

Adversaries in Jewish Tradition, Part I: Megillat Antiochus

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Torah in Motion

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Note: Citations of Megillat Antiochus will come from the Aramaic edition by M.Z. Kadari and the English translation by J.C. Reeves. Both appear on the [Open Siddur](#) website.

1. תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף כט עמוד א

-דכתיב למנצח על אילת השחר... אמר רב אסי: למה נמשלה אסתר לשחר? לומר לך: מה שחר סוף כל הלילה - אף אסתר סוף כל הנסים. - והא איכא חנוכה! - ניתנה לכתוב קא אמרינן.

1. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 29a

...it is written: “For the leader, about the morning hind” (Psalms 22:1);... Rabbi Asi said: Why was Esther likened to the dawn? It is to tell you: Just as the dawn is the conclusion of the entire night, so too, Esther was the conclusion of all miracles performed for the entire Jewish people.

2. ר' סעדיה גאון, ספר הגלוי, הקדמה

וכמו שכתבו בני חשמונאי יהודה ושמעון ויוחנן ויונתן ואלעזר בני מתתיהו ספר במה שעבר עליהם, הדומה לספר דניאל בלשון כשדים

2. R. Saadia Gaon, Sefer ha-Galuy, Introduction

And just as the Hasmoneans Judah and Simeon and Yohanan and Yonatan and Elazar, sons of Mattityahu, wrote a book about what happened to them, similar to the language of Daniel in the Chaldaic language...

3. ספר הלכות גדולות סימן עה - הלכות סופרים עמוד תרפד

זקני בית שמאי וזקני בית הלל הם כתבו מגלת בית חשמונאי ועד עכשיו לא עלה לדורות עד שיעמוד כהן לאורים ותומים, והם כתבו מגלת תענית (שבת יג ב) בעליית חנניה בן חזקיה בן גרון כשעלו לבקר

3. Sefer Halakhot Gedolot 75 – Laws of Sofrim 684

The elders of the House of Shammai and Elders of the house of Hillel wrote the Megillat Beit Hashmonai, and until today it has not arisen for all generations [to be read] until the priest returns of the Urim ve-Tumim. They wrote Megillat Ta'anit (Shabbat 13b) in the attic of Hananiah ben Hezekiah ben Garon when they went up to visit him.

4. תוספות רי"ד מסכת סוכה דף מד עמוד ב

וכן נמי מקום שנוהגין לקרוא מגילת אנטיוכוס בחנוכה אין ראוי לברך עלי' מפני שאין שורש חובה כלל

4. Tosefot Rid, Sukkah 44b

Similarly, a place that has the practice to read Megillat Antiochus on Hanukkah, it is not proper to bless upon it because there is no root for this obligation at all.

5. ספר אבודרהם חנוכה

ורבים ביד מעטים ע"ש (ש"א יד, ו) להושיע ברב או במעט כי הם היו רבים ונצחום חמשה בני מתתיהו כמו שמפורש במגלת אנטיוכוס.

5. Sefer Abudraham, Hanukkah

“Many in the hands of few,” following (ISam 14:6) “to save with much or with little,” for they were many and were defeated by the five sons of Matityahu, as is explicit in Megillat Ta'anit.

6. הרב נתן פריד, "מגילת אנטיוכוס מורחבת", בית אהרן וישראל לח (תשנ"ב), קיא-קכא, ד' קיב
מנהג כפא וקראסוב נדפסה המגילה בלשון הקודש ולפניה נאמר: "נוהגין לקרות מגלת
אנטיוכוס [בשבת] במנחה אחר קדיש תתקבל...", בתכלאל התימנים "עץ חיים" (ח"א, קסג א);
"ויש שקורין מגלת אנטיוכוס בשבת אחר ההפטר..." בספר "חסדי אבות": "...כמנהג ק"ק
ג'רדאיה יע"א, שיקרא אותה הש"ץ בביהכ"נ, אחר קריאת ספר תורה בחובות היום, בשבת
שהוא באמצע ימי חנוכה..." ואכן עד היום נוהגים יוצאי גרדאיה (אלג'ירה) לקרות המגילה
בצבור.

6. R. Natan Fried, "Expanded Megillat Antiochus," *Beit Aharon ve-Yisrael* 38

The practice of Kafa and Krasov, this Megillah was printed in Hebrew, and before it was written:
"We have the practice of reading Megillat Antiochus [on Shabbat] at Mincha after Kaddish
Titkabbel."... And until today those from Gradaia (Algeria) have the practice to read the
Megillah publicly.

