

MEGILLAT ANTIOCHUS

Unambiguous references to *Megillat Antiochus*, or ‘The Scroll of Antiochus,’ first occur in gaonic works of Babylonian provenance, and it is hence likely that the work originated in the East. The ninth-century *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot* of R. Shim‘on Qayyara refers to מגילת בית חשמונאי which allegedly emanated from ‘the oldest schools of Shammai and Hillel’ and which will eventually be read at the Festival of Hanukkah once ‘there should arise a priest with Urim and Thummim.’¹ Approximately a century later, R. Saadya Gaon in his *Sefer ha-Galuy* states that five Hasmonean brothers named Judah, Shim‘on, Yoḥanan, Jonathan, and Eleazar wrote a כתאבא פּי מאַ מר בהם ‘book about what happened to them’ in Aramaic² while providing a quotation from its text.³ A copy which he examined divided the narrative into verses and provided the consonantal text with markings for vowels and accents, an indication that the work enjoyed quasi-scriptural status and played a role in liturgy. The eleventh-century Arabic original of Nissim b. Jacob Ibn Shāhīn’s *Hibbur Yafeh me-hayeshu‘ah* states in its prologue that the events recorded in ‘the Scroll of the Hasmonaeans’ would not be recounted therein since they were already available in written form,⁴ like those described in the scroll of Esther and the remaining canonical books. The popularity of the work is confirmed by the recovery of dozens of copies from the Cairo Geniza. A Hebrew translation of the Aramaic work is contained in a number of medieval and modern prayer books, and an Arabic ‘targum’ frequently accompanies the Aramaic narrative in Islamicate manuscripts.

This English rendering translates the edition of the Aramaic text prepared by Menahem Zevi Kaddari, “Megillat Antiochus ha-aramit,” *Bar-Ilan Annual* 1 (1963): 81-105, at 87-102. For other editions of the Aramaic text, see H. Filipowski, *Sefer Mivhar ha-peninim* (London: [n.s.], 1851), 73-99; Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur* (6 vols.; Leipzig, 1853-77; repr., Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1938), 6:4-8 (cf. 1:142-46 for a Hebrew rendering); Moses Gaster, “The Scroll of the Hasmonaeans (Megillath Bene Hashmunai),” in *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology* (3 vols.; repr., New York: Ktav, 1971), 3:33-43; Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot* (2d ed.; 2 vols.; ed. Abraham Joseph Wertheimer; Jerusalem: Ktav Yad we-Sefer, 1989), 1:309-30, at 319-30 (an Aramaic-Arabic synopsis). A Judeo-Arabic translation compiled from four manuscripts was published by Hartwig Hirschfeld, ed., *Arabic Chrestomathy in Hebrew Characters with a Glossary* (London: K. Paul Trench & Trübner, 1892), 1-6. An expansive Judeo-Persian version is given in *Sefer Megillat Antiochus ... be-lashon Paras ...* (Jerusalem: Be-defus ha-Rin Levi we-shutafav, 1903). The important sixteenth-century Judeo-Persian poet ‘Imrānī based an 1,800 couplet *masnavī* known as the *Hanukkah-nāmāh* or *Zafar-nāmāh* (‘Book of Victory’) on *Megillat Antiochus*, and this poem has been recently rendered into English by Vera Basch Moreen, *In Queen Esther’s Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 159-75.

It came to pass during the time of Antiochus king of Greece: he was a mighty and powerful ruler and his governance was strong, and all kings were obedient to him. He subdued many provinces, imprisoned powerful rulers, destroyed their citadels, set their palaces ablaze in fire, and imprisoned their warriors. He constructed a large city on the shore of the sea to serve as his royal residence, and he named it

¹ *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot* §75, ‘amud 684; also cited by Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt* (2d ed.; Frankfurt a. M.: J. Kauffmann, 1892), 131 n. With regard to this work, see especially Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 223-30.

² A. Harkavy, *Studien und Mittheilungen aus der kaiserlichen öffentlichen Bibliothek zu St. Petersburg, Fünfter Theil: Leben und Werke des Saadjah Gaon (Said al-Fajjumi, 892-942), Rektors der talmudischen Akademie in Sora* (St. Petersburg: Gr. Puschkarskaja, 1891), 151.

³ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴ Nissim ben Jacob Ibn Shāhīn, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity* (trans. William M. Brinner; repr., Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 6.

