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# THE GATE OF ALEXANDER IN HEBREW ALEXANDER ROMANCES[1]

**SUMMARY:** However surprising it may seem, the story of the gate of Alexander in the Hebrew versions of the *Romance* is associated rather with certain geographical and historical facts than with the eschatological dimension and the popular association of Gog and Magog with the Unclean Nations are not a part of the narrative. This does not mean that the eschatological aspect was absent from the Jewish interpretation of the figure of Alexander. Quite the contrary: it seems a crucial part of Alexander's role as presented especially in Hellenistic Jewish literature. But this eschatological significance of Alexander in Jewish tradition is more often suggested by Alexander's linking with the end of prophecy[2] or the beginning of the new universal kingship. The Unclean Nations episode is not so important in that aspect. It is rather used by the authors of the Hebrew Alexander Romances to stress the exotic and fanciful elements in the narrative, thus eliciting the curiosity of the reader, or to comment on Alexander's decisions as a king and on political aspects of his rule.

## ROMANCE AS A GENRE IN JEWISH LITERARY TRADITION

Among medieval Hebrew secular texts of special importance is a diverse (both chronologically and spatially) collection of Hebraic

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[2]    See Amitay 2010: 112-113.

versions of the *Romance of Alexander*. Preserved in a number of various versions, it presents researchers with a twofold opportunity. On the one hand, it enables one to see the development of Alexander material in the Jewish culture and provides a further line of its development, after ancient Greek-Jewish texts (such as, e.g., *1 Maccabees*, *III Sibyl*, pseudo-Hecateus, Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*) and Alexander-centred Talmudic material. On the other hand, it gives the reader a chance to see how the Hebrew Alexander stories work within the broad tradition of *Alexander Romance*: how they differ from other versions in both Eastern and Western Alexander tradition, which motifs they borrow, develop, or change, how their general tone and their versions of events reflect both the universal Alexander themes and the specific character of Jewish culture(s) of the period.

The Greek version of the *Romance*, created possibly as early as within decades after the death of Alexander[3], but preserved in literary form only in the versions from $3^{rd}$ c. CE, in all probability in Alexandria, was a model for all reworkings of the *Romance* in various languages. A number of influences can be detected in the development of the *Romance*: the predictable Greek component is supported by numerous motifs of Egyptian[4] and Indian origins and in the later recensions of the *Romance* monotheistic components of probably both Jewish and Christian origins are clearly detectable.

The development of the *Romance* text is complicated and in many places problematic; as such, it has been an object of scholarly attention for a long time and the relationship between various redactions and versions of the *Romance* is one of the best-researched topics in the study of this body of texts. Extensive scholarship exists on the topic of the redactions and their interplay; for the purpose of the present paper, however, it is sufficient to state a number of crucial points in the development of the earlier versions of the *Romance*.

Oriental influence on the creation of the *Romance* should be especially connected with the γ recension of the Greek text, dating from

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[3]    On the early composition see Stoneman 1991: 8-17.

[4]    The opinion of Wallis Budge 1933: xiv that the Egyptian version of the narrative was the primary one, is often still held true. The reason for this is the Nectanebo narrative in the early part of the *Romance* and the way in which the Egyptian origins and connections of Alexander are stressed in the narrative.

after 900 C. E., but preserving probably an earlier Jewish or Jewish Christian source[5]. The main arguments to support such a thesis would be the presence of monotheistic/monotheism-inspired motifs in the γ recension of the *Romance*[6]. This recension is based on the earlier β version, as is the recension λ[7], containing several popular episodes: the letter of Alexander to his mother, the king's descent to the bottom of the ocean or the flight of Alexander; these episodes appear in numerous Jewish versions of Alexander legends, both in the *Romance* and in earlier Talmudic narratives. Another important recension is δ; as such, this recension is lost, but its importance stems from the fact that it was used as a basis for the definite Latin translation, made in the 10th c. by Leo of Naples and entitled *Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni*[8]. The history of the *Historia* is in itself rather complicated. Three of its recensions[9]: the so-called I1[10], I2[11] and I3[12], each of them based on the same text, but containing additional material, are of special importance for the development of the Hebrew *Alexander Romance*.

