

*From Heroes to Villains – the Maccabees and
the Hasmoneans in Sefer Yosippon*

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In the 10th century Southern Italy was divided into several areas with different cultural orientations. Apulia and Calabria were under Byzantine influence while also the Islamic conquests left its cultural prints. The Lombards reigned over the duchy of Spoleto and the Principalities of Benevento and Salerno. The region of Naples was organized as an independent duchy under Byzantine rule. Somewhere in this cultural hub *Sefer Yosippon* or *Sefer Yosef ben Gorion* was written at the beginning of the 10th century. Its anonymous author reworked the writings of Flavius Josephus into a description of the Jewish history from the Babylonian Exile to the destruction of the Second Temple. But he did not use only the works of Josephus. The book includes the foundation story of Rome. It integrates apocryphal works, i.e. the additions to the Septuagint in the Books of Daniel and Esther as well as the First and the Second *Book of the Maccabees* (chapters 1-26). The second part relies on Josephus' *Antiquities* (Books 9-16; SY, chapters 27-49 of *Sefer Yosippon*). Chapters 50-89 are a reworking of Ps-Hegesippus' Latin paraphrase of the *Bellum Judaicum*, titled *De excidio Hierosolymitano*. Since Flavius Josephus mentions having written an Aramaic version of his *Bellum Judaicum*, the medieval *Sefer Yosippon* was identified with this Aramaic original written by Josephus himself. The attribution to the Jewish Hellenistic historian contributed to the diffusion and authority of *Sefer Yosippon* which was read among Jews in Palestine, Byzantium, Ashkenaz, France and Spain.

The textual history as well as the question of time, place and literary character of *Sefer Yosippon* was first analyzed extensively by David Flusser.¹ He published an eclectic edition which to his mind comes close to the "Urfassung" of *Sefer Yosippon*, accompanied by a second volume dedicated to the discussion of origin and dating of this text. In my research on the transmission and the reception history of the *Sefer Yosippon* I analyzed the manuscripts known to us today, and I discovered that there must have been an earlier redaction of the text that is transmitted in fragments of the Cairo Geniza (11th century) and in one Italian manuscript (MS Vatican Urbina 52; 15th century).² It is also reflected in the Judaeo-Arabic

¹ D. Flusser (Ed.), *The Josippon [Josephus Gorionides]: Edited with Introduction, Commentary and Notes*, 2 Vols., Jerusalem 1980-81.

² S. Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption des Sefer Yosippon* (forthcoming); S. Dönitz, "Historiography among Byzantine Jews: The Case of Sefer Yosippon", in: R. Bonfil; O. Irshai; G.A. Stroumsa; et al. (Ed.), *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, Leiden, Boston 2012, pp. 951–968. .

translation that was made in the 11th century.³ This redaction differs in several aspects from the one printed in Flusser's edition. Flusser included three chapters that are based on the additions to the biblical Book of Daniel, i.e. the stories of Daniel and Bel, Daniel and Tannin as well as Daniel in the lion's den.⁴ But this section is not part of the text preserved in the Cairo Genizah. It is also not found in the early Judaeo-Arabic version. Therefore, one can assume that these chapters are a later interpolation into *Sefer Yosippon*. There are more examples for the theory that Flusser's text does not represent the oldest version.⁵

Soon after its compilation the book won fame among Jews from all regions of the Diaspora. It was treated as an "open text" and underwent several stages of rewriting and revision which resulted in several redactions.⁶ Considering the number of manuscripts and the many textual variations that were produced during the centuries of the text's transmission, it is clear that *Sefer Yosippon* was one of the most widespread texts in Jewish medieval society. This is corroborated by the number of the quotations of the book.⁷ Looking at the reception history of *Sefer Yosippon* it is striking, that medieval authors are not interested in the story of the Jewish War *per se*. Interestingly enough, the majority of the quotations of or references to *Sefer Yosippon* mention either the chapter on Esther, which consists of the additions to the Greek Bible only (chapter 9), or different chapters of the story of the Maccabees (chapters 13-26).

Let me return to the sources of *Sefer Yosippon*. The main sources are the Latin translations of Josephus' works.⁸ Moreover, the redactor of *Sefer Yosippon* probably had a copy of the Latin Bible at hand. The chapter on Esther and Mordekhai consists of some of the additions to the Greek Bible only.⁹ *Sefer Yosippon*, chapters 11 to 26, is a reworking of First and Second Maccabees.¹⁰ It can be argued then, that the author of *Sefer Yosippon* reveals a tendency to

³ S. Sela (Ed.), *The Arabic Josippon*, 2 Vols. (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv 2009).