Ant[i]ochia (אנטוכיא) after his own name. His second-in-command Bagras⁵ also built [for himself] another city opposite it, and he named it [City of] Bagras. These are their names even now.

In the twenty-third year of his reign – it being the two hundred and thirteenth year after the reconstruction of [the] Temple of God⁶ – he set his face to go up to Jerusalem. He spoke up and said to his companions: ‘Are you not aware there are a people among us – the Judeans who are in Yehud – who do not worship our gods or observe our law? They abandon the laws of the king in order to observe their own laws! They also long for the day when rulers and authorities are shattered, and they say: “When will our own king rule [over us]? We will gain authority over both sea and land, and the entire world will be delivered into our power!” The majesty of the kingdom cannot permit these (people to remain) on the surface of the earth! Now come and let us go up against them, and we will abolish from among them the covenant which was decreed on them (of observing) Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision!’

The proposal was pleasing in the eyes of his nobles and in the eyes of all his forces. Antiochus arose at once and dispatched Niqanor his second-in-command⁷ with a large army and numerous people, and he came to Jerusalem. There he killed many, and he erected a statue in the Temple (ביתא דמקדשא) on the spot where the God of Israel had told His servants the prophets: ‘there I will cause My Shekinah to dwell forever!’ They slaughtered a pig at that time and brought some of its blood into the holy court.⁸

Now when Yoḥanan bar Metatyah heard about these things, he was filled with anger and wrath. The form of his face changed, and he took counsel in his heart about what to do about this. Then Yoḥanan bar Metatyah fashioned a sword for himself two spans in length and one span in breadth, (and) he wrapped it under his clothing. He came to Jerusalem and stood at the gate of the city. He addressed the gatekeepers and guards (saying), ‘I am Yoḥanan bar Metatyah, a priest of Yehud. I have come to enter before Niqanor.’ Thereupon the gatekeepers and guards entered and said to Niqanor: ‘The high priest of Yehud is standing at the gate.’ [Niqanor answered] and said to them: ‘Let him immediately enter!’ Then Yoḥanan was made to enter before Niqanor. Niqanor spoke up and said to Yoḥanan: ‘Are you one of the rebels who have revolted against the king and who do not seek the welfare of his kingdom?’ Yoḥanan answered Niqanor and said: ‘I have now come before you in order to perform whatever you seek (to do).’

Niqanor spoke up and said to Yoḥanan: ‘Lo, you seek my favor? Take a pig and sacrifice it to this statue! (Do so) and I will clothe you with a royal garment, I will mount you on (one of) the king’s horses, and you will become like one of the friends of the king!’ Thusly⁹ did Yoḥanan make answer to him and say: ‘My lord, I am afraid of the children of Israel. Should they hear about what I have done, they will stone me with stones. Let every person now leave from before you lest they inform the House of Israel!’ Then Niqanor made everyone leave from before him.

At that time Yoḥanan bar Metatyah raised his eyes toward heaven and offered his prayer before the Master of the Universe. He said: ‘My God and God of my ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Israel!’ And thusly he (continued) to say: ‘Do not hand me over into the power of this uncircumcised one, lest he put me to death and then go and offer praise in the temple of Dagon his idol, saying: “My idol has delivered him into my power.”’ He immediately took three steps toward him and thrust his sword into his heart. He then threw his corpse into the holy court. Yoḥanan spoke up before the God of Heaven and said: ‘My Lord, do not place grievous sin (חוביך) upon me because I killed him in Your Temple! May You now hand over (to me) all the peoples who are in Jerusalem who have come to lead astray the children of Israel!’

Then Yoḥanan went out on that same day, and he waged war against those nations, and he effected among them a great slaughter. The people who escaped from the sword fled on a ship to King Antiochus. The number of the slain who were killed on that day amounted to 72,700, for each one was killing his

⁵ A corruption of Bacchides (cf. 1 Macc 7:8; 9:1-69)?

⁶ For this same synchronism, see Jellinek’s ‘Zweiter Midrasch für Chanukah’ (in his *BHM* 1:137.1-2), a correspondence noted by Franz Rosenthal, “Saadyah’s *Introduction to the Scroll of the Hasmoneans*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 36 (1945-46): 302. Note Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge*, 142 n.