In general, romance narratives, describing fantastic adventures and incredible stories of heroes and heroines in strange, exotic lands, were quite fashionable in 12th c. Europe and the Jewish culture was no exception. Universal romance stories stemming from different cultural origins (texts[13] such as *King Arthur, Alexander*, *Seven Sages*, *Kalila and Dimna*) were, in this period, adapted and reworked in Jewish culture just as they were in other European cultural milieus. The texts that were reworked or adapted into the body of the Jewish culture were composed in a variety of languages, Arabic, Latin and Italian being of crucial importance. Such a process would take place especially in the places where cross-cultural contracts were the strongest: thus, it is not surprising that the focal point for the creation of Hebrew romances

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[5]   Stoneman 1991: 14-15.
[6]   Edition: von Lauenstein 1962; Engelmann 1963; Parthe 1968.
[7]   Edition: van Thiel 1983.
[8]   Edition: Pfister 1913.
[9]   See Bergmeister 1975.
[10]   Edition: Hilka, Steffens 1979.
[11]   Edition: Hilka, Bergmeister, Grossman 1976-1977.
[12]   Edition: Steffens 1975.
[13]   See Leviant 2003; Epstein *1967;* Derenbourg 1881.

based on universal European and Eastern models were Andalusia, France and Italy. It was in these areas that the secular romance literature, applying universal motifs and adapting them for the use in Jewish cultural contexts was mainly developed.

The question of crucial importance for the present paper is the problem of translation versus addition. Were the Hebrew romances – first of all, the Hebrew Alexander romance narratives – just translations[14], whose place is on the margins of Jewish culture of the period? Can they be treated as literature whose meaning for the Jewish tradition is secondary[15]. That seemed to be the consensus of scholars for quite some time.

It is true that the translation aspect of these works is important: the Jewish authors working on Alexander Romances would use sources in other languages to work their versions. These sources would, as a rule, be translations themselves: Arabic Alexander romances and various recensions of *Historia de preliis*. In addition, one should remember that also other sources – Italian *Alexander Romance* versions and the Old French *Alexander Romance,* as well as motifs from Oriental traditions, chiefly Ethiopian and Syriac – are also sometimes included in the Hebrew Alexander narratives. Translated into Hebrew, they become building blocks of the new text in a new cultural context.

But if one reads the Hebrew Alexander Romances carefully, it seems obvious that even if they were openly based on texts created and existing in other cultural milieus, they were very carefully and painstakingly adapted to suit the culture that had imported and appropriated them. The use of Biblical forms and structures, the geography and history of the world presented, the moral and often also religious values espoused by main characters and the special importance ascribed to the Jews and their God seem to be, to a greater or lesser extent, recurring motifs in the Hebrew Alexander romances. And the reading public, apparently, reacted to it: quite of few of the romances (once again, Alexander stories are very good examples here) have been preserved in various versions and redactions and a relatively large number of manuscripts.

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[14]    See especially Steinschneider 1893.
[15]    Roth 2003: 404.

A fascinating problem is the question of the relationship between the Hebrew *Alexander Romances* and other Jewish Alexander texts and legends, briefly mentioned before. The main point of connection would be the bulk of Alexander's stories in Rabbinic literature, mainly the Talmud and Midrash[16]. These stories are by themselves a diverse collection. Some of them tell the stories known to us from Greek and Roman sources; these stories, however, are often reshaped and reworked (tractate Tamid 31b-32a: Elders of the South, a story replacing Alexander's dispute with Gymnosophists). In other cases the Talmudic version of narratives is a variation of a story known from different Jewish sources (*Megillat Ta'anit* 9, *Yoma* 69a, *Genesis Rabbah* LXI, 7: Alexander's visit to Jerusalem, appearing also in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XI). Yet another set of stories are the narratives shared with a different *Romance* tradition (*Tamid* 32a: Alexander in the land of darkness, the Amazons, Alexander at the gates of paradise, all of which are copiously represented in the *Romance* tradition. Other material shared by the *Romance* and Rabbinic writings consists of the stories of Alexander's ascent into the air[17] and his descent to the bottom of the ocean[18]. The Jewish authors also include some episodes which do not seem to have a direct equivalent either in earlier Jewish Alexander tradition or the general repository of Alexander legends in the *Romance*. Here one should first and foremost include the story of the King Kazia[19], the narrative about the throne of Solomon[20] and the curious episode of transferring the bones of prophet Jeremiah into newly founded Alexandria[21]. It should be stated here that the majority of scholars believe that despite the similarities in stories the existing differences are significant enough to make one believe that the Rabbinic and *Romance* narratives prob-

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[16]   See van Bekkum 1986: 218-226.

[17]   *Avoda Zarah* III, 1, 42c, *Numbers Rabbah* 13, 4, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 11, 28b-29a, *Yalkut Shimoni* to 1 Kings, 18

[18]   *Midrash Tehilim* Ps. 93, 5, *Yalkut Shimoni* Ps. 93, 848, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 11, 28b-29a, *Yalkut Shimoni* to 1 Kings, 18.

