

4.00 - 4.30 Steven Bowman, University of Cincinnati
Foundational Tales and Polemic in Sepher Yosippon

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The recognition of the Foundation Tale in Sefer Haqabbalah by Gershon Cohen opened a new perspective on medieval Jewish stories. Scholars were already familiar with foundation tales, earlier studied as myths by Classicists, and later by scholars of Christianity. The claim by Rome to a dual apostolic foundation was early accepted by Christian leaders to recognize the bishop of Rome as the *primus inter pares*. Interestingly it was parodied by Italian Jews in their rewriting of Peter's career not as the rock of Christianity but rather as a plant by the rabbis to keep the Christians away from the Jews by becoming the first bishop of Rome, secreting himself in a tower appearing only once a year, and writing piyyutim for these new messianists.

Israel Yuval begins his paper "Shared Myths, Common Language"¹ with the Donatio Constantini which laid the foundation for the control of the papal estates. Even the exposure by Lorenzo Valla of the Donation as a pious fraud written during the Carolingian period did not end papal control until the unification of Italy restricted the papacy to the Vatican enclave it still controls. Yuval then expands this reference with a discussion of "The Legend of Sylvester" who served as pope during Constantine's reign. Included in the latter are the stories of Constantine's leprosy, Helena's conversion (possibly a rewriting of Elijah's victory over the priests of Ba'al), and Sylvester's victory over the dragon who terrorized Rome. Yuval then compares these stories with the Talmudic tale of Yohanan ben Zakkai's founding of Yavneh, a fascinating exercise with echoes of Daniel's victory over the dragon in the Septuagint's additions to Esther that unfortunately would deter us from the main theme of our paper.

However, true to the theme of this workshop, Yuval compares these two tales to the later medieval version of Josephus's prophecy to Vespasian and later two

¹ The "Other" as Threat: Demonization and Antisemitism. Discussion Papers presented in Jerusalem, 12-15, 1995, pp. 255 ff.

versions of Josephus's sage advice to Titus to help his recovery from the ill effects of the latter's joy upon hearing news of Vespasian's becoming ruler of the empire.²

But to return to medieval foundation tales, there are four that became central to the identity of Ashkenazi Jews, albeit not all were written in the Rhineland. Abraham ibn Daud relates the tale of the spread of Talmudic learning from southern Italy through his story of the four captives captured by pirates and redeemed throughout the Mediterranean Jewish centers. Most recently Reuven Bonfil argued in his new edition of *Megillat Ahima'az* that the author recorded several foundation tales in his family scroll that announced the transfer of Babylonian traditions and wisdom to Oria through the arrival of a scion of the exilarchal family, Abu Aaron. Among the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, the kabbalists relied on the tradition that Abu Aaron taught the *sod hatephilot* to these descendents of the Byzantine scholars of southern Italy.

But it is the fourth of these foundation texts that shall occupy us for the bulk of this paper, that is *Sepher Yosippon* and in particular the tale of Zepho ben Eliphaz, Zepho, whose name is always Zepho and not ever Zepher or Zopher as David Flusser read in one manuscript and Shulamit Sela extensively explored in 19th-century scholarship. That manuscript, now in the Siphriah Leumith in Jerusalem, is the culprit that misled both of these students of *Sepher Yosippon*. Last summer I had the opportunity to examine the manuscript again and was able to correct this misreading which appears in the photographic reproduction of the manuscript that Flusser prepared for his students. Indeed, there are two pinholes in the manuscript, a nasty trick by some creature, that make the *vav* of Zepho appear as a *resh* and a rather strange *resh* that differs from other appearances of that letter in the manuscript. I believe this observation will finally lay that discussion to rest.

