

Letters from Chanukahs and Purims Past
Dr. Malka Z. Simkovich

Timeline

BCE

722: Northern Israelite kingdom is exiled by Assyria; these exiles comprise “the ten lost tribes”

7th century: Decline of Assyrian kingdom; rise of Babylonian empire

587: Babylonian destruction of the First Temple and the exile of Judea into Babylonia

539: End of exilic period; Persia has conquered Babylonia and permits Judeans to return

525–515: Building of the Second Temple

334: Alexander the Great dies

200: Judea transitions from being under Ptolemaic control to being under Antiochid control

175: High Priest Simon II dies, and conflict breaks out between supporters of his son Onias III and Jason (Onias’ son was probably the founder of the temple at Leontopolis)

164: Judea gains autonomy from the Greeks; Hasmonean dynasty begins

63: Pompey invades Jerusalem; Judea now controlled by Roman client kings

62–61: Preconsul of Asia Minor, L. Valerius Flaccus, seizes foreign funds designated by diasporan Jews to be sent to the Jerusalem Temple

59: Cicero delivers a speech defending Flaccus

c. 20: Philo of Alexandria is born

CE:

6: Judea becomes a province of Rome

c.32: Jesus is crucified by the Romans

37: Josephus is born

38–41: Riots against the Jews in Alexandria, supported by Flaccus the governor and largely ignored by Gaius Caligula the emperor

c. 40: Philo writes *Embassy to Gaius*

67–70: Jerusalem riots; Temple destroyed by Romans

135: Bar Kokhba revolt: Jews expelled from Jerusalem (which Hadrian had renamed Aelia Capitolina); Rabbinic community moves to Yavneh and the Galilee

200: Mishnah edited and likely completed

6th century: Babylonian Talmud edited and redacted (it will still be subject to small revisions over the next three centuries)

Samples of the Latest Biblical Texts:

1. 2 Maccabees 1:1–10a¹ c. 124 BCE

To our brothers the Jews of Egypt, greeting, your brothers the Jews in Jerusalem and in the land of Judah. A good peace. May God make for you, and may He be good to you, and may He remember His covenant with His faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May He give you all a heart to revere Him and to do His will wholeheartedly and with a willing spirit. May He open your heart to His Torah and to His commandments. May He listen to your prayers and forgive you and not abandon you in an evil time. And now, here we continually offer prayers for you.

¹ Translation of these letters by Goldstein in Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (AB 41A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 137.

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In the reign of Demetrius in the year 169 we Jews wrote you, “In the affliction and in the distress which came upon us in the years from the time that Jason and his followers reveled against the Holy Land and the Kingdom. And set fire to the temple gateway and shed innocent blood, we prayed to the LORD, and He heartened to us. We brought animal sacrifices and fine flour, and we kindled the lamps and laid out the showbread.” And now we ask you to celebrate the Days of Tabernacles in the Month of Kislev. In the year 188.

2. 2 Maccabees 1:10b–2:18, c. 103 or 102 BCE

The people in Jerusalem and in Judaea and the Council of Elders and Judas to Aristobulus, tutor of King Ptolemy and member of the stock of the anointed priests, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting and wishes for health. Having been saved by God from great perils, we thank Him greatly as befits men who war against a king, for God Himself cast way those who made war on the Holy City.

Indeed, when the commander and the apparently irresistible army accompanying him came to Persis, they were massacred in the temple of Nanaia through the trickery of Nanaia’s priests. Antiochus came with his Friends to the shrine intending to marry the goddess and thereby acquire the money in her rich treasury as dowry. The priests of Nanaia’s temple set the money before him, and Antiochus came with a few of his men into the precinct of the shrine. As soon as Antiochus had entered, the priests locked the temple. Opening the secret trap door in the coffered ceiling, they rained stones down upon the thunderstruck commander. After dismembering and beheading the corpses they threw them out to the men outside. In every way blessed is our God, Who delivered over the evildoers! Inasmuch as we are about to celebrate, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Purification of the Temple, we thought we ought to let you know, so that you, too, might celebrate it as when Nehemiah, the builder of the temple and the altar, brought sacrifices.

