

MEGILLATH TAANITH.

"SCROLL OF FASTING."

ENGLISHED, FOR THE FIRST TIME,
FROM THE ARAMAIC AND THE HEBREW.

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THE Megillath Taanith (Scroll of Fasting), our oldest Jewish post-Biblical work, is a short historical record containing a list of days, arranged in the order of the months, Nisan to Adar,¹ on which it was held unlawful to fast, and on many to mourn, in joyous commemoration of deliverances afforded by God to the Jewish nation. As it has come down to us it consists of three parts, (a) a groundwork of thirty-five short paragraphs written in Aramaic, (b) a commentary thereon, after the manner of the Gemara of the Talmud, written in Hebrew, (c) an additional chapter written during the Gaonic period.

As to the authorship of the Aramaic part we read in the scholion (*see* XII, end) that it was composed by the followers of R. Eliezer b. Ḥananiah b. Hezekiah b. Garon. This R. Eliezer is the Zealot general who took so active a share in the revolt against the Romans. But in the Talmudic treatise Shabbath we read that "the Megillath Taanith was written by Ḥananiah and his followers, since they thought with fondness of the troubles which their countrymen had experienced." This seems to point to the work having been begun by the father of R. Eliezer about the year A.D. 7, when Judæa became a Roman province. The Scroll was not completed, however, till the time of R. Simon b. Gamaliel II, president of the academy at Usha, who said, "Were we as of yore to record the troubles experienced since the Megillath Taanith was written we would never complete them, for we should be obliged to turn nearly every day into a festival," thus indicating that the Scroll was definitely closed in his time.

The object of the work was to aid the people to keep in mind the victories vouchsafed to the Jews, chiefly during the Maccabean times and in the great revolt against the Romans. Zeitlin, who has made an exhaustive study of the period, classifies these "remem-

¹ Our book is the first Jewish book which gives the names of the Jewish months in regular succession,

brances " in what he considers their chronological order thus (the references are to chapters and sections) :—

I. Pre-Asmonæan :—I, 1, 2 ; II, 1.

II. Asmonæan :—VIII, 1, 3 ; IX, 4 ; XII, 8 ; XI, 3 ; II, 2 ; XII, 3 ; IV ; VI, 1 ; II, 4, 3 ; IX, 1 ; III, 2 ; VIII, 2.

III. Roman period to A.D. 65 :—IX, 1 ; XI, 2 ; XII, 5.

IV. The Great Revolt, A.D. 65–6 :—III, 1, 3 ; VI, 2, 3 ; VII ; IX, 2 ; X ; V, 2 (?) ; XI, 1 ; XII, 2, 6.

In addition to these there are some (V, 1 ; XII, 1, 7, 4) of a miscellaneous character which do not come under the above headings.

The Hebrew commentary on the Aramaic text dates from Talmudic times, and its main purpose is a glorification of the victories of the Pharisees over the Sadducees. Internal evidence shows that the glossator flourished after the sixth century, and all the quotations from the Megillath Taanith in the Talmud are from the Aramaic text. The explanations given in the commentary are of little historical value, but have their interest in the light they cast on the religious and ritual disputes of a later age.¹

The Megillath Taanith was printed for the first time at Amsterdam, 1656 ; and the latest edition is that of Bornstein, Jerusalem, 1908, with a very full commentary in Hebrew.

MEGILLATH TAANITH.

I (NISAN).

These are the days on which one must not fast, and on some of which also one must not mourn :—

1. From the first to the eighth of Nisan,^a when the daily sacrifice was again established, one must not mourn ;

Because the Sadducees were saying that only an individual could bring daily sacrifices, one for one week, another for two weeks, and another for thirty days. Whence do they deduce this ? They said that it is written in the Law, The one lamb shalt *thou* offer in the morning^b ; holding that this is to be understood of a single offerer. The sages replied to them, You have no right to interpret so, since a communal offering comes only from all Israel, for it is said, Command the children of Israel, etc.^c " My oblation "—that

^a Taan. 17 b ; Men. 65 a.

^b Exod. xxix. 39 ; Num. xxviii. 4,

^c Num. xxviii. 2.