To rehearse the tale of Zepho, a cousin of Joseph the vizier of Egypt during the biblical period, he was captured by Joseph during the Battle of the Makhpelah when Joseph went to Hebron to bury his father Jacob, brought back to Egypt and imprisoned. Later he escaped, fled to Agneas (i.e., Aeneas) in Carthage, had a

² In the 13th-century *Sachsenspiegel* and the earlier *Historia Miscella* of Landulphus Sagax [ca. 1100].

successful career as Agneas's general, then went to Rome where he eventually became the first divine king of the Romans, and was renamed Janus and Saturnus. Based on this brief outline of Zepho in Yosippon, 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 Sepher Hayashar, recently identified as a product of southern Italy based on its Hebrew style and its literary sources.³

To return to Sepher Yosippon, the anonymous author has given us a foundation tale of immeasurable influence. He was quite familiar with the Aeneid, Virgil's incomparable foundation text to enhance the divine Octavian Augustus and his Julian house. Sepher Yosippon adopts Virgil's thesis and applied it to a descendent of Isaac, thus making the patriarch the ancestor of Rome's greatness. This effort is a reappropriation of Israel's past which Christianity had arrogated to its self designation as Verus Israel via a counter appropriation of the signal text of ancient Rome's mythological ancestry. A brilliant polemic indeed.

Sepher Yosippon by this interpretation antedates the 11th-century Megillat Ahima'az, in which, as noted above, Bonfil identified the transfer of Babylonian tradition to southern Italy to Oria, the seat of Ahima'az's ancestors. It also antedates the 12th-century foundation tale of Abraham ibn Daud which mythologizes the translation of Babylonian traditions via south Italian scholars to Spain and North Africa. And it antedates the 13th-century tradition of Eliezer of Worms of Abu Aaron's translatio of the secret of the prayers [perhaps an allusion to the *siddur* of Rav Amram Gaon] and apparently some mysticism as well. Along with Sepher Yosippon and the Talmud and the Tanakh, these four texts and traditions became the foundation for Ashkenazi intellectual history and identity. And for emphasis we should note that these texts are directly or indirectly products of southern Italy.

The author of Sepher Yosippon was a skilled author fluent in Hebrew and Latin as illustrated by Flusser's close reading of the text and its sources. He, whether

³ Independently by two scholars in Israel Peter Lehnhardt with whom I discussed the book in Jerusalem and Meir Bar-Ilan, whom I thank for a prepublication copy of his informative lengthy analysis of the author's sources. Both scholars date Sepher Hayasher to 11-century Italy.

a scholar of the late ninth or mid tenth century, antedated the golden age that began with Hasdai ibn Shaprut in Spain. Indeed, as Peter Lehnhardt in his dissertation and elsewhere, argued the piyyut style of southern Italy influenced the composition of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi piyyutim. Two other compositions enhance the contribution of southern Italy to the development of European Jewish cultures. The aforementioned Sepher Hayashar, which was only published in 1625, at least in the extant copy that we possess, became exceedingly popular. The second which likely antedates or is contemporary to Sepher Hayashar is the Sepher Hazikhronoth or Divre Hayamim le-Yerahme'el ben Shlomo, another genius scholar who collected a creative selection of midrashim that has beguiled scholars for over a century.⁴

Since the theme of this workshop is Josephus, I would like to suggest a question that has arisen through my reading of Sepher Yosippon, and that is the latter's reading of Herod. At once the monster of Christian tradition and a ruler whose career should have attracted a Shakespearean tragedy based on Shakespeare's reading of Peter Morwynne's version of the shorter Yosippon⁵ which was reprinted for the next two and a half centuries as *The Wonderful and Most Deplorable History of the Latter Times of the Jews with the Destruction of the City of Jerusalem....*⁶ There is a hint in the Herod saga something that I would like to tease out as I explore the vicissitudes of this paranoia prone ruler. A brief summary is in order. Herod begins his rule as a governor in Galil appointed by his father Antipater, the major domus of Hyrcanus, the king and high priest of Jerusalem. Herod is ruthless as a Judaized native Idumean and proved himself an excellent policeman, being enriched by the grateful Greeks of Syria whom he saved from the ravages of Hezekiah, the northern rebel who has been recently identified as a major figure in the Jewish revolt against Rome and its local Hellenistic allies.⁷ Herod befriends the Romans who appreciate his role and also honor his father who had served them and Hyrcanus well. Herod is crowned king by the Roman triumvirate and returns from Rome with full Roman support. He later empties his treasury to save his people from

⁴ The title of course derives from Megillat Esther [6,1].

⁵ Of Abraham Conat published in 1480 and reprinted by Baron Günzburg (Berditschev, 1896-1913).

