CHAPTER 3

Elements and Characteristics of Megillat ha-Megalleh

3.1 Overview

The most well-known feature of Megillat ha-Megalleh is the great number of eschatological calculations it contains. Yet it is likewise a fact that most of the book consists of other elements, most notably philosophical ideas, biblical interpretation, historical information, and astrology. To read Megillat ha-Megalleh expecting it to be written in a coherent manner, the book needs to be approached as a whole, taking into account each element in the context of both the structure of the work and of the other elements found in the book. For this purpose, the present chapter will address in a preliminary fashion, both the structure of the work and the different elements the author uses in his book. For each element, we will discuss the previous research that is either directly or methodologically relevant, and also offer preliminary remarks on Bar Hiyya’s approach to this element, estimating the role of each element in the work, and raising any crucial questions that have to be addressed in the deeper study of the text.

3.2 A Synopsis of Megillat ha-Megalleh

Bar Hiyya begins Megillat ha-Megalleh with an introduction, which mainly provides a justification for writing on a controversial topic: the quest of the date of redemption. He also declares a polemical intent, stating that the exile has not been caused by the sins of the Jews, and that he intends to refute the claims of those according to whom the Messiah has already come.

The first chapter discusses the nature of time. The tone of the chapter is mainly philosophical, even if Bar Hiyya does not present a philosophically problem-free definition of time.1 Anyway, his main interest in the nature of time becomes clear: time is created along with the world, and time and the creatures depend on each other for their existence. Time is finite, meaning that it also

1 Julius Guttmann, Introduction, 1924, p. XIV.
has an end, even if the non-Jewish philosophers have not been able to agree on the duration of the world. The first chapter serves also to introduce several philosophical concepts that will be made use of later in the book.\(^2\)

In the second chapter, Bar Hiyya proceeds, starting from the claim that the duration of the world can only be uncovered by means of the religious tradition. He first establishes, by a combination of exegetical and philosophical arguments, that the creation days in Gen. 1 correspond to periods of history, or more specifically that history, with its good and bad periods, is potentially contained in creation. He then goes deeper into strengthening this theory with support from the Scriptures and the rabbinic literature and examines in detail how the day-periods\(^3\) map to the history of the Jewish people. Finally, the model is applied to a number of eschatological calculations. There are also two major excursions, a shorter one on the five worlds of light and a longer one on the three levels of prophecy.

In the third chapter Bar Hiyya defends the concept of physical resurrection believed to happen at the beginning of the messianic age. According to his eschatological scheme the Jews will be resurrected at the beginning of the messianic age, and a general resurrection together with the Day of Judgment will occur at the end of this age. Bar Hiyya even attempts to prove that resurrection of the dead can be reconciled with contemporary scientific information, but the main part of his argument is a combination of biblical interpretation and philosophical concepts and arguments, and the element of science is only briefly present. He examines in great detail the accounts of the creation of man and of the story of the Garden of Eden.\(^4\) According to Bar Hiyya’s interpretation, these texts simultaneously relate to the primal events and to the whole history of mankind. The final goal of redemption, which God planned from the beginning, is to restore man into his original state as it was after the creation, i.e. to immortality in a life without evil. Bar Hiyya’s discourse here appears to parallel contemporaneous Christian discussions concerning the original sin, and Bar Hiyya also directly asserts that the Jews have been cleansed of this sin. This chapter also contains eschatological calculations towards the end, together with a discussion on the nature and the fate of the Jewish people.

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\(^2\) Especially form, lack of form, actuality and potentiality, temporal and non-temporal precedence.

\(^3\) I will use the term ‘day-period’ to refer to the periods of history that Bar Hiyya associates with each day of the creation week. In the original Hebrew, Bar Hiyya uses yom (day) both for the actual days and the corresponding periods.

\(^4\) This part has been studied by Sara Klein-Braslavy (Creation of Man, 1981).