⁴ Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, chapter 4–5.

⁵ See examples in E. Reich, *מסירת הנפש על קיום המצוות אידיאולוגיה ותמורות מספרות הזל עד אשכנז הקדומה*, PhD, Ramat Gan 2011.

⁶ Flusser edited a text that represents a version of redaction A. Redaction B was edited by D. Günzburg, ספר יוסִפון כפי דפוס מנטובה קודם רמ לפק מהדורת דויד בן נפתלי גינצבורג ז"ל (Berditschev, 1913). The third redaction was edited by H. Hominer, *Josiphon of Joseph Ben Gorion ha-Cohen: Reprinted according to the complete Edition of Venice 5304 (1544) with Supplements from the Mantua Edition 5238-5240 (1478-80) and the Constantinople Edition 5270 (1510)* (Jerusalem, 1967).

⁷ A.A. Neuman, 'Josippon: History and Pietism', in *Alexander Marx jubilee volume: on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*, S. Lieberman and A. Marx, eds., (New York, 1950), pp. 637–667, especially 666f.; Dönitz (forthcoming).

⁸ V. Ussani, *Hegesippi qui dicitur historiae libri V* (Leipzig, 1932). Rufin's translation is only available in Gelenius' edition; S. Gelenius, ed., *Antiquitates Iudaicae / Flavii Josephi Antiquitatum Judaicarum libri XX* (Basel, 1534).

⁹ Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, chapter 9.

¹⁰ Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, pp. 61–115. Finally, a later interpolation on Jesus also comprises a version of the Susanna story from the LXX; comp. Appendix 5.2 in Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, pp. 442–444.

supplement the Biblical narrative of the history of the Jews. He adds an historical description of the time of the Second temple. Interestingly enough, his sources were transmitted mostly by Christians. It seems as though the redactor of *Sefer Yosippon* felt the necessity to reintegrate these sources into medieval Jewish Hebrew literature.

In the following part I will discuss some of the special characteristics of *Sefer Yosippon*'s version of the history of the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans. The chapters in *Sefer Yosippon* represent a fine reconstruction of the events described in First and Second Maccabees as well as in Josephus. In comparison to the ambivalent or even disapproving rabbinic view, it will be asked what kind of attitude the chapters in *Sefer Yosippon* show towards the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans.

It is well known that the history of the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans has not been widely discussed in the time span between the first century, when Josephus' wrote his *Antiquities*, and the 10th century, when *Sefer Yosippon* came into existence. Only a few rabbinic sayings refer to the Maccabees.¹¹ *Megillat Taanit* and *Megillat Antiochus* give more details than the names of the heroes. The kings of the Hasmonean dynasty were also mentioned only a few times. The reason for the silence of rabbis was often discussed in research. There are two lines of argument: First – the rabbis followed the opposition of the Pharisees who criticized the Hasmonean kingship.¹² Later, this opinion was replaced by the theory that already the Pharisees have not been in complete opposition to the Hasmoneans.¹³ Therefore, the attitude of the rabbis to the Hasmoneans was similarly characterized as ambivalent, sometimes even positive.¹⁴

Other theories say that the Maccabean way of taking arms and the Hasmonean kingship did not fit into the concept of the rabbinic attitude towards statehood and imperialism. Finally one has to keep in mind that the knowledge of the Maccabean and the Hasmonean deeds has not been very detailed in the time of the rabbis. Josephus wrote in Greek, and his writings were soon appropriated by the Christians who used his depiction of the Jewish history of the Second Temple to legitimate their claim for being now God's new chosen people. A similar fate befell the Books of the Maccabees which soon entered the Christian canon of the Holy

¹¹ G. Stemberger, "The Maccabees in Rabbinic Tradition", in: F. García Martínez; A. Hilhorst (Ed.), *The Scriptures and the Scrolls: Studies in Honour of A. S. van der Woude on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Leiden 1992, pp. 193–203, esp. 201ff.

¹² V. Aptowitz, *Parteipolitik der Hasmonäerzeit im rabbinischen und pseudoepigraphischen Schrifttum*, New York 1927.

¹³ D. R. Schwartz, "On Pharisaic Opposition to the Hasmonean Monarchy", in: D.R. Schwartz (Ed.), *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity*, Tübingen 1992, pp. 44–56.

