The Date of the War of the Sons of Light

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The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness 1), one of the scrolls discovered by the Bedouin boys near the Dead Sea in 1947, contains a detailed plan for a war to be waged by a Jewish army against many foreign nations. This plan has been called “apocalyptic”, “eschatological”, and “Messianic”, but I would reserve these terms for purported supernatural revelations of future events and for compositions dealing with Heaven, Hell, the end of the world, the general resurrection of the dead, and the future son of David. None of these subjects is mentioned in our scroll. It does not purport to be a vision or a prophetic revelation. The plan it sets forth was not realized, as is often the case with men’s plans. It was also somewhat Utopian, as is not unusual with men’s plans. But this does not authorize us to call it eschatological or Messianic. On the contrary, the many precise details, some of which have parallels in contemporary Hellenistic and Roman tactics and military organisation, as Mr. Février 2) and General Yadin 3) have shown, give it the appearance of a plan for a real war to be waged in the author’s days. It does not look like a liturgical poem for some annual festival, as some commentators seem to suggest, nor like an apocalyptic dream conceived in peacetime for the consolation of mystics, as others suppose.


3) Y. Yadin, Megillath Milhamath Bne Or bi-Bne Hošeb, Jerusalem, 1956.
Our text was composed for a specific historical situation. The date can be ascertained by the following considerations:

1. The Kittim of Assyria and the Kittim of Egypt ¹) must be the Macedonians of Syria and Egypt ²). To be sure, names of nations are occasionally used allegorically in this period, but they are never meaningless. Although in other texts the words “Kittim” and “Assyria”, used separately, may symbolize the Romans, when joined together and mentioned near the Kittim of Egypt, they can only designate the Seleucids. Therefore we are in the period 167-69 B.C., when there were hostilities between the Jews and the Seleucids.

2. Among the enemies are the “kings of the north” ³), a phrase that suits the Seleucids better than the Romans.

3. The fact that the Jews are represented as being fully independent and fighting for many years against many different nations also seems to rule out the Roman period. The scroll describes a war, not an insurrection.

4. The names of the archangels ⁴) are borrowed from the Book of Enoch, some parts of which I date about 165 B.C. ⁵).

5. The phrase “King of glory” ⁶) is borrowed either from the Book of Enoch or from Psalm xxiv, which I attribute to the 25th of Chislev 164, because it celebrates the return of the Lord to his dwelling-place.

6. The metaphorical use of the words “light” and “darkness” is

¹) Col. I, lines 2 and 4, accepting Prof. GASTER’S translation p. 281. Other translations, however, eliminate the Kittim of Egypt.

²) In this interpretation I agree with DELCOR, DUPONT-SOMMER, and VAN DER PLOEG. The word Kittim stands for the Macedonians, also in 1 Macc. i 1 and viii 5. The name “Assyria” perhaps stands for Seleucid Asia in Isaiah xix 23 and lii 4, in Zechariah x 11, and in Lamentations v 6. However, Kittim probably designates the Romans in the Commentary on the Book of Habakkuk. The Kittim are a nation in Jubilees xxiv 28-29 and xxxvii 10, but it is not clear which. The Assyrians symbolize the Romans in the Book of Judith. J. CARMIGNAC, („Les Kittim dans la guerre de fils des lumière contre les fils de ténèbres”, Novv. Rev. Théol. LXXVII (1955) pp. 737-748) suggests that Kittim might be a general term for non-Jews. This conjecture is not borne out by the texts, which in each case refer to some specific nation.


⁵) In my opinion, the Book of Enoch is composite. One section mentions seven archangels and may be dated c. 165 B.C. Another section mentions four archangels and may be dated c. 163 B.C. A third section mentions no archangels and is later. The Books of Daniel and Tobit, the N.T., the Midrashim, and the Koran borrowed the names of the archangels from Enoch. The archangels are mentioned also in the Testament of Levi.

⁶) Col. XII, 1. 8 GASTER, p. 297.