7. Aryeh Kasher, "The Historical Background of "Megillath Antiochus", " *PAAJR*, 48 (1981), pp. 207-230, at pp. 229-230

p. 218 It should be emphasized that the detailed stories of the scroll are not supported in
ancient sources, not even in the very rich and all-inclusive Talmudic literature; this must be taken
into account. Had the composition really preceded that of the Babylonian Talmud, such an
omission would be very difficult to credit, considering the impressive deeds narrated in the
scroll. For instance, the story of Mattathias, which tells about his decisive leadership in the war
against the Greeks, has no basis as such in ancient sources, whether in the confused and
entangled version of Josephus in *Wars*, I, 1, 3 (36-37), or in the abundance of Talmudic and
Midrashic legend. On the other hand, there are some points in common with the Arabic version
of II Maccabees, which apparently relied in particular upon the well-known Sefer Yosiphon.

p. 219 In contrast to the complete silence of Talmudic and Midrashic literature about the
deeds of Mattathias, the victory over Nicanor was given considerable attention and, in spite of its
literary adaptations and abridgements, this literature preserved the spirit of what was related in
the Books of Maccabees.

p. 219-20 our scroll contains a curious substitute version about the resourcefulness
of Johanan (son of Mattathias), who slyly tempted Nicanor to meet him privately in the Temple
when the latter demanded the sacrificing of a pig. Johanan pretended to be afraid of being stoned
by Jews whose fury would be vented on anyone committing such a sacrilege in public. Nicanor
jumped at the bait, and became the victim of the cunning by which Johanan succeeded in slaying
him with a dagger that had been hidden under his clothes (verses 13-25). The plot of this story
was probably based upon the working of a fertile imagination nurtured by Biblical association –
the killing of Eglon, King of Moab, by Ehud son of Gera.

p. 220 [V]arious motifs of secondary importance which were borrowed from Talmudic
sources in order to make the literary aspect of the scroll a familiar one... The "Oil Miracle" and
the Hanukkah festival: It should be noted that the story of the "Oil Miracle" has no roots in
Palestinian Talmudic traditions.

p. 221-22 As for the command to light candles, the scroll states emphatically that the eight
days of Hanukkah were fixed "as holidays which are written in the Torah" ... It is possible,
indeed, to explain these words as a simple conclusive Halachic summary, but actually it is not
unreasonable that they were a product of late religious conceptions. It seems that they are meant
to bestow considerable religious authority on the festival commandments, in order to avoid
doubts about and resistance to the feast, based on claims that it had not been prescribed by the

Bible. It is quite reasonable to assume that this could be connected with the vigorous campaign against the Karaites or other antinomistic sects which had flourished since the eighth century.

p. 223 The counting of years: The fifth verse of the scroll notes that the date of the events was the twenty-third year of Antiochus's reign, in the 213th year after the building of the Second Temple. In verse 74, the reign of the Hasmonean dynasty is calculated as having lasted for 206 years. Certainly, this reckoning is based upon B.T. Avodah Zarah 8b-9a.

p. 224 The cities Antioch and Bagris: The third verse of scroll points out that King Antiochus (Epiphanes) built a city to serve as his royal seat; it was named after him as Antioch. Similarly, the following verse notes that his viceroy Bagris built another city facing the first one, and named it after himself. At the end of this verse it is written that "these are their names until now."

p. 224-5 The statement in the scroll, noting that the names of both cities (Antioch and Bagris) were still in use, provides a plausible basis for dating the scroll, since it implies a considerable distance in time.

p. 226 Moreover, he has convincingly shown how the name was turned from the original form of Παγραι into the Latin form of *Pagras*, *Pagris*, or *Pacris*, and later into בגריס (Bagriis) as it appears in Arabic sources. Undoubtedly, the substitution of the letters B(ב') for P(פ'), was a product of typical Arabic pronunciation, something which lends support to our conclusions about the lateness of the date of composition. It is worth noting, in this context, that five other examples of writing in Arabic style occur in the Aramaic version of the scroll.

