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Sefer Yosippon: Reevaluations *

I wish today to bring some thoughts for discussion about *Sefer Yosippon*, that seminal history of Second Temple Jews whose influence on Jews and Christians for the past millennium has been monumental. Indeed scholarship since the Renaissance has interpreted the book as ranging from fabula to history.¹ I assume you are all aware of this important contribution to history and literature and hope you have enjoyed it on a sleepless night or, as the Nobelist Shai Agnon advised, on a Sabbath rest period.

My first point is the tale of Zepho ben Eliphaz, a cousin of Joseph the vizier of Egypt whose own career is outlined in the Book of Genesis. Zepho, as *Yosippon* relates it, was captured by Joseph during the Battle of the Makhpeleh between the sons of Esau and the sons of Jacob when Joseph went to Hebron to bury his father Jacob and subsequently was imprisoned in Egypt. Later he escaped, fled to Aeneas in Carthage, made a career as general to Aeneas, then went to Rome where he became the first divine king of the Romans and was renamed Janus and Saturninus for his Herculean exploits. Thus a brief outline of his *Yosippon* career. A full-fledged biography of Zepho was written in the 11th century by an unknown author in his lengthy rewriting of Genesis through Judges known as *Sefer ha-Yašar*, also a product of Southern Italy.²

To return to *Sefer Yosippon*, the anonymous author has given us what we now call a Foundation Text of immeasurable influence. He was quite familiar

* This is a slightly updated version of the paper delivered at a conference in Bari in 2012, called to honor our colleague Cesare Colafemmina, dean of research on southern Italian Jews and teacher, devoted husband and father, commemorating his recent departure to the *yešivah šel ma'alah*. We wish his spirit well; we shall continue to be honored by his memory, his congeniality, his hospitality, and his scholarship.

¹ See Azariah de' Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes*, translated and annotated by J. Weinberg, Yale U.P. 2001; and A. Grafton and J. Weinberg, "I have always loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship, Harvard U.P. 2011.

² As argued by Peter Lehnhardt and Meir Bar Ilan. My thanks to Professor Bar Ilan for an advance copy of his recent paper that substantiates this argument.

with the Aeneid, Virgil's incomparable foundation text to enhance the divine Octavian Augustus and his Julian House descended from the goddess Venus. *Sefer Yosippon* adopted Virgil's thesis but adapted it to a descendent of Isaac (Zepho replacing Hercules) thus making Isaac the ancestor of Rome's greatness. This effort then is a reappropriation of Israel's past, which Christianity had arrogated in its self-designation as *Verus Israel* via a counter appropriation of the signal text of ancient Rome's mythological ancestry. Too many scholars have missed the point of this brilliant polemic by critiquing the facts of the story rather than what I understand as the intent of the author.

Sefer Yosippon by this reinterpretation of the Zepho saga antedates the 11th-century *Megillat Ahima'as*, recently reedited and translated by Reuben Bonfil, as a foundation text.³ The latter claims the transfer of Babylonian tradition to southern Italy to Oria, the seat of Ahima'as's ancestors. It also antedates, the 12th-century foundation text of David ibn Daud in his *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, which mythologizes the *translatio* of Babylonian traditions via south Italian Jewish scholars to Spain and North Africa.⁴

In other words, we have three seminal foundation texts of the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries that describe via a new midrashic style of semi mythology, the translation of Israel's origins and learning to Italy. Indeed there is a fourth, namely Eliezer of Worms who records the translation of the Babylonian sage Abu Aaron's wisdom (*sod ha-tefillah*) and *qabbalah* to the Rhineland.⁵ Along with *Sefer Yosippon* and the Talmud and the Tanakh, these four texts and traditions became the foundational texts for Ashkenazi intellectual history and identity.

I will not dwell too much on the question of date for *Sefer Yosippon*. David Flusser, its modern editor, found in a late manuscript a copyists scribal colophon date of 885 years after the destruction of the Second Temple, that is 953 CE, and claimed the book was completed in that year.⁶ Reuben Bonfil coun-

³ R. Bonfil, *History and Folklore in a Medieval Jewish Chronicle: The Family Chronicle of Ahima'az ben Paltiel*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2009 (see my review in *Speculum*, July, 2012).

⁴ G. Cohen (ed. and tr.), *A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition (Sefer Ha-Qabbalah) by Abraham ibn Daud*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1967. See now K. Vehlow (ed.), *Abraham Ibn Daud's Dorot 'Olam (Generations of the Ages): A Critical Edition and Translation of Zikhron Divrey Romi, Divrey Malkhey Yisra'el and the Midrash on Zechariah*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2013.

⁵ One might question the relationship of the recent *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon* and Eliezer's tradition about Abu Aaron. See R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*, Yale U.P. 1998, 192-193.