¹ See Schürer, *Hist. of the Jew. people in the Time of Jesus Christ*, vol. ii. div. ii., pp. 35 ff. (Eng. translation).

is, the blood ; “ my bread ”—that is, the pieces of fat ; “ my offering made by fire ”—that is, the incense ; “ sweet savour ”—that is, the frankincense ; “ my sacrifices ”—these are the libations, and all that is like the sweet savour of my sacrifices ; “ ye shall observe to offer it to Me in their due season,” for all of them come from the Temple treasury.¹

R. Akiba says,^{a 2} Whence is it proved that the lamb for the sacrifice must not go out and pasture among the flocks ? Since the Scripture says, Ye shall observe to offer unto Me in their due season ^b ; and again it says, And ye shall keep it until the fourteenth day.^c As in the one case they examined it for defects four days before slaughtering, so in the other case also. When the sages prevailed against the Sadducees, they ordained that they should pay their head-taxes,^d and place them in the treasury ; and so they offered the daily communal sacrifices ; and of all those eight days in which they argued they made festivals.^{e 3}

2. From the eighth of Nisan to the end of the festival (the twenty-second), when the Feast of Weeks was re-established, one must not mourn.

What is this festival ?^f It is Atsereth. But surely it is unnecessary to write down all the festivals in this roll unless they were matters of dispute with the Sadducees, who said that Atsereth was after Sabbath.^g R. Johanan b. Zakkai joined their discussions and said, Where do you stupid people get this from ? There was not anyone among them who could give him an answer but a

^a Pes. 96 a ; Men. 49 b ; Erub. 13 b.

^b *Ibid.*

^c Exod. xii. 6 (of the Paschal lamb).

^d Shek. 1-8. Exod. xxx. 11 ff.

^e Taan. 17 b, 18 a.

^f Taan, 17 b ; Men. 65 a ; Sifra p. 100 d. (ed Weiss).

^g Cf. Hag. II, 4.

¹ It will be seen that the Sadducees maintained that, from the use of the singular pronoun in Num. xxviii. 4, an individual might bring the communal daily offering, whilst the Pharisees held, from the use of the plural pronoun in Num. xxviii. 2, that it should be brought by the whole congregation at the expense of the community.

² The saying is ascribed to Ben Bag-bag in the Talmudic passages. See note in Taylor's *Sayings of the Fathers*, p. 111. At first sight there appears to be no connection between this and the preceding paragraph. Perhaps the Sadducees, who differed from the sages in the matter of offerings, differed also from them in this matter of the offerings being under examination for four days as in the case of the paschal lamb.

³ This explanation is without support. Zeitlin thinks that the holiday commemorated the dedication of the second Temple : cf. Ezra vi. 15 (LXX), Josephus, *Antiq.* xii. 4, 7.

garrulous old man who said,^a " Since Moses, our lord, loved Israel and knew that Atsereth would be but one day, he ordained that it should be after Sabbath, so that on these two festivals, one after the other, men might take their joy." R. Joḥanan b. Zakkai read to him this scripture, It is eleven days to Horeb by way of mount Seir to Kadesh-Barnea.^b If Moses, our lord, loved Israel, why did he detain him in the desert forty years (instead of eleven days)? The old man replied to him, Rabbi, with this answer do you dismiss me? R. Joḥanan said, You most foolish person in the world, is our perfect Law like your own vain opinion? He replied, How would you dismiss me? He said to him, The Scripture says, And ye shall count for you from the morrow after the Sabbath, etc.^c That reckoning cannot be dependent on anything but weeks. Hence follows, Ye shall number fifty days.^d How is this to be understood? When the festival falls on a Sabbath there must be numbered therefrom seven weeks; but if it fall after a Sabbath there must be numbered fifty days. So when you read, From the morrow of the Sabbath, the meaning is, from the morrow of the first day of Passover. But R. Eliezer said, He (R. Joḥanan) is not right, since it says, Seven weeks shalt thou number unto thee, from the time thou beginnest, etc.^e The numeration depends on the court, with the exception of the regular weekly Sabbath, which anyone can count for himself. R. Joshua said,^f The Law says, Number the days and sanctify the new moon^g: number the days and sanctify Atsereth.^h When the new moon is near its advent it is recognized; so also when Atsereth is near its advent it is recognized. R. Ishmael said, The Law says, Bring the omer at Passover, and bring two loaves at Atsereth.ⁱ As the one is a feast and the beginning of a festival, so is the other. R. Jehudah b. Betherah said, It is said, Sabbath,^j of Atsereth, and also, Sabbath,^k of Passover. So here, where Atsereth is spoken of, Sabbath means the feast and the beginning of the festival; and when you read, From the morrow of the Sabbath, the meaning is, from the morrow of the first day of Passover.^l

^a Erub. 22 b. ^b Deut. i. 2. ^c Lev. xxiii. 15. ^d *Ib.* xxiii. 16.