¹⁴ P. S. Alexander, "From Poetry to Historiography: The Image of the Hasmoneans in Targum Canticles and the Question of the Targum's Providence and Date", in *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 19 (1999), pp. 103–128.

Scriptures while the Hebrew Bible did not encompass them. Thus, they were abandoned by the Jews.

Sefer Yosippon played a key role in reintroducing the events of the Maccabean revolt and those of the Hasmonean period into medieval Jewish tradition after the period of silence inflicted by the rabbis. *Sefer Yosippon* tells the events associated with the revolt of the Maccabees on the basis of the First and Second Book of Maccabees. The two versions were merged by the author of *Sefer Yosippon* into a chronological description, actually creating a fairly modern synopsis of the events. He also integrated the martyr's stories from II Macc, chapters 6 (Eleazar) and 7 (Mother and her seven sons).¹⁵ After the glorious victories of Judah ha-Makkabi, the story of the Hasmonean dynasty is told until Pompeius' conquest of Jerusalem. In the following I want to point out special features about the story of the Maccabees in *Sefer Yosippon* to show the way the redactor reworked his sources.

The martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons was transmitted already in rabbinical texts (b Git 57b; EkhR 15,1).¹⁶ It became one of the most famous literary motifs during the Middle Ages not only among Jewish, but also among Christian and Muslim authors.¹⁷ Like his source, the redactor of *Sefer Yosippon* located the story in the correct time of the persecutions under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE, while the rabbinic and medieval versions do not refer explicitly to certain king, but talk about a Caesar (קיסר), probably a Roman emperor. This means that in rabbinic literature the story of the mother and her seven sons was combined with the rabbinic martyr's stories belonging to the Roman period. *Sefer Yosippon* returns the events into their original historical context under the rule of the Seleucid king Antiochus. While in the rabbinic sources the mother of the seven sons was called Mirjam bat Tanhum, during the transmission history of *Sefer Yosippon*, she was named Hanna. The name is applied to her in redaction B which probably was copied and disseminated in Sefarad (Spain).¹⁸ Moreover, the redactor of *Sefer Yosippon* integrated some new motifs into the story which became crucial for the understanding of martyrdom in the

¹⁵ Flusser, *The Josippon*, vol. 1, chapter 14 and 15.

¹⁶ G.D. Cohen, 'The Story of Hannah and her Seven Sons in Hebrew Literature', in *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume*, M. Davis, ed., (Jerusalem, 1953), pp. 109–122; R. Doran, 'The Martyr: A Synoptic View of the Mother and her Seven Sons', in *Ideal Figures in Judaism*, J.J. Collins, ed., (Chicago, 1980), pp. 189–221; E. Baumgarten; R. Kushelevsky, 'From 'The Mother and Her Sons' to 'The Mother of the Sons' in Medieval Ashkenaz', *Zion* 71 (2006), pp. 301–342.

¹⁷ D. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, New York 2009; G. Rouwhorst, 'The Cult of the Seven Maccabean Brothers and their Mother in Christian Tradition', in *Saints and Models in Judaism and Christianity*, M. Poorthuis and J.J. Schwartz (eds.), Leiden 2004, pp. 182–204; L.V. Rutgers, 'The Importance of Scripture in the Conflict between Jews and Christians: The Example of Antioch', in *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World*, L.V. Rutgers (ed.), Louvain 1992, pp. 287–303.

¹⁸ *Sefer Yosippon*, Mantua 1480, p. 24. Abraham Ibn Daud, Maimonides and Israel ben Josef Al-Nakawa knew the mother and her seven sons by that name; see Cohen, *The Story of Hannah and her Seven Sons in Hebrew Literature*, pp. 109–122, 118f.

Jewish medieval society, especially in Ashkenaz. The motif of the great light in the after world promised for those who are ready to die for *Qiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of the name of God) is only one example.¹⁹ This motif was also used by the authors of the Hebrew crusade chronicles for 1096.²⁰

The author of *Sefer Yosippon* identified Eleazar the Priest who suffered martyrdom during the persecution undertaken by Antiochus IV Epiphanes with one of the leaders of the group of sages who were sent to Egypt to fulfil Ptolemy's request of translating the Bible into Greek. This served as an literary device to integrate the story of the translation of the Septuagint into the plot of *Sefer Yosippon*. It is located in the time of king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, more precisely in between the chapter on the Heliodorus-affair and the chapter on the beginnings of the persecutions under Antiochus.²¹

