we know for certain that it was authored by a Jewish woman. Whether other Jewish women did not write or whether their works were not preserved, we do not know, but in both cases the loss is a very serious one.¹⁰ From most literary sources we do not at all get the impression that learned women were anything of an ideal in ancient Judaism, on the contrary.¹¹ In real life, however, talented and intelligent women may sometimes have really got chances to develop their capacities. We know, not only from some literary sources but also from inscriptions, that there must have been highly educated Jewish women – mostly in the diaspora, hardly in Palestine!¹² – whom one can imagine to have put their thoughts into writing.¹³ There can be no serious doubt that there were literate Jewish women in the Hellenistic-Roman period.¹⁴ Maria evidently was one of these happy few. It is, therefore, much to be regretted that we do not know more about her personal circumstances (was she married?), her background (did her parents encourage her activities?), her training (was she herself the first to weld this long-lasting bond between Judaism and alchemy?) et cetera. She will probably remain an elusive figure forever, but she deserves to be remembered not only in the kitchen but also in the study! The fact that none of the existing works on the history of Jewish literature makes any mention

¹⁰ Important in this respect are two essays by R. Kraemer, 'Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period', in A.-J. Levine, ed., *Women Like This. New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, Atlanta 1991, 221-242, and also 'Jewish Women in the Diaspora World of Late Antiquity', in J.R. Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, Detroit 1991, 43-67. Unfortunately Kraemer completely overlooks our Maria.

¹¹ See L.J. Archer, *Her Price is Beyond Rubies. The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine*, Sheffield 1990, 69-100; and in general T. Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers. Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, Leiden 1997.

¹² T. Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, Tübingen 1995.

¹³ On learned women in Jewish inscriptions see P.W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs. An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE – 700 CE)*, Kampen 1991, 108-109; cf. also R.S. Kraemer, 'Hellenistic Jewish Women: The Epigraphic Evidence', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 24 (1986) 183-200.

¹⁴ See, e.g., M. Bar-Ilan, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*, Atlanta 1998, 31-35.

of this first Jewish woman writer in (or known from) history is a serious defect that has to be remedied soon.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Not even a specialized history of Jewish literature from antiquity such as volume 3 of the new English revision of E. Schürer (*The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 3, Edinburgh 1986) makes any reference to Maria the Alchemist.