

Vered NOAM, מגילת הענית. הנוסחים, פשרם, תולדותיהם (*Megillat Ta'anit. Versions, Interpretation, History*), Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2003, pp.451, ISBN 965-217-215-4.

Since its edition by H. Lichtenstein ('Die Fastenrolle – Eine Untersuchung zur jüdisch-hellenistischen Geschichte', *HUCA* 8-9 (1931-2), 257-351), a modern, critical edition of *Megillat Ta'anit* has long been overdue. Because of its unique status as a 'pre-rabbinic' literary composition, and because of the unique historiographical material that it contains on the Second Temple period, this work is of great importance to early rabbinic scholars as well as to ancient historians. Noam's excellent edition, with extensive commentaries, fills an important need.

Megillat Ta'anit is an annual calendar (starting from the month of Nisan) of about 35 dates commemorating auspicious historical events, on which it is prohibited to fast and (on some dates) to deliver eulogies. Each entry gives the date in the year, followed by a very brief (and usually rather cryptic) description of the historical event it commemorates. As Noam demonstrates, half of these events remain obscure and unidentifiable, whilst the other half belongs mostly to the Hasmonaean period – e.g., most famously, the Maccabean victory, commemorated on the days of Hannukah – although some events are earlier and some later. Among the earlier events is Purim (14-15 Adar); the latest event, mentioned in the entry for 22 Shevat, is the abrogation of Caligula's decree (?) to introduce an idol into the Temple.

In spite of its historical content, *Megillat Ta'anit* would have been, from the outset, a primarily halakhic work. On the basis of its language (a form of Middle Aramaic) and its interest in fasting (which seems to have declined in the rabbinic period), Noam (19-21) favours a 1st cent. CE dating, probably prior to 70 CE. *Megillat Ta'anit* certainly existed, already in written form, at the time of the redaction of the Mishnah, since it is cited in the Mishna (and subsequent rabbinic literature) and treated not unlike a form of Scripture (11, 22, 336-7). Tannaitic sources treat it as halakhically authoritative, but its halakhic authority was questioned in the Amoraic period, and in the post-Amoraic period, the ruling that *Megillat Ta'anit* was 'cancelled' had become widely accepted (except for the retention of Hannukah and Purim), which explains its general neglect in subsequent rabbinic literature (350-2).

An extensive scholion in Hebrew was added quite early on to *Megillat Ta'anit*, explaining the historical events referred to in each of the entries. Some of the scholia provide detailed, informed aggadic accounts, others are vacuous and clearly improvised. In Noam's estimation, half of the scholion is unique and unattested in rabbinic literature, but parallels can be found in earlier Jewish works such as the books of Maccabees, other parts of the Septuagint, and especially Josephus (22-4). Other parts of the scholion are attested in the Babylonian Talmud (13 entries in all – 133-58, 361-75); but surprisingly, no scholion is found in the Palestinian Talmud or in any other Palestinian rabbinic source (27, and fully argued out in 375-82 – more could have been made of the implications of this surprising finding). In the Babylonian Talmud, passages from the *Megillat Ta'anit* are routinely cited together with the

scholion (even where context does not demand the latter), which suggests that the scholion had become in some ways an integral part of the text, although the Talmud was still able to distinguish between them (11-12, 26, 361-75).

The origins and history of the scholion are unclear, because it remained a fluid composition. As Noam shows, it is attested in the manuscripts in two very different recensions (chiefly represented in the Oxford and Parma mss., that differ in about half their contents), whilst a third version is attested incompletely in the Babylonian Talmud. The recension of the Oxford ms. seems close to Palestinian traditions (the text is poorly preserved, but rightly identified by Noam as legitimate and authentic), whereas the 'Parma' recension is closer to Babylonian sources; although some common sources are used, the recensions do not seem to have originated from a single Urtext. Around the 10th cent., all three versions were conflated somewhere in Ashkenaz into a hybrid text, thus creating a fourth – albeit artificial – version (22-7, 319-332).

