CHAPTER EIGHT

FURNISHING GOD’S STUDY HOUSE:
AN EXERCISE IN RABBINIC IMAGINATION

Figure 38. Hagia Sofia, Istanbul, wall mosaic of Constantine IX Monomachus (d. 1055) and Empress Zoe (Wikimedia Commons).

Bridging the gulf separating artifacts and texts is always difficult, and identifying a specific object with a specific group of texts is a precarious undertaking at best.¹ This is all the more so in regard to Jewish culture in Byzantine and early Islamic Palestine, where the literary sources are so few and disparate. An excellent example of this problematic presents itself in a document known as *Pereq Meshiah*, the “Chapter of the Messiah,”

which describes “God’s great study house in the world to come.” Published in 1978 from a Cairo Genizah manuscript, this fascinating text reads as follows:2

1. Rabbi Eliezer son of Jacob
2. says: The great study house of the Holy One, Blessed be He,
3. in the future will be eighteen thousand
4. myriad parsangs (in size), for it is written: “Its circumference [will be] 18,000” (Ezekiel 48:35).
5. The Holy One, Blessed be He, sits on a chair
6. upon them, and David sits before him, for it is said:
7. “His chair is like the sun before me” (Psalm 89:37). All the teaching women
8. who pay
9. And teach so that their sons may be taught Torah, Scripture,
10. and Mishnah, manners, pious sincerity,
11. and honesty stand by (or, within) reed mats made as a partition for the bema and listen
12. to the voice of Zerubabel son of Shaltiel
13. when he stands as interpreter.3

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3 The Genizah text reads meturgaman mishpaḥah. The notion of a “family translator” is unknown elsewhere in rabbinic literature, and the “family translator” seems to be a bridge to the next section of the manuscript, which discusses Shabbat Qiddush, the wine benediction. See the manuscript editions (n. 62, p. 157, below), which continue with an elaborate drama in the divine courtroom. On the meturgaman in synagogue and study house contexts, see York, “The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School”; Urman, “The House of Assembly and the House of Study: Are They One and the Same?”