p. 229-30 We can state, therefore, with a great degree of certainty that Zunz, Levi, Neubauer and Ginzberg were right to place the writing of the scroll in the Gaonic period. The examination of its references to different sources proves that it could not have been written before the second half of the eighth century, and that only afterwards was its composition associated with the Hasmoneans. A critical analysis of its contents proves not only its lack of accuracy and its inferiority to genuine ancient common with medieval sources. The geographical descriptions in the scroll imply the time of Moslem rule, as do some stylistic slips of the pen. The impetus to rewrite the story of Hanukkah might have originated in Antioch, because of the special religious atmosphere prevailing there. But it seems that the popular legend in its revised and adapted version, even if known since the sixth century, was only written in the form of our scroll in later times, and was designed to serve a purely Jewish religious aim. This religious aim is to be understood as an attempt to claim sanctity for the Hanukkah festival as if its celebration were prescribed in the Bible. Sa'adiah Gaon's Arabic translation of the scroll, his introduction, and his commentary were designed deliberately to promote this religious aim. On the basis of an analogy to Megillath Esther, he went to great length to bestow upon Sefer (=Kitab) Benei Hashmonai, which was already known in his time, the character of a Megillah, complete with the implicit ritual and obligatory duties. It seems, therefore, that we shall not err if we ascribe the composition-date of the scroll to the days of the great Rabbinic campaign against Karaism, from the second half of the eighth century to the time of Sa'adiah Gaon.

8. תלמוד בבלי מסכת עבודה זרה דף ח עמוד ב דף ט עמוד א

מאה ושמונים ותו לא? והתני רבי יוסי ברבי: מלכות פרס בפני הבית שלשים וארבע שנה, מלכות יון בפני הבית מאה ושמונים שנה, מלכות חשמונאי בפני הבית מאה ושלש, מלכות בית הורדוס מאה ושלש, מכאן ואילך צא וחשוב כמה שנים אחר חורבן הבית; אלמא מאתן ושית הו

8. Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8b-9a

It was only 180 years? But Rabbi Yose beRibi taught: The Kingdom of Persia was stood for 34 years before the Temple, Greece for 180, the Hasmoneans for 103, Herod for 103, and from here and on calculate how many years [remain] after the destruction – we see it was 206 years.

9. S. Atlas and M. Perlmann, "Saadia on the Scroll of the Hasmoneans," PAAJR 14 (1944), 1-23

p. 1 It appears from Geniza material that Saadia prepared or edited the Arabic version of the Scroll of the Hasmonaeans, and that he wrote a preface to it... The preface does not appear in any of the known texts and was considered lost; but now, fortunately, we are in possession of a good part of it.

p. 22 It appears from Saadia's words that he did not write the introduction to the scroll as a separate work, but took occasion to write this introduction at the end of his commentary on the scroll of Esther, as the events of the time of the Maccabeans are a parallel to those which happened earlier and which Purim commemorates. Saadia says that the reasons for his writing this introduction are: first because there are many who don't understand the significance of Hanukkah, and secondly because of some who reject it entirely (the Karaites). Saadia felt apparently that if it could be proved from the Bible that the success of the Maccabeans was foretold by prophecy, the significance of Hanukkah would be enhanced, and its validity placed in the same rank as the other festivals of the Jewish calendar. And so Saadia tries to prove that in the Bible there are passages foretelling the victory of the Hasmoneans and that thus the feast of Hanukkah is sanctified by the Torah. It is as if prophecy takes for Saadia the place of history in order to add lustre and significance to Hanukkah and to silence the objections of the Karaites. Prophecy is thus for Saadia history in anticipation.

10. הרב יהודה זייבלד, "חלקו של רס"ג בעריכת מגילת אנטיוכוס וההדרה של הקדמתו, "חצי גבורים י (תשע"ז)

מגילת אנטיוכוס לא הועלתה על הכתב אלא נמסרה בעל פה – כפי שנמסרה גם המשנה לדעת הראשונים האשכנזים – והועלתה על הכתב אך ורק על ידי רס"ג, שבירר מתוך המסורות השונות את הנוסח הנראה בעיניו, פסקו והוסיף לו טעמים, וכאמור, גם תרגום לערבית ומבוא.

10. R. Yehuda Seewald, "The Portion of Rasag in Editing Megillat Antiochus," Chitzei Gibborim (2017)

Megillat Antiochus was not put into writing but rather passed on orally, just like the Mishnah was passed on according to the Ashkenazic Rishonim, and was put into writing only by R. Saadia Gaon, who clarified from the different traditions the text proper in his eyes, broke it up into sections and added cantillation, and, as said, also translated it into Arabic and [drafted an] introduction.