Chapter Eight

Megillat Taanit – The Scroll of Fasting

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Introduction

Talmudic scholars have on occasion wondered at the lack of historiography and historical awareness in the literature of the sages. Many have concluded that our rabbis were indifferent to the events of their day as well as to the rest of the post-biblical Jewish history. These scholars have argued that the rabbis had viewed their own purpose as limited solely to their work in the fields of halakha and exegesis.¹ In this light, it is surprising to discover that a document of a semi-historical character is the first to have been produced by our early sages, and that they regarded this document with respect and granted it special status. This Document is Megillat Taanit.

MegTaan originated among the sages of the Second Temple era and is the earliest known Pharisaic document to have survived. The Scroll is essentially a list of about thirty-five dates drawn up in Aramaic and arranged in calendar order. Its goal, as stated in its opening sentence, is to keep the Jews from fasting on ‘days on which miracles had been performed for Israel’.² On days commemorating especially important events, in the opinion of the compiler of the Scroll, it was forbidden not only to fast, but even to eulogize the deceased. The dates listed are, in the main, those of joyous events of various kinds that befell the Jewish people during the Second Temple era. The Scroll is aimed at preserving their memory and turning them into minor festive days.

¹ See e.g. Herr, ‘Conception of History’.
² See yTaan 2:13, 66a [= yMeg 1:6, 70c] (Neusner Translation p204; all Yerushalmi translations are from Neusner, The Talmud of the Land of Israel, with adaptations where necessary).
MegTaan does not belong to the genre of historical writing, but rather to the halakhic genre, as may be concluded from a number of its characteristics: (a) its purpose, as declared by its initial sentence, is halakhic: to prohibit fasting and eulogizing on certain dates of the year; (b) the historical events commemorated on these dates are hinted at in the Scroll only in brief, little or no relevant detail being provided; (c) events are listed in the Scroll in calendar order, rather than chronologically. Nonetheless, the Scroll reflects a paradoxical relationship between an overt halakhic aim and a covert historical goal. Whereas the historical events mentioned in the Scroll are adduced only for a halakhic purpose, the prohibition of fasting exists only in order to preserve the memory of those very same historical events!

It may thus be said that MegTaan does, in fact, reflect an interest the early sages showed in the history of the Jewish nation in the Second Temple period, and the religious significance they accorded to this history. The redactors of the Scroll singled out about 35 events they deemed worthy of being fixed in the Jewish calendar. These events had transpired during a period of c. 500 years, from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah to the times, at least, of Caligula. However, the means they adopted to shape the collective memory were, typically, not those of historiography, but rather those of halakhic authority. This feature, namely the ambition to shape some kind of historical awareness, alongside the abstention from historiography, has important ramifications for our understanding of the sages’ outlook and self-image, in the generation of the creation of the Scroll, as in subsequent generations that maintained it and delivered it to their successors.

It must be noted that the commonly employed name of this compilation, lit. ‘Scroll of Fasting’, is misleading. It concerns not a list of fast days, but a list of days of rejoicing on which it was not allowed to fast. The original name of this list may well have been merely תקנות, ‘Scroll’, in which case only later was the word תרנ基礎, ‘fasting’, added to it.  

An explanatory commentary in Hebrew was later added to the Scroll, known in scholarly literature as the ‘Scholion’. Its intention is to identify and elaborate on the events intimated in the Scroll. Thus it adds stories, legends

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3 See Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 5-26.
4 The mss reflecting the Palestinian version of the Mishna (Kaufman, Parma, Cambridge-36) as well as the first printed version of the text in Naples, all read in mTaan 2:8 ‘Any day whereof it is written in the Scroll...’ (cited, as all Mishna passages, from Danby, Mishnah, adapted where necessary), and not ‘Any day whereof it is written in the Scroll of Fasting...’, as in the other printed versions of the Mishna (for this mishna see infra). The name Megilla, rather than Megillat Taanit, is also to be found in other sources. Grätz, Geschichte, 559 n4 viewed it as an abbreviated form. On the assumption that the original name of the document was indeed Megilla, and that it had degenerated into Megillat Taanit at a later stage, see already Dalman, Dialektproben, 2; Cassel, Messianische Stellen, 71; Ratner, ‘Notes on Megillat Taanit’, 501; Zeitlin, Megillat Taanit as a Source, 4; Lichtenstein, ‘Fastenrolle’, 258; Urbach, The Halakha, 248 n43. But see also: Bar Ilan, ‘Character and Origin’, 114 n4.