

## Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) and Sarah (c. 1642-1674). Married 1665(?).



Sabbatai Zevi

Sabbatai Zevi was the most notorious of the Jewish pseudo-Messiahs since Bar Kokhba in the second century CE.

In 1665, Sabbatai was living in Cairo. He had proclaimed himself the Messiah and had gathered a large body of followers. He had already been married twice, but both marriages had been annulled:

“When he was about 22 or 24 years old, he took a Jewish woman to wife. However, he did not have relations with her — or so rumor tells it — due to physical weakness or a fancied sense of holiness and purity . . . or for other undisclosed reasons. Since she did not arrive at consummation of the marital union with him, the girl was taken from him in accordance with the laws of the Jews, because he had rejected her. After some time, he again married a Jewish woman, also from Smyrna, of a very distinguished Jewish family in that city. But what had happened in his first marriage happened again in this second marriage, and therefore his second wife was taken from him, just like the first.”<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of different accounts of Sarah’s early youth. According to one account,<sup>2</sup> Sarah was orphaned at the age of six in the Chmelnitsky massacres of 1648-1652. She was rescued or seized (depending on your point of

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<sup>1</sup>From Thomas Coenen, *The False Hopes of the Jews as They came to Light in the Figure of Sabbatai Zevi*, originally published in Amsterdam in 1669; quoted in *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816*, Ada Rapoport-Albert, trans. Deborah Greniman, Oxford, 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Franz Kobler (ed.) *Letters of Jews Through the Ages*, vol. 2, Horovitz Publishing, 1952; and the English Wikipedia article “Sabbatai Zevi”

view) by a convent, baptized, and brought up there. She escaped the convent about the age of 16. According to a different account<sup>3</sup> she was kidnapped by a Polish nobleman or noblewoman, who wanted her to marry their son. Anyway, she eventually went to Livorno, where she proclaimed publicly that the Messiah would come soon and that she would be his bride. It is claimed that she was openly promiscuous, but that may be the slander of her enemies.<sup>4</sup> When news of this reached Sabbatai, he immediately accepted her as a bride. He sent a delegation of twelve young men and two elderly women to Livorno to bring her to Cairo. They brought with them valuable gifts and the following letter of courtship, written in Hebrew, and consisting almost entirely of quotations from *Song of Songs* and *Proverbs*.

*‘O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of my envoys’*

How fair and how pleasant art thou,<sup>5</sup> my beloved Sarah, daughter of Isai, the Pole! Behold thou art fair, my beloved,<sup>6</sup> thou art all fair; there is no spot in thee.<sup>7</sup> Many daughters have done valiantly, but thou exceedest them all.<sup>8</sup> O set me as a seal upon thy heart!<sup>9</sup> Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a gazelle or to a young hart!<sup>10</sup> King Solomon made himself a palanquin for thee,<sup>11</sup> and if thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps<sup>12</sup> of my envoys. The king will bring thee into his chambers;<sup>13</sup> strength and honor are thy clothing; and thou shalt laugh at the time to come.<sup>14</sup>

[Quoted in Kobler]

Sarah accepted the proposal and traveled with the envoys to Cairo. They were married in March 1665<sup>15</sup> “with Oriental pomp and ceremony” (Kobler). Around Shavuot 1665, Nathan of Gimzo publicly proclaimed that Sabbatai

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<sup>3</sup>The Hebrew Wikipedia article “Sarah eyshet Shabbatai Tzvi”

<sup>4</sup>The sexual mores of Sabbatai and his followers, during his life and after his death, were unquestionably very peculiar, but it difficult to tell how much of what is reported is true and how much is the invention of their enemies. Rapoport-Albert (2011) studies the question in depth.

<sup>5</sup>Song of Songs, 7:6

<sup>6</sup>Song of Songs, 1:16

<sup>7</sup>Song of Songs, 4:7

<sup>8</sup>Proverbs 31:29

<sup>9</sup>Song of Songs 8:6

<sup>10</sup>Song of Songs 8:14

<sup>11</sup>Song of Songs 3:9

<sup>12</sup>Song of Songs 1:8

<sup>13</sup>Song of Songs 1:4

<sup>14</sup>Proverbs 31:25

<sup>15</sup>The year is a matter of dispute; some date the event to 1664 or even 1663. See the Hebrew Wikipedia article “Sarah eyshet Shabbatai Tzvi”

was the Messiah. In December 1665, Sarah accompanied Sabbatai on his ill-fated journey to the Sultan, and like Sabbatai, eventually under compulsion she converted to Islam in September 1666.

In 1668, they had a son Ishmael; whether they had other children is unclear. Sabbatai divorced Sarah in 1671. According to a letter by Sabbatai's acolyte Nathan of Gaza<sup>16</sup>, who disliked her, this was in consequence of Sarah's twice having attempted to poison him; but that is questionable. At this time Sabbatai became engaged to the daughter of Rabbi Aaron Mejar of Sofia, but she died before the marriage took place. Sabbatai then reconciled with Sarah and they remarried. The Turks exiled Sabbatai and Sarah to Ulcinj in 1673. Sarah died in 1674. After Sarah's death, Sabbatai married his fourth wife, Jochebed, the daughter of Rabbi Joseph Filosofoff of Salonica. He died in 1676.<sup>17</sup>

Many thanks to my brother Joey for very helpful feedback.

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Rapoport-Albert

<sup>17</sup>My account here combines information from Rapoport-Albert, Kobler and *Sabbatai Zevi: Testimonies to a False Messiah* trans. and ed. David Halperin, Liverpool U. Press, 2007.