[19]   *Baba Mezia* II, 5, 8c; *Genesis Rabbah* 33, 1; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 9, 24; *Leviticus Rabbah* 27, 1; *Midrash Tanhuma* Emor 6, *Yalkut Shimoni* Ps. 36, 727.

[20]   *Targum Sheni* I, 2

[21]   The foundation of Alexandria, snakes and the bones of Jeremiah: Midrash Haggadah Numbers, 30, 15;

ably share the same (oral) sources rather than be the direct ancestor (Rabbinic texts) or descendant (*Romances*).

## HEBREW *ALEXANDER ROMANCES*: AN OVERVIEW

Despite having certain common features, Hebrew *Alexander Romances* are a diverse collection of texts and the interrelations between the texts are often quite complicated. In an attempt to classify the existing texts (or the ones which are kown to have existed), S. Dönitz[22] divided the Hebrew *Romance* tradition into four main groups[23].

Type 1 includes translations from various redactions of Greek *Alexander Romance* or from its translations into other languages, mainly Arabic. Preserved texts are MSS Héb. 671.5 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 145, Jews' College, London and Heb. 1087, Biblioteca I.B. de Rossi, Parma. Type 2 is represented by Cod. Heb. 750.3 (Jacob Bonfils' *Sefer Toledot Alexandros Ha-Maḳdoni*), Paris and by the lost MS from Turin; based on a number of sources and composed by authors aware of their aims, carefully choosing episodes and designing their work (Jacob Bonfils, the known author of one of these *Romances*, was a great Jewish intellectual of the period), these are easily readable and usually better written than other recensions. Type 3 stresses the fairytale and exotic motifs (MSS Heb. D.11 Bodleian Oxford, 53, Estense Library, Modena and the lost MS Damascus); this group of *Romance* texts emphasizes also Jewish elements in the narrative, which results in numerous reworkings of the story and its main motifs in order to suit the Jewish culture better. Type 4, represented only by one short fragment (MS Codex Hebr. 419XX, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) is not relevant to the present argument.

The overlong introductory part of the present paper has an aim: it is meant to point at both the complicated state of the material's form and preservation and to signal a number of key concepts, crucial to researching the Jewish Alexander material. Among these the principal

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[22]   Dönitz 2011: 30.

[23]   Main editions are listed separately in the Bibliography section of the present paper.

problem is the placement of Hebrew *Alexander Romances* within two traditions: the Jewish legendary material on Alexander and the general circle of world Alexander literature of the period. These problems cannot be avoided when one takes into account a complicated and fascinating case of received and reworked motif: the story of Gog and Magog in Hebrew Alexander narratives.

## THE GOG, THE MAGOG, THE KING AND HIS GATE

Among often mentioned and not yet clearly understood Biblical characters Gog and Magog clearly stand out. These figures/names have an interesting history[24] and are known from a number of Hebrew Bible places[25], appearing also in additional loci in LXX[26]. To the general reader and to the generations of Christians they are, of course, known mainly from the Book of Revelations[27], but the biblical sources are not the only ones in which the Gog and Magog appear. Quite the contrary: they are present in a number of Jewish literary works from the Second Temple period: the Book of Jubilees[28], the Sibylline Oracles[29], 1

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[24]   On Ezechiel's vision of Gog and Magog and its reinterpretations in Jewish and Christian tradition see especially Bøe 2001.

[25]   Gog and Magog: Gen 10:2, Magog only *(The descendants of Japheth*: *Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras*); Ezechiel 38:1-4, *Gog of the land of Magog (The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. Prophesy against him and say: Thus says the Lord God: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; I will turn you around and put hooks into your jaws, and I will lead you out with all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great company, all of them with shield and buckler, wielding swords*.

[26]   See Bøe 2001, on the placement of the two in Amos (p. 61-70) and the LXX version of Ezechiel (pp. 133-135).

[27]   *Revelations* 20:7-9 (*When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them*).

[28]   Book of Jubilees 7,9.

[29]   *Sibylline Oracles* 3, 319 and 3, 512.

Enoch, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*[30] and Josephus, together with some Qumranic texts[31] and the Targumim[32].

The history of Gog and Magog is fragmentary and complicated to the point that it is difficult to state what they really are. Are they persons? Two people, or possibly one person (Gog) from a specific land (Magog)? But at the same time some sources would indicate that they (or, at least, Gog) are not a person, but a tribe/nation?

Luckily, in the narrower context of the Alexander legends it is slightly easier to define Gog and Magog. Namely, their importance should be linked with associating them with the Unclean Nations and the broader narrative concerning the Gate of Alexander.