⁶ Last printed in Bellows Falls, Vt., 1819.

⁷ See Israel Ben-Shalom, *Beth Shamai and the Zealots' Struggle against Rome* (Jerusalem, 1993).

starvation. He defeats all his enemies, the Arabs by force, Cleopatra by guile. He murders all his suspected enemies including the last of the Hasmoneans, his sons by Mariamme. Then he builds, inter alia, a new and magnificent temple after receiving permission from the Sadducean priests to destroy the ramshackle altar and buildings built over the past five centuries. Finally he dies at the age of 70, much to the relief of the leading men of Jerusalem whom he ordered killed after his death so the people would be mourning at the right time.

I would ask after this paltry summary if there is a biblical parallel that was recalled by the author of *Sepher Yosippon* who follows fairly closely the biography of Nicholas of Damascus as rewritten by Josephus. The question is: Did Nicholas read the Septuagint books of Samuel and Kings in his composition of the biography of Herod? Did the biblically savvy author of *Sepher Yosippon* recall the glorious period of Israel's empire under David and Solomon when he was working on the translation of Pseudo-Hegesippus and Josephus for his Herod chapters? David, after all, was a great conqueror, Solomon a great builder of fortresses and a temple. David too died at 70. How much of this was an historical or a historiographical coincidence? All three were kings; two were anointed, the third was crowned. All three were recognized by their followers as messiahs! Indeed, later Christian heresiologists counted Herod a messiah among his Herodian party. And does Herod's Praetorian Guard of Gauls parallel David's Praetorian Guard of Philistines and Cretans? It began to look suspicious to me, although suspicion, like parallelism, should be treated with caution.

Let me look at the problem from another perspective. *Sepher Yosippon* is a nationally charged history of the Second Temple period replete with oversized heroes, all of whom appear in the author's sources but without the rhetorically charged and emotionally rich drama of *Sepher Yosippon*. Can this be seen as a continuation of the polemical hints we have already earlier suggested? The polemic would be aimed at the author's contemporary Church. [Here I would note the chapter (57 in Flusser's edition) on Paulina, the chaste Roman matron seduced by a champion charioteer – a *Yosippon* update. Pseudo-Hegesippus had already alluded to Mary in his expanded text of Josephus's brief mention which the author of

Yosippon emphasized even more for his Hebrew readers!] Overtly hostile to the Jews and Judaism, despite occasional mutual respect due to personal relationships as recorded by Ahima'az, nonetheless there was no love lost between the Greeks, the Latins, and the Jews. Hence Sepher 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 apology and praises Titus who acted so cruelly out of the necessity of war and who regretted the destruction of the temple, a rare punishment among the superstitious Romans. After all only the Druid priests were proscribed by Rome.

And for my last point, Masada. Sepher Yosippon translates the bold Middle Platonic speech of the Zealot priest Eliezer that urged 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 three points are precisely the same that the Greek polis demanded of its citizens to enact lest they be captured and enslaved by the enemy. To them slavery was a fate worse than death. 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.

Sepher Yosippon moreover, in repeating the brilliant speech of Eliezer in the Neo Platonic garb of Pseudo-Hegesippus's fourth-century rhetoric, thus becomes the first medium to introduce Neo Platonic 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!

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 dates was apropos to the actual date of the text whether 9th or 10th century. And his readers would have recalled the fate of the Jewish center of Bari and the murder of the Ten Martyrs later recorded by Yerahme'el ben Shlomo in his Sepher HaZikhronoth. We should also note the image of this destruction visible to the Jews of Rome whose quarter was but a stone's throw from the Forum Romanum where the Arch of Titus and the Coliseum were extant monuments to this national tragedy.

So we suggest in conclusion that Sepher Yosippon has, in addition to its historical methodology unique in its time, to its literary innovations and brilliant style unique in its time, a more than 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, we may recall, 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 – unsuccessful in many instances – and interpolated many expansions into Sepher Yosippon nearly destroying but definitely crippling this medieval masterpiece until its pristine message and arguments were restored from the study and Flusser's scientific edition of its manuscripts.

We may then add polemic to the list of characteristics attributed to Sepher Yosippon which became one of the best loved influential and texts to emerge from the renaissance of Hebrew literature in southern Italy.