^e Deut. xvi. 9. ^f Ros. H. 5 a; Ḥag. 17 a. ^g Cf. Num. xi. 20.

^h Cf. Lev. xxiii. 15; Deut. xvi. 9. ⁱ Cf. Lev. xxiii. 10 ff.

^j *Ib.* xxiii. 16. ^k *Ib.* xxiii. 15.

^l See Lauterbach, J. J., in *Studies in Jew. Lit.* (1913), p. 192; Derenbourg, *L'histoire Pales.*, pp. 137 ff.; *Jew. Ency.* ix. 593 ff., 663.

II (IYYAR).

1. On the seventh of Iyyar was the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, when it is forbidden to mourn.

In two places of this scroll mention is made of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, when it is forbidden to mourn. One is when the Israelites came up from captivity; the other^a when the Kings of Greece made a breach in the wall, and the Asmonæan house fenced it in again; for, of the first, it is said, And the wall was finished in the twenty-fifth day, etc.^b But although the wall was built, as yet the gates were not set up; so it is said, Though even unto that time I had not set up the doors in the gates^c; and again, He built it, and covered it, and set up the doors thereof, the bolts thereof, etc.^d; and again, And the porters, and the Levites, and the singers were appointed.^e So when they had completely set up the gates they made that day a festival.

2. On the fourteenth the little Passover^f was slaughtered, when it is forbidden to mourn.

This is the reply R. Joshua gave to R. Eliezer, when the latter said that a limb from a living man was unclean, but one from a dead man was clean.^g R. Joshua said, If a limb from a living man be unclean, will not a limb from a dead man be much more unclean? if the limb of a living man, who is clean, when separated from him is unclean, shall not the limb of a dead man, who is unclean, be much rather unclean? And it is written in Megillath Taanith, On the little Passover one must not mourn. If this be so, much more so on the great Passover. Moreover in another way did R. Joshua refute what R. Eliezer was saying: ^hYou may have a privilege for a minor, but not for an elder. R. Joshua said to him, If for a minor you say there be privileges, much more for an elder; and as is the law of the great Passover, so is that of the little Passover.¹

^a VI *init.*^d *Ib.* iii. 15.^g Hull, 129 b.^b Neh. vi. 15.^e *Ib.* vii. 1.^h Bab. Bath. 156 b.^c *Ib.* vi. 1.^f Num. ix. 10 ff.

¹ Zeitlin disagrees with the reasons given by the glossator, and thinks that the holiday was for the whole nation, not for those debarred from participating in the Passover. He connects the celebration of 14th Iyyar with the Syrians, when the Asmonæans were away during the Passover season on military duties, and so the celebration was deferred to that date, which commemorated victories over the Syrians.

3. On the twenty-third the children of Acra^a went forth from Jerusalem.¹

This is what is written, And David took the stronghold of Sion, the same is the city of [David.^b This is the place of the Acrates (?) until now.² Because they oppressed the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the Israelites were unable to go out and come in because of them in the day time, but only at night^c; so when the Asmonæan house overcame them and took them thence into captivity, they made a festival of that day on which they removed them.

4. On the twenty-seventh the coronation tax³ was remitted from Judah and Jerusalem^d

Because in the days of the Grecian Kings they were bringing wreaths of roses and hanging them on the doors of their idolatrous temples, and on the doors of their tradesmen's shops, and on the doors of the court-yards, singing songs to the idols, and writing on the foreheads^e of the oxen and of the asses that their masters had no portion in the God of Israel, just as the Philistines did, as it is written,⁴ Now there was no smith found, etc.^f So when the Asmonæan house overcame them, they abolished these wreaths, and made the day of their abolition a festival.

III (SIVAN).

1. On the seventeenth^g of Sivan the tower of Tsur was taken.

This is Cæsarea, the daughter of Edom,⁵ which was situated between the sea-places.^h It was a thorn in the side of Israel in the days of the Greeks, because they could not subdue it on account

^a 1 Macc. xiii. 51.

^b 2 Sam. v. 7.

^c Cf. VI. 2; XI. 3.

^d 1 Macc. xiii. 39.

^e Cf. Ezek. ix. 4; Apoc. vii. 3; ix. 4; xiv. 1; xxii. 4.

^f 1 Sam. xiii. 19-21.

^g Some MSS. "fourteenth."

