

The Rising of Canopus, the Septuagint, and The Encounter Between Shimon the Just and Antiochus the Great

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The ancients advanced several arguments for Earth being spherical rather than flat. Enumerating them, Aristotle in *De Caelo* states that the masts of ships disappeared from view on the horizon later than the body of the ship, and he adds that the Earth is spherical in the South-North direction since the appearance of the starry sky varies at different latitudes. These ideas, known to the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, are at the bottom of the following story, which occupies a special place in Jewish history – a tale about an encounter of Alexander the Great with the Jewish nation.

That story has been a stumbling block for historians. Different names given for the Jewish high priest (Shimon the Just in the Talmudic version, or Jaddua in Josephus) already were the cause of some embarrassment. Still, all of the historians, from Isaac Newton to Heinrich Graetz and modern writers, preferred Josephus' version rather than the Talmudic one. In 1924, Solomon Zeitlin reversed the picture, suggesting that the true story is about the surrender of Jerusalem to Antiochus the Great in 199 BC by the high priest Shimon II. Though Zeitlin's arguments were fully convincing, his version did not obtain any recognition. Besides, some questions remained open; in particular, the Alexander option was not entirely discarded. We advance Zeitlin's claim several steps further. The completion and publishing of the Septuagint, the first Greek version of the Bible, is key in explaining the most fabulous detail of the encounter, the "recognition" of the high priest by the king. With that, Alexander must leave the scene. Considered anew, several Talmudic remarks provide a clearer picture of the encounter. The reference to a statue that held a ball likely refers to Urania, muse of astronomy, and supports the later, Antiochus version. Though a subtle reference to the visibility of Canopus, the second brightest star in the Mediterranean sky, cannot be a decisive argument in favor of Antiochus' version, it provides a more precise time for the king's arrival in Jerusalem. The encounter likely occurred at Har ha-Tsofim, north of Jerusalem, around Yom Kippur time.