According to *Sefer Yosippon* during these persecutions Antiochus IV Epiphanes commanded his military leader, Philippus, to kill everyone 'who calls himself a Jew' (מחה) (מחה) [...], a motif that appears neither in the Books of the Maccabees nor in Josephus.²³ The same command is quoted in the Hanukkah-Piyyut אין צור חלף by Salomo ha-Bavli (10th century, Italy), by Rashi in his commentary on Dan 11,17 (11th century, Ashkenaz) as well as in the Hanukkah-Midrashim.²⁴

The following events of the rebellion of Mattathias and his sons as well as the wars of Judah the Maccabee were not in the focus of the medieval Hebrew authors. Nevertheless, the literary creativity of the redactor of the book is shown by his reworking of the sources. When Judah was appointed military leader of the Jews by his father Mattathias, the redactor of *Sefer Yosippon* decided to bestow on him a special position. He wrote that Mattathias anointed him and thus made him "anointed (for the) war" (משוח מלחמה), the rabbinic term for a priest in war.²⁵ This term occurs in *Sefer Yosippon* when the Greek text designated Judah with the

¹⁹ Flusser, *The Yosippon*, chapter 15, line 21 and 77.

²⁰ E. Haverkamp, *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs* (Hannover, 2005), pp. 286f., 324f., 362f., 370f., 376f., 436f., 442f., 458f., 476f.; see also R. Chazan, *God, Humanity and History: The Hebrew First Crusade Narratives*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2000, pp. 194–202; S. Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds*, New York 2006.

²¹ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 11–13. For a discussion on the story of the translation of the Septuagint in *Sefer Yosippon* see A. Wasserstein; D. Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 192–216; G. Veltri, *Gegenwart der Tradition: Studien zur jüdischen Literatur und Kulturgeschichte* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 122–143; the identification of Eleazar the translator and Eleazar the martyr was later cited by the Coptic author Abu Shakir ibn al-Sana' al-Rahib (13th century) as well as by Jirjis al-Makin ibn al-'Amid from the Arabic translation of *Sefer Yosippon*.

²² Chapter 16, lines 3ff. in Flusser's edition. The phrase evokes Deut 25,19 and Ex 17,14.

²³ But compare b RSH 18b.

²⁴ E. Fleischer, *The Poems of Shelomo Ha-Bavli: Critical edition with introduction and commentary*, Jerusalem 1973, pp. 243–248; Davidson, x3079.

²⁵ M Sot 8,1; b Sot 43a; b Yom 72b–73b; Sifra Zaw 5; y Yom 1,1 (38d); y Meg 11,10 (72a).

denomination “the Maccabee” (ο Μακκαβαῖος).²⁶ This choice seems to reflect the discussion of the Hasmonean’s genealogy and their being fit to fulfil the role of the High Priest.

The author of *Sefer Yosippon* used the stories of the wars of the Maccabees also to praise the Romans. Chapter 21 talks about the covenant between Judah and the Romans.²⁷ To show the power of the Romans who represent the fourth empire of Daniel’s vision, the author introduced a part that describes the wars between Hannibal and Scipio. He probably drew on a source that is based on Titus Livius.²⁸ The wars of the Romans against Carthage were also mentioned by Josephus in *Antiquities* 12,414 in connection with the covenant between Judah and the Romans. Therefore it seems likely that the author of *Sefer Yosippon* took this remark in Josephus and used it to integrate more information about Roman history.²⁹

The story of the Maccabees in *Sefer Yosippon* therefore illustrates the use of the sources and the intentions shown. On the one hand, the redactor wants to reintegrate the history of the Maccabees, the one about the martyrs as well as the one about the warriors, into Jewish historiography. On the other hand a clear intention is felt to add more information on Roman history. Rome, resp. Edom, is the fourth empire of Daniel’s visions and as such gained its power according to God’s will. Concerning the destruction of the Temple *Sefer Yosippon* follows the line of Josephus and tries to clean Titus and Vespasian from guilt and blames the *Pritzim* of having caused the catastrophe.³⁰ On the other hand praises *Sefer Yosippon* the Roman invention of the Senate more than the struggle for power of the individual kings and Caesars.³¹ Obviously, there is a right way to rule, and it is not the one dictated by the wish for gaining more power. It is the path of ruling according to religious prescriptions and with the authority legitimated by the correct genealogy and the approval of the righteous.