^h Meg. 6 a.

¹ The citadel erected by Epiphanes to dominate Jerusalem, cf. 1 Macc. iv. 2 (οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς Ἀκρας).

² This sentence looks like a late gloss.

³ A fixed sum paid annually in commutation for the crowns of gold given to the King formerly on various notable occasions, as when he gained victory in battle, etc. See Josephus, *Antiq.* xii. 3. 3.

⁴ The point seems to be that just as the deliverance of the Israelites depended on God's power and not on material means (cf. 1 Sam. xiii. 5, 22), so did the deliverance from these Greeks who had "no portion in the God of Israel."

⁵ Cæsarea was called "daughter of Edom" because it was considerably enlarged by Herod the Idumæan. See *Echah Rabb.* iv. 21 (ed. Buber, p. 153 note 120).

of the mighty men therein. But when the power of the Asmonæan house prevailed they subdued and expelled them, and caused Israelites to dwell in the midst of it^a; and they made a festival of the day on which it was subdued.¹

2. On the fifteenth and on the sixteenth the inhabitants of Beth-Shean and of the valley² were taken into captivity.³

They too were a thorn in the side of Israel in the days of the Greeks, when they waged war against the Arabs. Because they had not been doomed to captivity before, neither Joshua^b nor David^c having led them captive, so when they were doomed to captivity through the power of the Asmonæan house who took them captive, they made a festival of those days, wherein they rejoiced before the Name because their Kingdom had been eradicated from the world, as it is written, And Saviours shall come up on mount Zion, etc.^d; and again, Jehovah is King for ever and ever.^e When? When the heathen shall perish out of his land.^f Again it says, Let sinners be consumed out of the earth, etc.^g.

3. On the twenty-fifth the demosionai⁴ were removed from Judah and from Jerusalem.⁵

When the Ishmaelites came to contest the validity of the birth-right against Israel, and there came with them the two wicked families of the Canaanites and the Egyptians, they said, Who will go and contend with them? Then Gebiah b. Pesisa, the keeper of the temple, said to the sages, Give me authority to go and dispute with them. They said to him, Take heed that thou cede not the land to them. He answered, I will go and dispute with them; if I overcome them they will say, The Law of Israel has conquered us; if they overcome me, you can say to them, Ye have overcome an ignorant person amongst us. The sages gave him authority and

^a Cf. Jer. Demai ii. ^b Jos. xvii. 12. ^c 1 Sam. xxxi. 10. Hull, 10 b. ^d Obad. 21. ^e Ps. x. 16. ^f *Ibid.* ^g *Ibid.* civ. 35.

¹ Zeitlin and Grätz argue against the glossator's explanation, since Cæsarea was entirely inhabited by Greeks and Syrians till Herod's time. The former, on linguistic grounds, rejects Grätz's view that the festival indicated the period of Simon the Asmonæan, and connects it with the first Jewish victory over Florus. Cf. Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* ii. 15. 5 f.

² Perhaps = the plain of Jezreel: cf. Josephus, *Antiq.* xiii. 10. 3.

³ In the reign of John Hyrcanus. See Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* i. 2. 7.

⁴ Publicani, the farmers of the public revenues under the Romans; San. 91 a (end).

⁵ Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* ii. 16. 5.

the book of the Law. He went and disputed with them. The Ishmaelites said, It is written in the Law, In that day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land.^a We are the seed of Abram, for Ishmael was Abram's son ; so let us divide the land with you. Gebiah b. Pesisa answered, Since you bring me a proof from the Law alone, I also will do the same. It is written in the Law, But unto the sons of the concubines that Abraham had Abraham gave gifts^b ; and it is also written in the Law, And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac.^c They fled away. The Canaanites said the land of Canaan was theirs, since it is written in the Law, The land of Canaan according to the borders thereof.^d Gebiah b. Pesisa said to them, Is there a legal decision that one part of the Law is imperative whilst the other stands? lo, it is written in the Law, Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren.^e 'A servant who acquires possessions, whose servant is he? and whose are the possessions? Moreover, there are now many years wherein you have not served us. Alexander said unto them, He has given you an irrefutable answer : if you return answer, it will be well ; if not, you should become his servants. They said to him, Give us three days' time. He granted it ; whereupon they went away, and when they saw that they were bound to become servants of the Israelites because they found no answer, they immediately left their houses as they were full of goods, their fields sown, and their vineyards planted. In that year they fled away thence ; and tradition has it that it was a Sabbatical year. So that day was made a festival.