⁷ A villain familiar from 1 Macc 3:38; 7:26-50; 2 Macc 8:9-36; 14:11-15:37; *Megillat Ta’anit* for 13 Adar (יום ניקנור) and its Hebrew scholion; *y. Ta’an.* 2.13, 66a; *y. Meg.* 1.4, 70c; *b. Ta’an.* 18b. For the text of *Megillat Ta’anit* and its medieval scholion, see Hans Lichtenstein, “Die Fastenrolle: Eine Untersuchung zur jüdisch-hellenistischen Geschichte,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 8-9 (1931): 257-351.

⁸ עזרתא דקודשא.

⁹ כנימא = biblical Aramaic כנימא.

companion. At his residence he built a minaret (מנרתא) and proclaimed its (*sic*) name (to be) ‘Maqbey, killer of strong ones’ (מקבי קטלא תקיפין).

Now when King Antiochus heard that his second-in-command Niqanor had been assassinated, he was greatly distressed. He sent for and summoned the wicked Bagras, the deceiver of his people. King Antiochus spoke up and said to Bagras: ‘Do you not know and have you not heard what the children of Israel have done to me? They have slaughtered my armies and despoiled my camp and my nobles! Can you now put confidence in your possessions or your dwellings? Come now and let us go up against them, and we will abolish from among them the covenant which was decreed for them with regard to Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision!’

Then the wicked Bagras arose along with all of his camp and came to Jerusalem. He effected there a great slaughter, and issued in it a final decree about (not observing the rituals of) Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision. On account of this, anyone who boldly flouted the word of the King – anyone who circumcised his son – both the man and his wife would be brought and impaled because of the child. There was even a woman who gave birth to a son after the death of her husband: she circumcised him on the eighth day (after birth), and then she climbed onto the wall of the city holding the son whom she had circumcised. She cried out and said: ‘Go, inform the wicked Bagras that the covenant of our ancestors will never cease (being observed) among us or our descendants!’ She then cast her son down to the base of the wall, and she flung herself after him, so that the two of them perished.¹⁰ Numerous others from among the children of Israel were acting similarly and would not change their ancestral covenant.

At that time (some of) the children of Israel said, each to his companion: ‘Come, let us go away and observe the Sabbath in a cave lest we profane the Sabbath day.’ Informants maligned them before Bagras. He thereupon dispatched some men and they came to the mouth of the cave and said: ‘O children of Israel! Come out to us! Eat some of our food, drink some of our wine, and behave like us!’ The children of Israel answered and said, each one to his fellow: ‘We remember what we were enjoined on Mt. Sinai: “Six days you will do your work, and on the seventh day you will rest.” Now it would be better for us to perish rather than to profane the Sabbath day!’ Since they were not receptive to them, they brought green (branches of) wood and kindled a fire at the mouth of the cave, and about one thousand men and women perished (as a result).¹¹

Following this five sons of Metatyah arose – Yoḥanan and his four brothers – and they engaged these nations in battle. They effected a great slaughter among them, and those who remained fled to the islands of the sea, for they now put their trust in the God of Heaven. Then the wicked Bagras took seat on a ship, and he fled to King Antiochus together with the men who had escaped from the sword. Bagras spoke up and said to King Antiochus: ‘O King, you gave a command to abolish (the observance of) Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision from Yehud, and there is (now) a fierce rebellion there. (Even) if every nation, people, and language group were to come against them, they could not prevail over the five sons of Metatyah, for they are mightier than lions, swifter than eagles, and bolder than bears. Now O King, may my counsel please you! Do not wage war on them with these camps lest you suffer embarrassment before all (other) kings! Instead, send a letter throughout every province of your kingdom, and the nobles of the armies will come bringing with them all nations and also elephants covered with armor.’

Now the proposal was pleasing in the eyes of (King) Antiochus. He sent for and summoned the nobles of his kingdom, and all the nations came accompanied by elephants covered with armor. Next the wicked Bagras arose and came to Jerusalem. He broke open thirteen breaches in its (wall), closed off the water supply of the city, and applied fire to its stones until they crumbled like dust. He thought to himself, saying: ‘This time they will not defeat me, for my army is great and my power is strong!’ But the God of Heaven was not thinking in a similar vein. When the five sons of Metatyah heard, they arose and came to Mizpah of Gilead in the place which was a refuge for them in the days of the prophet Samuel.¹² They decreed a fast and sat upon ashes in order to seek favor from the God of Heaven.¹³ Then a good counsel entered their minds – their names were Judah the firstborn, Shim‘on the second oldest, Yoḥanan the third, Jonathan the fourth, (and) Eleazar the fifth.¹⁴ Their father blessed them before he sent them forth to do battle and said: ‘Judah, my son, I give thanks that your action is like that of Judah b. Jacob, who was

¹⁰ Compare 2 Macc 6:10.