The story told in the γ recension of the *Romance* mentions Alexander's encounter with a group of bestial tribes, engaging in a number of non-human, non-civilized activities: committing atrocities, engaging in cannibalism, deprived of the blessings of civilization. In order to avoid spreading their corruption to the wide world, Alexander has them enclosed within the walls and the gate he had built, with God's help, between two mountains called Breasts of the North.

The Gate of Alexander was made to be unbreakable. However, in some versions of the Alexander legends (in the *Romance* or otherwise) it will stand only until the end of days would draw near. Then, as a part of the final eschatological conflict between the forces of God and Satanic leagues, Gog and Magog would be freed from beyond the gate and be ready to wreak havoc in the world. The Gate serves thus as a motif (one of a number) connecting Alexander with the eschatological, the apocalyptic and the end of days.

Already in the γ recension of the *Romance* the story has a rather noticeable apocalyptic character and its Biblical connotations, linking the Gate narrative with the aforementioned Gog and Magog. The combination of the two narratives became a prevalent theme in European Alexander literature. It should be interesting to observe how (and also: if) the same association works in Jewish traditions.

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[30]   *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 4,2. On the interpretation of the presence of Magog in LAB see Jacobson 1996.
[31]   Bøe 2001: 159-181.
[32]   Ibid.: 189-198.

## ALEXANDER THE MONSTER-SLAYER

The association of Alexander with defeating all kinds of dangerous monsters – a heroic activity *par excellence*[33] – is mentioned throughout the ancient sources on the conqueror, with episodes presenting such activity of the king set at various stages of his conquest. However, for the Jewish tradition (and, conversely, also for the Christian one) Alexander as the conqueror of evil is crucial mostly due to his association with the Unclean Nations and the Gate of Alexander.

The motif of Alexander building the gate at the end of the world to stop the Unclean Nations, Gog and Magog among them, from spreading their corruption into the world, is very common in numerous *Romance* narratives. It is interesting to ask, however, which parts of the set of associations, connecting (1) Alexander with the gate built against the (2) Unclean Nations, Gog and Magog among them and (3) the end of days, when the gate would be finally breached, are really strongly present in Hebrew *Romance* traditions.

The answer, as we would see, is quite surprising. It would seem that while the story of the Gate of Alexander is predictably rather important, the motif of the Gog and Magog and their association with the Gate cannot be really taken for granted in Jewish tradition.

The case of the Hebrew *Romances* is rather intriguing as far as the motif of the Gate and of Gog and Magog is concerned. As was mentioned previously, the association of Alexander with the iron gate built somewhere at the supposed end of the world is present already in Josephus, who mentions Alexander building a gate and associates the region of the gate's placement with the territory of the Alans[34]. Josephus' account on the story seems realistic and as non-symbolic and non-allegorical as possible, stressing the (alleged) historicity of the events. It is worth mentioning here – not only because his realistic approach may

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[33]   Stoneman 2008: 171-172.

[34]   Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, VII, 244-245 (Whiston VII, 7, 4): τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἀλανῶν ἔθνος ὅτι μέν εἰσι Σκύθαι περὶ τὸν Τάναϊν καὶ τὴν Μαιῶτιν λίμνην κατοικοῦντες, πρότερόν που δεδηλώκαμεν. κατὰ τούτους δὲ τοὺς χρόνους διανοηθέντες εἰς τὴν Μηδίαν καὶ προσωτέρω ταύτης ἔτι καθ᾽ ἁρπαγὴν ἐμβαλεῖν τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Ὑρκανῶν διαλέγονται· τῆς παρόδου γὰρ οὗτος δεσπότης ἐστίν, ἣν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος πύλαις σιδηραῖς κλειστὴν ἐποίησε.

be crucial for the development of some *Romance* versions, but mainly due to the fact that his narrative shows how early (1ˢᵗ c. CE) the story of the Gate of Alexander was already present in the Jewish tradition.

The same story of the gate of Alexander also appears in some of the Hebrew versions of the *Alexander Romance*, although it is quite probable that the general inspiration for its placement there were the model versions of the *Romance* rather than the Jewish Josephus narrative. However, it is rather surprising to notice that the apocalyptic associations are nearly absent from these particular renditions of the *Romance* and that the Gog and Magog connotations are not a part of the story in its Jewish versions.

Let us start with a rather surprising fact: however strange that sounds, the most atypical of the *Hebrew Romance* versions, that is the type 3 narratives, do not elaborate on the Gog and Magog/ Gate of Alexander motifs. These texts, quite peculiar and very original in their selection of Alexander material, abound in fantastic elements and motifs; however, the story of the gate of Alexander has not been included here. It would be difficult to speculate as to why it is so, but the fact remains: unlike in a number of other Jewish Alexander Romances, those included in the type 3 group do not use this particular motif.