⁶ See S. Bowman, "Dates in *Sefer Yosippon*", in J.C. Reeves, J. Kampen (eds.), *Pursuing the Text: Studies in Honor of Ben Zion Wacholder on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, Shef-

tered in his review of Flusser's edition, and subsequently in numerous venues, that *Sefer Yosippon* was a product of the latter 9th century since it did not evince any trace of the Talmud which he claimed was ubiquitous in southern Italy in the 10th century. Shulamith Sela, in her study of the Arabic *Yosippon*, took the middle ground and suggested an early 10th-century date.⁷ Basically then we have a two generation spread that cannot be overcome, albeit the scholarship will fill several pages in my monograph on *Sefer Yosippon* currently in progress.

The place of composition is more debatable. Flusser suggested Napoli, based on the library of Duke Sergius located there.⁸ Our colleague Cesare Colafemina opted for Bari during our initial meeting, some years ago, and so honored its medieval reputation as a center of scholarship: "From Bari shall go forth the Torah, and the Word of the Lord from Otranto." Any other site or even multiple sites could have hosted the author as he traveled along the Via Appia. I would like to suggest one of a few northern sites that he might have visited or at least had intercourse with those who did. Yitzhak Baer, in his seminal article on *Sefer Yosippon*,⁹ identified a number of sources that the author used, including Macrobius, the Dream of Scipio, and other ancient texts including Hieronymus, Josephus, and Pseudo Hegesippus. All of these treatises were available in the great library – over 700 mss. – of the monastery of Bobbio situated in Piacenza in northern Italy, from which copies of numerous mss. were dispersed throughout the monastic and papal libraries of Italy. Question: could our author have read in this great collection?

That is to ask: could Jews have had entry to medieval monastic libraries? Could they have gained entrance as itinerant scholars or, as Flusser suggested, could a visiting doctor have taken his leisure in a gentile library when on a medical visit? Frankly I have not found a satisfactory answer to this question. Perhaps the yeshivoth in Apulia could have ordered copies for their libraries, a not impossible suggestion for which there is no textual support however. Yet the author of *Sefer Yosippon* did have access to the *Aeneid* and to Orosius among his other sources, as well as Pseudo Hegesippus, his major source for Herod and the final revolt against Rome. Moreover, the 11th-

field Academic Press 1994, 349-359. Destruction Era dating is a signal feature of south Italian epitaphs, although it was already in use in Late Antique Palestine.

⁷ S. Sela, *The Arabic Josippon*, 2 vols., Ben-Zvi Institute - Hebrew University of Jerusalem - Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Jerusalem - Tel Aviv 2009.

⁸ D. Flusser, "Josippon, a Medieval Hebrew Version of Josephus", in L.H. Feldman, G. Hata (eds.), *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, Wayne State U.P. 1987, 393.

⁹ Y.F. Baer, "Sefer Yosipon ha-'ivri", in Y.F. Baer *et al.* (eds.), *Sefer Dinaburg*, Kiryat Sefer, Jerusalem 1948-49, 178-205 [Hebrew].

century interpolation of Alexander Romance was translated into Hebrew from a very early Greek manuscript.¹⁰ Closer in time to *Sefer Yosippon* is the polymath Shabbatai Donnolo, whose access to Byzantine scientific, medical, and other works is well attested.¹¹

Secondly, the first chapter of *Sefer Yosippon* is a rewriting of the family of nations from Genesis chapter 10, which became a central theme continually updated in Jewish historiography: Book of Chronicles, Josephus Flavius, *Sefer Yosippon*, and Joseph ha-Cohen's 16th-century chronicle of the Frankish and Ottoman empires. A close reading of the peoples, identified as the author's contemporary period suggests someone familiar with the trade routes of Slovenia, Croatia, Albania which had long been the scene of Roman settlement and, as we hear from our Israeli colleagues, Jewish communities as well.¹² Did our author vacation there or was he, or his sources, conversant with the merchants, e.g., the Radaniyyah whose overland route traversed the Balkans, or others who frequented the provinces of the former Yoke of the Slavs?

The third point of my talk is to note the two heroes of the Maccabean period: Matitiyahu Hasmoneus and Judah Maccabeus. I begin with the second since he is better known. *Sefer Yosippon* gives us two portraits of Judah. First as a great fighter and leader, a *mešiah milḥamah*, that is an anointed warlord. Why a *mešiah milḥamah*? Because his father, a priest who was anointed as were all priests since Aaron, anointed him a warlord. Josephus too was an anointed warlord, as *Sefer Yosippon* reminds us, and that may be a subtle polemic against his contemporary Christianity, which had its own anointed lord or in Latin – and Greek of course – Christus, the anointed by God as *Rex Iudaeorum*. I will not push this possibility; however, I would emphasize that one cannot be too sure about this creative author who was quite influenced by the Bible's varied styles and rhetorical tropes, perhaps especially the sardonic wit of the book of Judges.¹³

Judah is also portrayed as a diplomat of the first order both in his dealings with the Macedonian generals sent by Antiochus from Damascus and later by his treaty of friendship and mutual aid with Rome. While based on

¹⁰ See discussion and bibliography in S. Bowman, "Alexander and the Mysteries of India," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 2 (1999) 71-111.