The most important contribution of Noam's book is philological. Following a preface and an introduction (both conveniently summarize the work, but repeat each other unnecessarily), and an useful review of modern scholarship, Noam provides, firstly, a critical edition of *Megillat Ta'anit* on its own (without the scholion). The Parma ms. is used as base text (not because it is more authentic, but only because it is in better condition), with no less than four distinct apparatus: 1) mss. and editions; 2) citations in the Palestinian Talmud (including textual variations); 3) citations in the Babylonian Talmud (ditto, and expanded further in an appendix); 4) citations in medieval rabbinic sources. Then follows the critical edition of the scholion, this time with a synoptic layout of the Parma, Oxford, and hybrid recensions (with apparatus based on the remaining mss. and editions); and as an appendix, another synopsis of the Parma, Oxford, and Babylonian Talmud recensions (the latter with Venice edition as base text, and full apparatus). This judicious choice of a range of different formats, maximizing clarity and ease of use – which, I suspect, bears the mark of Yaakov Sussman's supervision of Noam's doctoral thesis – is a far cry from Lichtenstein's eclectic edition that hopelessly blurred all the textual traditions (on which see further comments in Noam, 36).

The longest section of this book is a detailed commentary on each of the entries, in the *Megillah* as well as in the scholion. On the Hannukah entry, for example, Noam establishes that the story of the miracle of the oil is absent in the Oxford and Parma recensions, and only attested in the Babylonian Talmud (from where it was incorporated into the hybrid recension); this suggests not only that the story is late (which comes as no surprise), but also that the Oxford and Parma recensions were redacted earlier than the Babylonian Talmud (268, 275-6). Also worthy of note is a parallel between the 22 Shevat entry in *Megillat Ta'anit* and a Tosefta passage (*t.Sotah* 13:6 – full citation of the passage would have been useful), which reveals that the author of *Megillat Ta'anit*, like that of the Tosefta, drew on common and earlier Judaeen source materials in Aramaic that belonged perhaps to a 'historical' genre (Noam's inverted commas – 21, 283-4). Besides questions of text and source criticism, one of the recurring problems that Noam contends with is the identification of the historical events referred to in the entries. Her cautious approach is generally to present the various theories (often very speculative) of earlier scholars, but without adjudicating between them. As she remarks more than once, *Megillat Ta'anit* has

ultimately far more to teach us on the history of rabbinic literature than on the history of the Second Temple period.

The book concludes with an attempt to trace the origins and history of *Megillat Ta'anit* itself, with a detailed study of the manuscript tradition, the *Megillah* and its scholion in early rabbinic literature, and their transmission in the Middle Ages. This section is particularly erudite, but on the question of the origins of *Megillat Ta'anit* and its early history, I beg to differ with the author. In the context of this question, Noam appears to assume the historical reliability of early rabbinic sources and traditions – a position that historians, today, can no longer adopt without considerable reservations and qualifications. Thus the attribution, in Tannaitic sources, of sayings about *Megillat Ta'anit* to Sages of the generation of Yavneh does not historically prove that the *Megillah* was well established in this period (or, according to Noam, still before 70 CE – 22). Similarly, the apparent use of the scholion by a Palestinian Amora, cited in the Babylonian Talmud, cannot be assumed reliably attributed (*pace* 27). But more importantly, Noam's claim that *Megillat Ta'anit* was composed by a 1st century CE Pharisaic, Shammaitic figure that can be identified as (R.)Hananiah b.Hezeqiah or as his son Eleazar is based on a rabbinic tradition that is attested only in a *baraita* of the Babylonian Talmud (*b.Shabbat* 13b) and in the scholion (333-6). Although she prudently refrains from Graetz's far-fetched theory that this figure was a Shammaitic Zealot leader who wrote *Megillat Ta'anit* during the Great Revolt (*ibid.* and 22-31), Noam's apparently unquestioning reliance on this relatively late rabbinic tradition is unjustified and unacceptable by present-day methodological standards. *Megillat Ta'anit* is clearly pre-Mishnaic, Judaeen, and related to rabbinic or proto-rabbinic circles, but more than that, we do not know.

This book is a minefield of information, and a remarkable display of scholarship in a wide range of domains: textual criticism, Second Temple history, and rabbinic literature, ancient as well as medieval. It provides a lucid and meticulous text of an important early Jewish work, together with a copious commentary. I recommend it highly.

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