The case is quite different with other *Romances,* where several motifs associated with themes of the Gate and Gog and Magog are expounded on.

The placement of the episode within the larger narrative frame in *Sefer Toledot Aleksandros ha-Makdoni* connects the episode with Alexander's Persian triumphs. His conflict with the peoples of Hyrcania and Milyas (Lycia and Caria?) is preceded by the marriage to Roxane and ascension to the Persian throne. In the London[35] and Paris[36] manuscripts, conversely, Alexander encounters the Unclean Nations having marched to the extreme east regions of the world. The associations here are rather meaningful: the realistic (as much as possible) setting in Bonfils is typical for his way of telling Alexander's story, while the placing of the episode at the farthest reaches of the earth in MSS Paris

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[35]    MS London, 36.
[36]    MS Paris 260a.

and London stresses the association of the story with the exotic, strange and unpredictable: we are firmly on the fairytale/legend territory here.

The Unclean Nations are, quite predictably, characterized as alien and uncivilized. In *Sefer Toledot,* they are creatures incurring hate and distrust. They use black magic and are quite skilful with it. Their main transgressions, however, have to do with breaching Jewish rules of purity. The Unclean Nations eat things forbidden to the Jews, resorting often to cannibalism, and they do not practice the burial of the dead. As is often the case in such narratives, their despicable habits and horrible way of life do not detract from their fighting skills: they are dangerous enemies and fighting them costs Macedonians a great deal and only thanks to personal appeal and involvement of Alexander the Macedonian army manages to defeat them.

In the MSS London and Paris Alexander on his way to the end of the world encounters more and more strange nations, until finally he meets the extreme ones: the Unclean Nations, with their uncivilized way of life and dietary habits once again described in the way concentrating on their impure aspects. The military aspect of their presence is suppressed here: having encountered them, Alexander on impulse decides to kill them all, only later changing his mind.

The crucial motif of the story is the aftermath of the battle/Alexander's change of heart concerning the fate of the Unclean Nations. In *Sefer Toledot*, the king gathers them together with their families and then leads them to the valley in far north. There  a construction is erected on Alexander's order, resistant to iron and fire and additionally strengthened with a magical component called *absinthium*. The gate is placed between two mountains and there the king imprisons the Unclean Nations. They cannot get out and go beyond the gate: keeping them inside seems to be the main function of the gate[37].

The narrative is slightly different in MSS Paris and MSS London. In both these versions Alexander demands that the Unclean Nations should be placed in a valley between two great mountains, called, in both cases, Promuntorium and Boreum; the latter name recalls the name of the mountains in the Gog and Magog episode (these are known

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[37]    Kazis 1962: 114: *the people who were locked there would not be able to get out nor would others be able to get in*.

as μαζοὶ βορρᾶ or *ubera Aquilonis*, 'breasts of the North'). When the enemies of Alexander are placed there, the king prays to God: the texts state quite clearly that the mountains are separated from each other and that the distance separating them is great; it would take divine intervention to close the gap. God intervenes and the mountains come closer together, with only 12 miles separating them now. Only then could Alexander order the preparation of a special mix of metals be pored into in the divide and to enclose the Unclean Nations beyond an ever-resistant, unbreakable barrier.

When one looks into the versions of this episode in Sefer Toledot and in MSS London and Paris, two facts become obvious. Firstly, while the Gate of Alexander narrative features in all the aforementioned narratives, it is not associated with the Gog and Magog story. Secondly, and even more surprisingly, the Gate of Alexander narrative in both cases analysed above is practically deprived of any associations with the eschatological and the mysterious. Eschatological speculations are absent from the scene in *Sefer Toledot*, where the story of the Gate of Alexander appears rationalized and historicized. In the passage from Sefer Toledot, Alexander has no qualities of a visionary or a man of God; he is only a skilful, dedicated and talented commander and politician. Even his aims are political: he is worried that the evil of the Unclean People might spread to his own lands and, as a leader, he decided to attack to prevent that. His actions against the Unclean Nations is a typical military conquest: after a difficult war he defeats them in battle and then relocates them according to his will. Later on, he himself, as befits the king, decided to build a wall to enclose them.

We have a rather different Alexander in MSS Paris and London. Firstly, the role of God and the miraculous and religious aspects of the story are stressed. This time, without divine intervention it would not be possible to close the gap between the mountains. Alexander's abhorrence of the Unclean Nations is also described in a slightly different way: the political concerns are absent here and the king's motifs are less clearly delineated. Instead, the fantastic element is more pronounced.

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