Yonatan Binyam, 2023

Sefer Yosippon Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims



Fragment of a Yosippon manuscript (c. 14th cent.). Holding institution: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Call number: Cod.hebr. 153(8. Digitized by Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.
Link: https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00039620?page=4,5

Following its production by an anonymous Jewish author in the first half of the tenth-century, *Sefer Yosippon* (hereafter *SY*) becomes hugely popular among Jewish communities across the eastern Mediterranean and throughout Europe. The text provided medieval and early modern Jews a redemptive account of ancient Israelite/Jewish history from Creation to a defiant retelling of the fall of Masada. Beyond its popularity among Jews, *SY* represents a particularly striking example of textual and literary cross-pollinations between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities.

First, it demonstrates the co-mingling of Jewish and Christian textual traditions, since the author of *SY* relies heavily on Christian, Latin manuscripts for the composition of his text. In particular, he draws from Latin translations of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* and a Latin reworking of Josephus's *Jewish War* known as the *De Excidio Hierosolymitano* ("On the Destruction of Jerusalem"). Written in Greek during the first century, the *Jewish Antiquities* and the *Jewish War* both depict the Jewish people positively, given that they were written by Josephus, a Jewish general turned Roman historian who presented his works to Greco-Roman audiences as a defense of the Jewish people. By contrast, the fourth-century *De Excidio* represents a polemical Christianization of the *Jewish War*, depicting the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE as divine punishment of the Jews for their involvement in the execution of Jesus.

The Hebrew *SY* reappropriates the Christian appropriation of Josephus, expanding the competitive historiography that constitutes the second mode of co-production in *SY*'s transmission. As counter history to the *De Excidio*, *SY* thoroughly revises the Christian

version of providential history by presenting a redemptive narrative of the fall of Jerusalem. It accomplishes this literary feat by couching the destruction of the Second Temple within a biblicizing interpretation of the relationship between God and the Jewish people as an abiding cycle of fall and redemption, one that looks forward post-70 CE to a future renewal.

Furthermore, the co-productive vectors of *SY* not only point backward in time to its Christian sources, but also extend forward chronologically to its impressive *Nachleben* among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The text is first translated into Arabic as early as the eleventh or twelfth century by an anonymous author. This Christian-Arabic revision of *SY* quickly gains a place of recognition within the Coptic biblical tradition, due to its mistaken identification as one of the books of Maccabees. In his *Nomocanon*, for example, al-Ṣāfī ibn al-'Assāl notes that the book was "accepted" (*qabīl*), though not canonical, in most congregations. Similar to its source text, the Gə'əz translation of the Copto-Arabic reworking of *SY*, commonly known as the *Zena Ayhud* ("History of the Jews"), enters the Ethiopian Orthodox canonical corpus upon its arrival in Solomonic Ethiopia during the fourteenth century.

There is no evidence that the author of the Christian-Arabic reworking of *SY* had unmediated access to the writings of Josephus or to the Latin *De Excidio* outside of his Hebrew source. The medieval Christianization of *SY* differs from the late-antique Christianization of Josephus in that it lacks the lengthy and acerbically anti-Jewish interpolations that characterize the *De Excidio*. Nevertheless, it does re-Christianize the ancient Israelite/Jewish history related in *SY* by omitting explicitly pro-Jewish readings (e.g. the triumphant retelling of Masada) and by placing emphasis on Vespasian and Titus as the instruments by which God puts an end to the legitimacy of Judaism. It thus falls well within traditional Christian interpretations of the destruction of the Second Temple as an irreversible, providential event.

The Christian-Arabic reworking of *SY* subsequently circulates outside the boundaries of Christian communities. A Judeo-Arabic version of the text, written in Hebrew script, is transcribed from a source written in Arabic script around the same time as its Christian counterpart. While it omits explicitly Christian interpolations, the Judeo-Arabic text otherwise features the same outline and content as the Copto-Arabic version, once again indicating co-mingled manuscript traditions between (this time Arabic-speaking) Jews and Christians. Furthermore, Muslim historians draw upon the Christian-Arabic *SY* as their primary source for the history of the Second Temple period, as famously demonstrated by large citations from the text that appear in Ibn Khaldūn's *al-Muqaddima* ("Prolegomena").

In conclusion, *SY*'s creative repurposing of Christianized accounts of ancient Israelite/Jewish history, as well as its many afterlives, paint a fascinating picture of an interconnected web of textual, literary and theological co-productions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims that stretches across some fifteen centuries.

Further Reading:

Sepher Yosippon: A Tenth-Century History of Ancient Israel, Translated and Introduced by Steven Bowman. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022.

Flusser, David. *Sefer Yosippon: Organized and Edited According to Manuscripts Along with an Introduction, Explanation and Variant Readings* (Hebrew). 2 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1978.

Dönitz, Saskia. *Überlieferung und Rezeption des Sefer Yosippon*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.

Sela, Shulamit. *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gurion: Texts in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic with a Hebrew Translation and Introduction* (Hebrew). 2 vols. Tel Aviv: Makhon Ben-Tsevi le-ḥeḳer ḳehilot Yiśra'el ba-Mizraḥ, 2009.

Vollandt, Ronny. "Ancient Jewish Historiography in Arabic Garb: Sefer Josippon Between Southern Italy and Coptic Cairo." *Zutot* 11, no. 1 (2014): 70–80.

Witakowski, Witold. "Coptic and Ethiopic Historical Writing," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: 400-1400*, eds. Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 138-154.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48620/96689
License: CC BY 4.0