¹¹ Compare 1 Macc 2:29-38; 2 Macc 6:11; and see Judg 9:46-49.

¹² Cf. 1 Sam 7:5-6.

¹³ Cf. 1 Macc 3:46-47.

¹⁴ For the same names but a different ordering, see 1 Macc 2:2-5.

compared to a lion.¹⁵ Shim'on, my son, I give thanks that your action is like that of Shim'on b. Jacob who killed the inhabitants of Shechem because they committed offenses against his sister Dinah. Yoḥanan, my son, I give thanks that your action is like that of Abner b. Ner, the general of Israel. Jonathan, my son, I give thanks that your action is like that of Jonathan b. Saul who killed the Philistines. Eleazar, my son, I give thanks that your action is like that of Pinḥas b. Eleazar who was zealous before his God and rescued the children of Israel [from divine wrath]!

After this the five sons of Metatyah arose on that day and waged war against those nations. They effected a [very] heavy slaughter among them, but among themselves Judah was slain.¹⁶ At that time when [the sons of Metatyah] saw that Judah had been slain, they turned back and came to their father. But he said to them: 'Why have you returned?' They spoke up and said: 'Our brother Judah, he who himself could be accounted equal to the rest of us, has been slain!' Metatyah spoke up and said to them: 'I [myself] will go forth with you and wage war against these nations lest the children of Israel perish while you are grieving for your brother!'

Metatyah came forth that same day with his sons and waged war against those nations. The God of Heaven handed over into their control all the soldiers of those nations, and they effected among them a heavy slaughter – all those who unsheathed a sword, held a bow, and the noblest of their commanding officers – and there did not survive a refugee from their ranks. The ones who did escape fled to the islands of the sea. Now Eleazar occupied himself with killing the elephants, and he sunk down in the excrement of an elephant. His brothers searched for him among the living and among the dead, but they could not find him. They however afterwards discovered him pressed down in the excrement of an elephant.¹⁷

The children of Israel rejoiced that their enemies had been delivered into their hands. They burned some of them in a fire, whereas others they hung upon trees. The people of the House of Israel burned the wicked Bagras, deceiver of his people, in a fire. When King Antiochus heard that his second-in-command Bagras had been killed along with all his nobles who had accompanied him, he boarded a ship and fled to the islands of the sea. Every place that he came to rebelled against him, saying to him: 'Fugitive! Fugitive!' He (finally) cast himself into the sea.

After this the children of Israel entered the Temple and rebuilt its gates.¹⁸ They purified it of corpses and uncleanness, and they made search for some pure olive oil in order to light its lamps, but they could not find any except for a single flask which was sealed with the signet-ring of the high priest¹⁹ during the time of the prophet Samuel. They knew that this was pure. There was in it (an amount equivalent to) about one day's burning, but the God of Heaven Who made His Name dwell there bestowed a blessing with it, and they lit (the lamps) from it for eight days. Therefore the Hasmoneans swore this oath, and they and all the children of Israel took upon themselves this binding vow to inform the children of Israel to observe this (*sic*) eight days (as a time of) celebration and ceremony²⁰ like the days of the festivals which are inscribed in the Torah²¹ – to light (lamps) on them to indicate to whomever comes after them that their God effected deliverance for them from Heaven. On them one must not mourn, nor may one decree a fast,²² but all who have (vowed) a vow on them must fulfill it.²³

¹⁵ Note 1 Macc 3:4, which is based on Gen 49:9.

¹⁶ See 1 Macc 9:11-18.

¹⁷ According to 1 Macc 6:43-46, Eleazar was crushed to death by an elephant which he had just slain.

¹⁸ According to 1 Macc 4:38, the gates of the Temple had been burned by its foreign occupiers. Note also 2 Macc 1:8; 8:33.

¹⁹ For this legend, see *b. Šabb.* 21b; Hebrew scholion to *Megillat Ta'anit* for 25 Kislev.

²⁰ Cf. Esth 8:16; 1 Macc 4:59.

²¹ Compare 2 Macc 10:6-8.

²² See *b. Šabb.* 21b.

²³ Note the end of most versions of *Megillat Ta'anit*.