¹¹ See P. Mancuso, *Shabbatai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni: Introduction, Critical Text, and Annotated English Translation*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2010, 35-40 and *passim*.

¹² See now M. Toch, *The Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2013, Appendices I and II.

¹³ Cf. S. Bowman, "Sefer Yosippon: History and Midrash," in M. Fishbane (ed.), *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, State University of New York, Albany 1993, 280-294.

Josephus's documents, nonetheless the author of *Sefer Yosippon* emphasized them in true Middle Eastern hyperbole style to show Judah to be the equal of Rome or at least the power broker in the eastern Mediterranean.

Matityahu, his father, is more interesting however. As *Sefer Yosippon* pangenryzes him: He was the one to raise the flag of revolt; and he was the one who authorized the Hasidim to fight in self-defense on the Sabbath and also promised martyrdom to the fighters and loyal sacrificers to the Torah. But more interesting for future generations he was the one who uttered in his clarion call for revolt: *lo' namuṭ ke-šo'n la-tevah yuval* – We shall not die like sheep led to slaughter. This clarion call, a conjoining of two separate verses from the Bible – following biblical and contemporary Byzantine style – was evidently a unique construction of the author of *Sefer Yosippon*, since it is not so attested in earlier sources. This call was to resound in Jewish ears for the next millennium and indeed was to see its latest incarnation in the wartime career of Abba Kovner who repeated it on New Year's eve of 1942 in Kovno whence it became a cry of Jewish partisans through the remainder of the war before its inverse emerged as an insult to the victims of the Holocaust.¹⁴

Let us move to Herod, the monster of Christian tradition and a ruler whose career should have attracted a Shakespearean tragedy, let alone the supposed ridicule of Augustus, as preserved by Macrobius, who quipped that he preferred to be Herod's pig rather than his son. But there is in the Herod saga of *Sefer Yosippon* a hint of something different that I would like to tease out as I explore the vicissitudes of this paranoia prone ruler.

A brief summary is in order. Herod began his rule as governor in the Galilee appointed by his father Antipater, the major domus of Hyrcanus, the king and high priest of Jerusalem. Herod was as ruthless as any native Idumaeon and proved himself an excellent policeman, being enriched by the grateful Greeks of Syria whom he saved from the ravages of Hezekiah, the Galilean rebel.¹⁵ Herod befriended the Romans who appreciated his role and also honored his father who had served them and Hyrcanus well. Herod was crowned king by the Roman triumvirate and returned from Rome with full Roman support. Herod emptied his treasury to save his people from starvation. He defeated all his enemies, the Arabs by force, Cleopatra by guile. He murdered all his suspected enemies including the last of the Hasmoneans. Then he built, *inter alia*, a new and magnificent Temple after receiving permission

¹⁴ Y. Feldman, S. Bowman, "Let Us Not Die as Sheep led to the Slaughter," *Haaretz Literary Supplement*, December 7 2007, 4.

¹⁵ For a revised view of Hezekiah, see I. Ben-Shalom, *The School of Shammai and the Zealots' Struggle against Rome*, Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi Press - Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, Jerusalem - Beer-Sheva 1993 [Hebrew].

from the priests to destroy the ramshackle altar and buildings built over the past 5 centuries. Finally he died at the age of 70, much to the relief of the leading men whom he ordered to be killed after his death so that the people would be mourning at the right time.

I would ask after this too short summary: what does it bring to mind? Is there a biblical parallel? We can see that *Sefer Yosippon* follows fairly closely the biography of Nicholas of Damascus rewritten by Josephus and Pseudo-Hegesippus. The question that concerns me is: Did Nicholas read the books of Samuel and Kings in his composition of the biography of Herod? Did the author of *Sefer Yosippon* recall the glorious period of Israel's empire under David and Solomon when he was working on a translation of Pseudo Hegesippus and Josephus for his Herod chapters? David was a great conqueror, Solomon a great builder of fortresses and a Temple. David too died at 70. All three were kings; two were anointed, the third was crowned. All three were recognized by their followers as messiahs! Indeed the later Christian heresiologists counted Herod a messiah among the Herodian party.¹⁶ And does Herod's Praetorian Guard of Gauls parallel David's Praetorian Guard of Philistines and Cretans? It is beginning to look suspicious, although suspicion like parallelism is to be treated with caution.