§ The^f Egyptians came and said, From their own Law we will bring against them a proof, because it is said, And let every woman ask of her neighbour, etc.^h Sixty myriad men went forth from us, each laden with silver and gold, for thus it is written in their Law, And they spoiled the Egyptians.ⁱ Let them return to us our silver and our gold. Gebiah b. Pesisa said to them, Since you bring me a proof from the Law alone, I will likewise bring you a proof from the Law only. It is written in the Law, Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.^j Our

^a Gen. xv. 18.

^d Num. xxxiv. 2.

^f San. 91 a, 105 a ; Meg. 16 a.

^h Exod. iii. 22.

^b *Ibid.* xxv. 6.

^e Gen. ix. 25.

ⁱ *Ibid.* xii. 36.

^c *Ibid.* xxv. 25.

^g San. 91 a.

^j *Ibid.* xii. 40.

fathers were sixty myriads, and they served Egypt in mortar and bricks and all manner of service for no wages. See you what our work was worth reckoned at a sela a day. Philosophers sat down and reckoned; and they did not reach a hundred years in their reckoning before finding that all Egypt would belong to Israel. So they went away ashamed.

When Alexander the Macedonian sought to go up to Jerusalem the Samaritans went to him and said, Take heed, for you will not be allowed to enter the most holy place of their temple because you are uncircumcised. When he thought on it Gebiah b. Pesisa went and made two shoes in which he put two precious stones valued at a myriad pieces of silver. When the King approached the temple he said to him, My lord King, draw off your shoes, and put on these two shoes, because the pavement is smooth, that your foot slip not. When he was drawing near to the holy of holies he said, My lord King, hitherto it is permitted us to come but no further. The King said to him, Lo, I go on and when I come back I will straighten your hump.¹ He replied, If you do so you will be called a true physician and will take away much gain.^a It is said that they did not move from that spot till a serpent stung the King.² The sages say of Gebiah b. Pesisa, Of thee the Scripture says, Let thy father and thy mother be glad, and let her that bare thee rejoice^b; and it also says, My son, be wise, and make my heart glad, that I may answer him that reproacheth me.^c

IV (TAMMUZ).

On the fourteenth of Tammuz the Book of Enactments was abrogated, and on that day one must not mourn;

Because in it was written and set down by the Sadducees concerning those who should be stoned, those who should be burned, those who should be decapitated, and those who should be strangled. And when they had written it, a certain man made enquiry and went to look into the book, and said to the Sadducees, How do you know that this man should be sentenced to stoning, this to burning, this to decapitation, and this to strangling? They could not bring a proof from the Law, wherein it says, According to the tenor of the

^a Gen. Rab. lxi. (end). ^b Prov. xxiii. 25. ^c *Ibid.* xxvii. 11.

¹ Gebiah means "humpback."

² On this story see Büchler, *Rev. des Etud. Juives*, lxxxvi. 1.

law which they shall teach thee, etc.,^a which indicates that they were not writing the laws which were in the Book but only what was written and laid down by them in their own Book of Enactments. Again, the Boëthusians were saying, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth^b: so if a man should put out his fellow's tooth, one should put out his tooth; and if anyone should blind his fellow's eye, one should put out his eye, that they might be alike.¹ And when it is said, They shall spread the garment before the elders of the city,^c they said it was to be literally observed. And the passage, And spit in his face,^d they also interpreted of literal observance.² The sages answered them, And is it not written, The law and the commandment which I have written (the written law) that thou mayest teach them^e (the oral law); and again, Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach it—this refers to the teaching of the Bible; put it in their mouths,^f—this refers to the oral law? So the day on which the Book of Enactments was abolished they made a festival.³

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(To be continued.)

^a Deut. xvii. 11.

^b Exod. xxi. 24; Lev. xxiv. 20; Deut. xix. 21. ^c Deut. xxii. 17.

^d *Ibid.* xxv. 9. ^e Exod. xxiv. 12. ^f Deut. xxxi. 19.

¹ The Pharisees, in the interests of the people, maintained that pecuniary compensation was sufficient. Bab. K. 84 a.

² Instead of "spit on the ground before him." See Targum and Rashi *in loc.*

³ Zeitlin, who contends that none of the festivals arose from controversies between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, agrees with Cassel (*Messianische Stellen d. A. T.*, p. 107) that the event here commemorated is the annulling of the Greek decrees by Demetrius (1 Macc. x.).