In chapter 27 the author continues with the story of the Hasmonean dynasty based on Josephus’ *Antiquities* 13, 228ff. In the version of *Sefer Yosippon* Johannes Hyrcanus is called “king”.³² Chapter 30 contains the story of the rift between Johannes Hyrcanus and the Pharisees. In the Babylonian Talmud the story is told about Alexander Yannai.³³ Since the Pharisees criticize him for claiming the role of the High Priest as well as of the king, maybe the author of *Sefer Yosippon* transferred this conflict also to Johannes Hyrcanus by making

²⁶ I Macc 3,1; I Macc 5,24; II Macc 10,35; II Macc 11,15; II Macc 12,19f. The Hebrew מכבי was derived from מקבה which is translated as ‘hammer’, see Jdg 4,21; I Kg 6,7; Jes 44,12; Jer 10,4.

²⁷ I Macc 8,22–20.

²⁸ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 21, note to line 9.

²⁹ Already chapter 2 consists of the early history of Rome, its foundation, the early kings and the invention of the Roman senate, see above. Chapter 38 tells the story of Caesar’s birth being cut from his mother’s womb.

³⁰ G. Stemberger, *Die römische Herrschaft im Urteil der Juden*, Darmstadt 1983, p. .

³¹ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 2, line 127–135.

³² Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 27, line 2; chapter 29, lines 6, 14, 27 and more.

³³ B Qid 66a.

him king. This would mean that the author of *Sefer Yosippon* knew the Babylonian Talmud.³⁴ In the description of Johannes Hyrcanus asking to know about the future of his sons the prayer he says to God is given with phrases from the liturgy.³⁵ The sentence on Johannes Hyrcanus being an ideal ruler and possessing the gift of prophecy is missing in *Sefer Yosippon*.³⁶

Chapter 33 tells about the conflict between Alexander Yannai and the Pharisees. Interesting is a detail on the description of the rites for the Feast of Tabernacles. Thus, *Sefer Yosippon* says that during the feast the Pharisees usually play (לישחוק) with the etrogs and the branches of the dates.³⁷ So when the king was hit by an etrog it is argued by the thrower that it is the law (חוק) to do so during the feast. Flusser guesses that there may have been a similar rite in Southern Italy. Steven Bowman said that this detail shows the playfulness of the author and the parodistic character of *Sefer Yosippon*.³⁸ Both stories reflect an attitude towards Jewish kingship that criticizes the internal strife between the king and the religiously legitimate leaders, in this case the Pharisees.

I could continue giving details of ornaments the author of *Sefer Yosippon* inscribed into his version of the story of the Hasmonean dynasty. But I will turn now to the question on how the author judged the Hasmonean dynasty. It is difficult to see a definite judgement since he worked very close to his source, the Latin *Antiquities*. It is clear from the deviations in the text that the author of *Sefer Yosippon* did not know the historical details exactly. His own interests may be seen especially in the martyr's stories of the Maccabees. Here we find very elaborate depictions of the martyr's attitude and braveness towards death. The stories about persecution and salvation as well as martyrdom belong to genres generating from the Second Temple period. Transmitted into the Middle Ages they became part of the foundation of Jewish society's historical consciousness and identity, a foundation that was laid down by the Greek speaking Jews during the Hellenistic age and conveyed by Byzantine Jews also via *Sefer Yosippon* into Ashkenaz, France and Spain.

In sum, one of the reasons to tell the stories of the Maccabees as well as the one on the Hasmoneans may lie in the fact that this history was not known well among Jews between the

³⁴ Bonfil argued that the author of *Sefer Yosippon* did not know the Babylonian Talmud; see R. Bonfil, "Between Eretz Israel and Bavel", in: *Shalem* 5 (1987), pp. 1–30 (hebr.), esp. p. 29f.

³⁵ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 30, lines 41–43.

³⁶ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 30, lines 46–48.

³⁷ Flusser, *The Josippon*, chapter 33, lines 1–7.

³⁸ S. Bowman, "Sefer Yosippon: History and Midrash", in: M.A. Fishbane (ed.), *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, Albany 1993, pp. 280–294, esp. 292ff.

first and the tenth century. Another reason may be that the formation of Jewish communities in Italy, France and Ashkenaz during the from the 9th century onward called for a discussion of the different forms of statehood and their opposite, the life in exile – to find an appropriate solution for the question how to organize the new communities and their leadership.