From another perspective, *Sefer Yosippon* has written a nationalistically charged history of the Second Temple period replete with oversized heroes, all of whom appear in the sources but without the rhetorically charged emotionally rich drama of *Sefer Yosippon*. Can this be seen as a continuation of the polemical hints we have suggested already? The polemic would be more subtly aimed at the Church.¹⁷ Overtly hostile to the Jews and Judaism, despite occasional mutual respect due to personal relationships as recorded by Aḥima'āš, nonetheless there was no love lost between the Greeks, the Latins, and the Jews. Hence *Sefer Yosippon* may be responding in the medium of the new Hebrew style and the new narrative source he had discovered to this hostility by producing a most readable response to the inferior position that Jews experienced among Christians of whatever persuasion. His super nationalism, even in recording the greatest disaster of the Jewish people – the destruction of the Temple, so central to his story, and the slaughter of his ancestors, is full of pride; yet his antagonism is muted. He follows Josephus's

¹⁶ See S. Bowman, "Aqedah and Mashiah in *Sepher Yosippon*," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 2 (2008) 21-43 for references.

¹⁷ Here I would note the chapter on Paulina, the Roman matron seduced by a champion charioteer, a *Sefer Yosippon update of his sources* [chap. 57 in Flusser's edition]. Pseudo Hegesippus had already alluded to Mary in his text which the author further emphasized for his Hebrew readers.

apology and praises Titus who acts so cruelly out of the necessity of war and who regrets the destruction of Temple, a rare thing among the superstitious Romans.¹⁸

And for my last point, Masada. *Sefer Yosippon* translates the bold Middle Platonic speech of the Zealot priest Eliezer ben Yair urging his loyal and fanatic followers to kill their wives and children, to burn their supplies, and finally to kill each other as a final victory over the Romans who would find no booty to sate their lust and cruelty. Interestingly, these points are precisely the same that the Greek polis commanded its citizens to enact lest they be captured and enslaved by the enemy. To the Greeks, slavery was a fate worse than death and suicide was promoted to avoid such a fate.¹⁹ Josephus may well have chosen this ending for Masada based on the traditions of the barbarians and the Greeks who did so, thus cheating their enemy of the victory and its rewards. He expands the fate of his Yodapat officers to a community wide potlatch to bring glory to the last defenders of Jewish freedom.

Sefer Yosippon, moreover, in repeating the brilliant speech of Eliezer in Neoplatonic garb, thus becomes the first medium to introduce Neoplatonic rhetoric into Hebrew literature. But he has his heroes – whom he calls bandits after Josephus – fight to the death after killing their families and firing their supplies, a heroic end indeed.

The shorter of two manuscript endings to *Sefer Yosippon* reads:

When the morning came, they took their wives and their sons and their daughters and slaughtered them on the ground, and put them in the cisterns, and threw soil upon them. After that the men went forth from the city and engaged in fighting with the Roman camp, and they killed many of them without number. So the Jews fought until all of them were finished in the battle, and they died for God and His Sanctuary.

There is no attempt here by the text to ask for praise from the Romans as did the apologist Josephus but rather to show heroism to his Jewish readers who had suffered persecution under Basil I and later Romanos Lekapenos and who had been sacked and enslaved by Sicilian Muslims at the beginning of the tenth century (whichever of these periods was apropos to the actual date of the text whether 9th or 10th centuries). And his readers would have re-

¹⁸ Only the Druids were proscribed by the Romans.

¹⁹ Jacob Burkhardt has a powerful chapter on suicide in ancient Greek tradition in his *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. O. Murray, tr. S. Stern, St. Martin's Griffin, New York 1999.

called the fate of the Jewish center of Bari and the murder of the Ten Martyrs as recorded by Yerahme'el ben Šelomoh in *Sefer Zikronot*.²⁰

So we suggest then that *Sefer Yosippon* has in addition to its historical methodology, to its literary innovations and brilliant style unique in its time, a possible polemical response to the vicissitudes of the Jews in southern Italy during the several generations following the Byzantine persecutions in southern Italy. History as apology has been part of the Jewish argument since the Hellenistic period, and as polemic since the Bible itself. In addition we should appreciate the creative effect of its several foundational tales on later generations who took up the challenge – unsuccessfully in many instances – and interpolated many expansions into the text nearly destroying but definitely crippling this medieval masterpiece until its pristine message and arguments were restored from the study and scientific edition of its manuscripts. In conclusion, we may then add polemic to the list of characteristics attributed to *Sefer Yosippon* which became one of the best loved texts to emerge from the renaissance of Hebrew literature in southern Italy.

²⁰ E. Yassif (ed.), *The Book of Memory that is The Chronicles of Jerahme'el*, Tel Aviv U.P. 2001.