When our forefathers were being carried off to Persia, the pious priests of that time secretly took some fire from the altar and hid it in a pit which was like a dry well and shut it up securely so that the place remained unknown to all. Many years went by, and then, in God’s own time, Nehemiah received his commission from the king of Persia and sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to recover it. When they reported that ... they had found no fire, but a viscous liquid Nehemiah ordered them to draw it up and bring it to him. After the sacrificial offerings had been placed upon the altar, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid over the firewood and over the offerings laid upon it. When that had been done, after a while in the sun, which had been covered by clouds, began to shine, and a great shire blazed up, to the astonishment of all.

As the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests and the whole assemblage uttered a prayer, in which Jonathan led and the rest, following Nehemiah, responded. The prayer was as follows: “LORD, LORD, God, creator of all, awesome and powerful and just and merciful, our sole good king, our sole provider, the sole just One Who is almighty and eternal, the preserver of Israel from every exile, the One Who chose and sanctified the patriarchs! Accept our sacrifice for the sake of all Your people Israel, and guard Your portion and make it holy. Gather together our dispersion. Free those who are enslaved among the nations. Look upon those who have been despised and abominated, and let the nations know that You are our God. Put to torment the oppressors and the arrogant perpetrators of outrage. Plant Your people in Your holy Place, as Moses said.” The priests went on singing hymns to the accompaniment of lyres. When the sacrificial offerings had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that they pour the remaining liquid too, . . . large boulders. As soon as the command was carried out, a flame blazed up, and when the fire on the altar lit up in turn, . . .

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was consumed. The news of the phenomenon spread. The king of the Persians received the report that the liquid had been found in the place where the priests being led into exile had hidden the fire and that by means of it Nehemiah and his followers had burned the sacrificial offerings. After verifying the phenomenon, the king had the place fenced in and declared it holy. The king took large sums of money and distributed them to Nehemiah and his followers. Nehemiah and his followers called the liquid “nephthar,” which means “purification,” but it is commonly called “nephthai.”

In our documents we find that it was Jeremiah the prophet who commanded those who were being led into exile to take some of the fire, as we have just told you. They also show that the prophet gave the Torah to those who were being led into exile and admonished them not to forget the LORD’s commandments and not to let their minds be led astray when they saw gold and silver images and the ornaments upon them. With other words to the same effect, he exhorted them not to let the Torah depart from their hearts. The text also said that the prophet, on receiving a divine revelation, ordered that the tabernacle and the ark should go with him. It went on to say that Jeremiah went out of the mountain which Moses ascended to see the heritage promised by God. There, Jeremiah found a cave chamber and brought into it the tabernacle and the ark and the incense altar and blocked up the entrance. Some of those who had come along when back to mark the path, but they could not find it. When Jeremiah found out, he rebuked them, saying, “the place will remain unknown until God gathers His people together in the Age of Mercy. At that time the LORD will bring these things to light again, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will be seen, as they were over Moses and as Solomon, too, requested, in order that the Place should be greatly sanctified.” We are also told that Solomon in his wisdom offered a sacrifice in honor of the dedication and completion of the temple. Just as Moses prayed to the LORD and fire came down from heaven and devoured the sacrifices, so Solomon prayed, and fire came down and consumed the burnt offering. . . (And Moses said, “On account of . . . the sin offering. . . was consumed.”). . . So, too, Solomon celebrated the eight days.

The same account is given also in the records and the memoirs of the time of Nehemiah, and also that Nehemiah founded a library and collected the books about the kings and those of prophets and the books of David and the letters of Persian kings on dedicatory gifts to the temple. In the same manner, Judas reassembled for us the books scattered in the course of the recent war, and we have them. If you have need of them, send messengers to fetch them. As we said, we write you in asmuch as we are about to celebrate the Purification. Please celebrate the days. God, Who saved His entire people and restored the heritage to us all...also...the kingdom and the priesthood and the sanctification, as He promised in the Torah. For we hope in God, that He will speedily have mercy upon us and gather us together from the lands under the heavens to His holy Place, for He has indeed delivered us from great evils and has purified His Place.

3. Colophon of Greek Esther:

In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, had Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the foregoing Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem.