


HASMONEAN HISTORICAL TRADITIONS PRESERVED IN A TENTH-CENTURY CE HISTORY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL: THE INTRIGUING CASE OF *SEFER YOSIPPON*

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Abstract

The tenth-century CE Hebrew historical work known as *Sefer Yosippon* has been among the most widely circulated and influential histories of ancient Israel for Jews and non-Jews alike for over a millennium. Long believed to be a lost work of the first-century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that he wrote in Hebrew for Jews, the book's author is anonymous. Scholars generally agree that its unknown writer resided in Italy, possibly Naples, with some suggesting that he had access to libraries, perhaps including monastic collections, to explain his extensive use of classical sources. It is this aspect of *Sefer Yosippon* that is of special importance to historians of Second Temple Judaism and ancient Mediterranean history, particularly of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, as the book incorporates numerous classical texts and unknown sources in its account of Jewish history. This study proposes that *Sefer Yosippon*'s author and redactors used works now lost that documented the Maccabean Revolt and the early Hasmonean period, particularly Jewish and Parthian relations. This article investigates this likelihood by highlighting possible new information about the origin of the Maccabean Revolt and the reign of John Hyrcanus in *Sefer Yossippon* and its major redaction that may shed new light on these enigmatic periods of history.

Keywords: Flavius Josephus, *Sefer Yosippon*, Maccabean Revolt, Hasmonean Period, Judah Maccabee, John Hyrcanus, Parthian Empire, Seleucid Empire.

The tenth-century CE Hebrew historical work known as *Sefer Yosippon* has been among the most widely circulated and influential histories of ancient Israel for Jews and non-Jews alike for over a millennium. Long believed to be a lost work of the first-century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that he wrote in Hebrew for Jews, the book's

author is anonymous.¹ The earliest date for the existence of this anonymous work, which is extant in several recensions, is a 953 CE colophon preserved in a fifteenth-century CE manuscript of *Sefer Yosippon*.² Scholars generally agree that the book's author wrote in Italy, possibly Naples, with some suggesting that he had access to libraries and monastic collections there, which accounts for his extensive use of classical sources.³ But what makes *Sefer Yosippon* of special importance to historians of Second Temple Judaism and ancient Mediterranean history, particularly of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, is the wide variety of ancient texts the writer incorporated into his narrative of Jewish history from creation until the termination of the siege of Masada (73/74 CE) following the official end of the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE). From the reign of John Hyrcanus (SY 27) to Herod's rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple (SY 50), *Sefer Yosippon*'s author largely used the Latin translation of Josephus's *Antiquities*, which was commissioned by Cassiodorus in the second half of the sixth century CE.⁴ Other sources include the Hebrew and Latin Bibles, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Pseudo-Hegesippus's *De excidio Hierosolymitano*, Virgil's *Aeneid* (books 1–2), Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (book 2), Orosius's *Historiarum adversum paganos* (book 8), Macrobius's *Saturnalia* along with his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Sallust's *De Catilinae coniuratione*, Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputations*, and other ancient materials that likely came from a Byzantine chronicle translated into Hebrew.⁵ Subsequent redactors added materials from other works, including the Hebrew *Alexander Romance*, the Septuagint, and selections from the additions to the Book of Daniel.⁶ *Sefer Yosippon*, moreover, shows no acquaintance with the Babylonian Talmud, suggesting that its author and redactor primarily obtained materials from non-Jewish sources and were not influenced by the rabbinic movement.⁷ This makes *Sefer Yosippon* a unique witness to a variety of Judaism outside the traditional rabbinic form as its author, and redactors, appears just as comfortable in the world of the Greek and Roman classics as Jewish Scripture. The cases of parallels between the historical content of *Sefer Yosippon* and the Talmud for the Hasmonean period, because they were written independently of one another but cover Hasmonean political relations, provide additional evidence for the existence of lost historical sources documenting Hasmonean history that circulated well into the Talmudic period and beyond.

Although *Sefer Yosippon* contains a wealth of historical information from a variety of classical and other ancient sources, scholars of Second Temple Judaism largely have

¹ Bowman 2019, xi. The name of the book varies in academic literature, with older publications adopting the spelling *Sefer Josippon*, and identifying its author as Joseph ben Gurion (= Flavius Josephus). I use the more common spelling of *Sefer Yosippon* adopted in the most recent critical studies. Citations from *Sefer Yosippon* are abbreviated as SY, followed by the chapter and line numbers in the critical edition of Flusser 1978.

² For the different recensions of *Sefer Yosippon*, the extant manuscripts, and their possible dates of compositions, see further Bowman 1995a, 349–359; Bowman 2023, xi–xiii; Flusser 1978, 1.3–53; Dönitz, 2011, 963–967; Dönitz 2013, 91–102; Dönitz, 2016 382–389; Dönitz 2024, 169–209.

³ For discussions of the possible location of the author, see Bowman 2019, 58–59; Bowman 2023, xii–xiv; Flusser 1987, 393.

⁴ Levenson 2024, 211–323; Levenson – Martin 2016, 322–327.

⁵ See further Bowman 2024, 390–400; Dönitz 201, 963–965; Flusser 1957, 165–184; Pucci 1981, 331–338; Pucci 1983, 13–25.

⁶ Dönitz 2011, 953–970.

⁷ Bowman 2019, 58–59; Dönitz 2016, 388.

ignored the possibility that its author and redactors used lost historical works that documented the Maccabean Revolt and the early Hasmonean period, particularly Jewish and Parthian relations.⁸ This study investigates this likelihood by highlighting possible new information about the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt and the reign of John Hyrcanus in *Sefer Yosippon* and its major redaction that may shed new light on these enigmatic periods of history.

I. The Maccabean revolt: Its cause (*Sefer Yosippon* 13–20, 22–25)

The author of *Sefer Yosippon* is a supporter of the Maccabean Revolt. He portrays Mattathias as a pious priestly leader of the Jewish community from Modein who defied the edict of Antioch IV Epiphanes prohibiting the practice of Judaism to protect the Jerusalem temple, which Hellenists had profaned by cooperating with the Seleucid rulers (*SY* 13–16).⁹ Although *Sefer Yosippon*'s author closely follows his sources to document the consequences of Antiochus IV's edicts, he frames his narrative differently to reflect his understanding of their significance, possibly incorporating additional sources that have not survived. Following his account of these decrees and the death of Antiochus IV; he describes the scattering of the Hasidim who fled for their

⁸ The Hasmonean family governed Judea and adjacent regions from 152 to 63 BCE after successfully fighting the Seleucid Empire and other powers to create an independent state. Named after an unknown ancestor, Asamoneaus (= Hashmon), the Hasmoneans were descendants of Mattathias and his sons who were the heroes of the anti-Seleucid revolt. Although known as the Maccabees, the name was given to Mattathias's son Judah (Judas) who liberated Jerusalem and its temple from the control of the Seleucid Empire in 164 BCE. Nevertheless, it is often used for the family of Mattathias whose fight for independence is commonly known as the Maccabean Revolt. See 1 Macc 4:36–59; 2 Macc 10:1–8; *War* 1.36–47; *Ant.* 12.265–434; Atkinson 2019a, 301–305; Atkinson 2019b, 958–960; Dąbrowa 2010b, 13–41. Maccabee is related to the Hebrew and Aramaic root *mqb* and means “hammer-like,” and refers to Judah's military abilities. See Bar-Kochva 1989, 147–148; Schwartz 2022b, 182. The nicknames of Mattathias' five sons in 1 Maccabees 2:2–5 are mysterious, and differ from Josephus, while only those of Eleazar and Judah recur in 1 Maccabees (cf. 1 Macc 6:43), and Judah's name occasionally appears in 2 Maccabees. Because we are unable to verify most of the information about Mattathias and his sons as found in 1 Maccabees, its portrayal of the Maccabees' achievements should be regarded as the version they sought to have widely distributed. Because Josephus largely derived his information about this period from 1 Maccabees—whether the version we possess or another, or possibly summaries or citations, is debated—making his works equally problematic to use for historical reconstruction. See further Dąbrowa 2010b, 15–16; Goldstein 1976, 231; Ilan 2002, 306, 366–367, 379–380, 438; Schwartz 2022b, 182. This study uses the name Maccabee for Mattathias and his sons, particularly Judah, and Hasmonean for John Hyrcanus, who as the grandson of Mattathias represents a new generation of leadership, and whose successors governed the Hasmonean state. See also Dąbrowa 2010b, 17.

⁹ See 1 Macc 1:16–63; 2 Macc 5–7; *War*, 1.34–35; *Ant.* 12.242–264; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.8.2. For historical background, see Atkinson 2016, 23–46; Dąbrowa 2010b, 13–66; Grabbe 2020, 340–387. Although 1 Maccabees (2:70; 9:19) states that Modein was Mattathias's ancestral home, 1 Maccabees 2:1 and Josephus (*Ant.* 12.265) claim that he moved there from Jerusalem with his five sons. Bar-Kochva (1989, 199 n. 8) proposes that his status as a priest of the Joarib clan was his family's only connection with Jerusalem. Mattathias and his son Jonathan were both buried in Modein, which may suggest they were from there. See also 1 Macc 2:70; 13:25; *War* 1.36. For this issue, and an extensive discussion of the debate over his priestly lineage, see Schwartz 2022b, 179–182.

lives and many of whom were killed in the ensuing chaos (SY 13.24–27). However, *Sefer Yosippon* provides additional information lacking in our primary sources of the Maccabees, for he portrays the Hasidim as Mattathias’s precursors who provided the backbone of the Maccabean army and whose origin he traces to the time of Alexander the Great (SY 10.58–60; 16.7–14). He not only places the Hasidim back to this time, but he also identifies them as the Essenes (SY 30.29–35): an etymology several scholars have proposed as factual based on other texts.¹⁰ In his cry to his fellow Jews to fight the Seleucids, *Sefer Yosippon* states that Mattathias sought the “powerful community of the Hasidim” to fight alongside him (SY 13.24–27; 16.7–14). Although no historical source traces the origin of the Hasidim as far back as *Sefer Yosippon* places them, because we lack sources for this period his account is plausible.¹¹ This is particularly so because there is reason to doubt the traditional account of Mattathias’s role in the anti-Seleucid rebellion since the resistance began before he came onto the scene, and the Hasidim do not appear initially to have been affiliated with him. 2 Macc 5:27, moreover, states that Mattathias and his sons fled to the country to escape persecution in Jerusalem, which suggests little support for them. Consequently, it is plausible, as Grabbe suggests, that Mattathias and his sons joined others, rather than others joining them.¹² The role of Mattathias in the early days of the revolt is uncertain as 2 Macc ignores him but focuses on Judah. As Dąbrowa highlights, after Antiochus III and his successors officially confirmed the right of Judeans to practice their religion and customs, and gave the temple and its priests fiscal privileges, some of Judea’s elites, particularly the Hellenists, aggravated the country’s different social groups by championing cultural assimilation, partly with the aim of securing careers in the Seleucid civil service. They used Antiochus IV’s attempt in 167 BCE to enforce Hellenistic religious reform, which mainly agrarian people opposed. Mattathias and his sons became the most successful

¹⁰ *Sefer Yossipon* in a passage about the three Jewish sects at the time of John Hyrcanus equates Josephus’s Essenes of *Antiquities* 13.298 with the Hasidim. The name Hasidim (οἱ Ἀσιδαῖοι) is commonly assumed to derive from the Hebrew word *Ḥāsīdīm* (חסידים), meaning “the pious.” See further Kampen 1998, 1–63; Sievers 1990, 38–40. Our knowledge of this group, referred to as “mighty warriors” who joined the Maccabees (1 Macc 2:39–42) is minimal. They are alleged to have been ancestors of both the Pharisees and Essenes; however, we know little about them. See further Grabbe 2020, 135–137, 381–382.

¹¹ For summary of the current state of scholarship on the Hasidim and their origins, and their relationship with other Jewish groups, see Grabbe 2020, 135–137. Although little is known about the Hasidim, Dąbrowa (2010b, 18–19, 29–30) astutely comments that the claim of 1 Macc that Mattathias organized the anti-Seleucid resistance movement is not supported by the evidence as there were already organized Jewish groups opposing the Syrians. See Dan 11:32–34; 1 Enoch 90:9; Collins 1993, 67–69. The only sources for the Hasidim, who the Books of Maccabees refer to as one group within the Jewish resistance that was distinct from the Maccabees, are: 1 Macc 2:42; 7:13–16; 2 Macc 14:6. According to 1 Maccabees 7:12–18 at one time they made peace with the Seleucid official Bacchides as well as Alcimus, but were executed by the former, possibly with the consent of the latter. See 1 Macc 7:23–24. See also 1 Macc 7:8, 16; *Ant.* 12.395–396. See further Dąbrowa 2010b, 30; Schwartz 2022b, 275–276. Several scholars have noted that Judah continued to receive opposition from Jewish supporters of the Hellenistic reform after his conquest of the temple, which shows the complexity of the situation that the books of the Maccabees simplify. The reference to “Judah’s friends,” moreover, after his death (1 Macc 9:26, 28) suggests that, despite the past deeds of him and his family, that the movement was largely centered around the personality of the Maccabean leaders and was subject to change. See Baumgarten 1997, 26; Regev 2013, 109–110.

¹² Grabbe 2020, 358–360.

armed resistance movement representing them.¹³ Because of the propagandistic nature of our extant sources, we should be cautious in accepting received tradition regarding the activities of Mattathias and the origin of the Maccabean Revolt.¹⁴

Sefer Yosippon's author departs from his sources in his description of the origin of the Maccabean Revolt to provide a unique perspective on its historical antecedents that suggest Mattathias was not as important during the initial stage of the anti-Seleucid resistance in Judea as 1 Maccabees and our major sources portray him. Rather, than the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV's edict as the impetus for Mattathias's resistance, *Sefer Yosippon*'s writer attributes it to national assimilation by Jews who had already adopted Greek customs (SY 16.23–43). In this regard, *Sefer Yosippon*'s reading of his sources suggests, as proposed by several scholars, that the edict of Antiochus IV was not the main reason for the Maccabean revolt. Instead, *Sefer Yosippon* places the blame on Jewish leaders—Menelaus, Simon, and Alcimus—and other “wicked men among our people,” whom he claims stirred up Antiochus IV to do evil in Israel because many Jews had refused to assimilate (SY 13; 16).¹⁵ Here, *Sefer Yosippon* reflects a tradition that an influential group of Judeans, often known as Hellenists, consisting of several groups—members of the aristocracy and priests among them—attempted to tighten the political and cultural bonds between the Judeans and the Seleucids. It was this tension that ultimately led to the Maccabean Rebellion. *Sefer Yosippon*'s claim that Antiochus IV ordered everyone throughout his realm to worship a graven image of him (SY 13.5–9), and that many Jews did so, reflects circumstances now widely accepted by scholars that there was some imposed religious change by Judea's Seleucid overlords.¹⁶ However, the reason for this worship is debated.

According to Josephus, after Antiochus III captured Coele-Syria in the Fifth Syrian War (202–199 BCE), he issued proclamations that confirmed the rights of the Jews

¹³ Dąbrowa 2010b, 7–9. See also *Ant.* 13.138–144; 1 Macc 1:11–14, 20–62; 2 Macc 6:1–11. See further Dąbrowa 2010b, 16–17, notes 20–25. Schwartz (2022b, 168–169) comments that the author of 1 Macc wanted to emphasize that many Judeans had chosen either to ally themselves with the Greeks or willingly acquiesced to the decrees against Judaism to portray Mattathias and his sons as unique.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the problematic nature of our sources and scholarship on the Hasmoneans, see further Berthelot 2018, 19–38, 65–80. For Palestine prior to this time, along with the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, see further Hengel 1989, 35–78; Schäfer 1989, 15–81; Schürer et al. 1973, 177–221; VanderKam 2004, 168–239.

¹⁵ Bowman 2023, 73 n. 1. For the thesis that “extreme Hellenists” are to blame, particularly Menelaus, Jason, and the Tobiads, see the seminal study of Bickermann 1937. Tcherikover (1959, 186–203) proposes that the Hasidim led the resistance to Hellenization in Jerusalem. For a synthesis of both views that emphasizes Syrian religious measures and Jewish support for it, largely from Menelaus, see Bringmann 1983, 120–140.

¹⁶ Cf. Dan 3:5; Jerome *Commentariorum in Daniele* on Dan 11:33; Bowman 2023, 63. Scholars generally agree that it was Zeus worship (2 Macc 6:2). However, because the Samaritan temple was also dedicated to Zeus without any change in its cult, and since the Baal Shamem of the Phoenicians was also referred to as Zeus, the locals in Jerusalem may have worshipped Zeus as a native deity. See further Bickerman 1937, 92–96; Breytenbach 1997, 369–380; Dąbrowa 2010a, 15–16; Goldstein 1976, 153–155; Tcherikover 1959, 194–195. Jerome (*Commentariorum in Daniele* on Dan 8:9 and 11:31) mentions the erection of a statue to Zeus Olympius in the Jerusalem temple. See also, Dan 11:31; 12:11; 1 Macc 1:54, 59; 4:43–47; 2 Macc 6:2, 7. Because Antiochus IV favored Zeus and associated this god with his own royal cult, it is most likely that he did institute some worship of Zeus in Jerusalem. See further Bernhardt 2017, 181–188. *Sefer Yosippon*'s author assumed that the foreign image represented the Seleucid monarch.

to practice their traditional customs and religion.¹⁷ However, he needed the loyalty of all the subjects of his realm to recover from the economic effects caused by his 190 BCE military loss to the Roman Republic at the Battle of Magnesia: the resulting 188 BCE treaty of Apamea required him to pay substantial indemnities and for his son, Antiochus IV, to be sent to Rome as a hostage.¹⁸ Although his sons and successors, Seleucus IV (187–185 BCE) and Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE), struggled to make the required payments to the Roman Republic, there is no evidence they treated Judea differently than any other part of the Seleucid Empire or the lands they had conquered. While the nearby Samaritan temple became devoted to the worship of Zeus at this time, there is no evidence for any change of its cult. Bickerman proposed that the Seleucids only required the offering of votive gifts, and not the installation of a cult image.¹⁹ The recently discovered Heliodorus Stele suggests the situation in Judea was more complex than our extant sources indicate.²⁰ Its content suggests that the Seleucid Empire's rulers were merely trying to assert the same control over the Jerusalem temple and the royal administration in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia they had exercised elsewhere; consequently, in contrast to 1 and 2 Maccabees, the measures of Antiochus IV were largely political and not religious.²¹ From the view of many Jews—the Hasidim along with the Maccabees and their partisans—the Seleucid measures to exercise direct control of the religious practices of the lands now under their jurisdiction had polluted the Jerusalem temple and infringed on its sovereignty, as well as the independent control of its high priest to regulate worship there. Although *Sefer Yosippon*'s author closely followed his sources—namely 1 and 2 Maccabees and Josephus's *Antiquities*—he somewhat deviates from them in preserving a tradition that is perhaps closer to the picture portrayed by the Heliodorus Stele.

According to *Sefer Yosippon*, the Maccabean family began their revolt to oppose the policy of national assimilation championed by Antiochus IV that the pre-Maccabean high priests and their partisans supported. Consequently, *Sefer Yosippon*'s description of the Maccabean Revolt as an inner-Jewish religious-civil war is more nuanced than our extant sources as it offers a much more multifaceted account, the complexity of which scholars now increasingly recognize. The expansion of Judean territory was a major goal of Mattathias and his sons, which was a radical departure from previous Jewish tradition. By seeking to Judaize newly conquered territories through a combination of purges

¹⁷ *Ant.* 12.138–146. These privileges are similar to those mentioned in the Hefziba stela, which contains decrees issued by Antiochus III from 202–195 BCE. See Honigman 2014, 400–441.

¹⁸ See Livy, 37.40–41; Grainger 2015, 169–186.

¹⁹ Bickermann 1937, 102–104.

²⁰ This inscription documents Seleucus IV's appointment of Olympiodorus as overseer of the sanctuaries of these regions, which included the Jerusalem temple. This action was merely part of the Seleucid Empire's administration of its territory: it was apparently never intended to harm the Jewish faith. See further Cotton – Gera 2009, 125–155; Cotton – Wörrle 2007, 192–205; Gera 2009, 125–155. Cf. 2 Macc 3:1–4:6. For the possibility that the early Maccabean rejection of gifts from the Seleucid Empire's rulers by Mattathias played a role in the start of the Maccabean Rebellion, see further Mendels 1987, 243–256.

²¹ Antiochus III gave new and generous endowments for native cults and their local sanctuaries. See further *Ant.* 12.138–144. However, Antiochus III also imposed punitive temple taxes in some regions under his control, which affected all of Coele Syria and Palestine, including the Tyrians, showing that his action on behalf of the Judeans was not unique. See further Cotton-Paltiel – Ecker – Gera 2017, 12; Honigman 2014, 321–327.

of non-Jewish inhabitants or to marginalize the native population by importing Jewish settlers, as well the use of force, the Maccabees and their Hasmoneans descendants pursued their own political agenda that was similar to the one previously practiced by the Seleucid Empire.²² The efforts of the Maccabees to conquer land should be viewed as a reversal of Seleucid policy of granting lands to military and agrarian settlers, as well as selling it to their supporters. This practice of confiscating and redistributing land was common in the Hellenistic world and served as an effective way to pacify populations. What is different is the lack of sources for the creation of Seleucid colonies in Judea: it appears that the efforts of Mattathias's son Simon to settle soldiers in conquered territories was a direct, and possibly successful, effort to prevent the Seleucid plan of creating long-term settlements in Judea from coming to fruition. The only difference between Maccabean and Seleucid land conquests and settlements is that the former served only the interests of a particular ethnos, namely the Judean ethnos.²³

Sefer Yosippon attributes the trouble in the time of Antiochus IV to lawless Jews, the *parizim*, whose actions he condemns (*SY* 11.7–8).²⁴ In contrast to our extant sources, *Sefer Yosippon* favors Roman intervention and blames these lawless Jewish men (*parizim*), and not the Romans, for the eventual loss of Jerusalem and its temple. His account hints at the complexity of the antecedents of the Maccabean Revolt, and our impartial understanding of what transpired. But it is the Romans who are the key players in *Sefer Yosippon*, and to whom he attributed a major role in igniting the Maccabean Revolt to an extant not documented in other sources.

²² For the uniqueness of Maccabean land expansion, which was rooted in Scripture to Judaize newly conquered territories, see further Dąbrowa 2010a, 7–14.

²³ See 1 Macc 3:36; 6:24; Baumgarten 81–91; Berthelot 2018, 80–93; Dąbrowa 2010a, 7–14. The Hasmonean propagandist sought to have his readers believe that Mattathias's son fulfilled the words of the biblical prophets to imply that they were like the Israelite heroes of the Bible, which justified them to purify the nation's religion and seize land. See further Goldstein 1988, 80; Staples 2021, 166–173. As Rajak (2001, 61–79) notes, the decline in Seleucid power and the collapse of that extended kingdom into continuous dynastic wars presented the Maccabees with an opportunity to take advantage of Syria's weakened political state: the Maccabean alliances with Rome was part of their strategy to exploit Seleucid weakness and helped them expand their territory.

²⁴ Schwartz (2022, 275–276) shows the complexity of the situation when he notes that the Hasidim were characterized by a religious orientation that had little interest in building a state, but that they were only interested in religious freedom. He notes that the pious who sought peace with the Seleucids had an agenda that was largely limited to religion. 1 Macc 7:12–18, moreover, relates that the pious along with scribes opposed Judah Maccabee and his partisans and approached Alcimus and Bacchides before being killed by them. This suggests that the political-religious situation in Judea was complex, and that various groups could change their alliances in light of the uncertain situation under Seleucid domination. This is clear in 1 Macc 1:11, 43, 52 where the author describes two responses to the decrees of Antiochus IV: those who willingly followed it and gave up elements of their Jewish practices to participate in the new cult and those who refused to participate, many of whom were killed. Many Jews colluded in the Seleucid reforms, which shows how terrible the situation had become as many Judeans did nothing to stop them while many cooperated with their Syrian overlords.

II. Judah's treaty with Rome and its consequences (*Sefer Yosippon* 21)

Sefer Yosippon exhibits a rather sophisticated approach to the early Maccabees in its description of the treaties Judah made with the Roman Republic. According to 1 Macc 8:1–32, Judah sent a delegation, which included Eupolemus son of John and Jason son of Eleazar, to Rome with the aim of securing a treaty of friendship and alliance with the Republic.²⁵ Although the account of this embassy implies that the Maccabees had secured independence, this was clearly not true.²⁶ Yet, as Dąbrowa astutely recognizes, Judah as leader of a faction of the Jewish community rebelling against the Seleucid Empire had a better chance of gaining recognition from Rome as the high priest of the Jerusalem temple than as the formal head of Judean society.²⁷ He had lost support of the Hasidim while the Hellenists appeared to have regained much of their former status.²⁸ Although it was doubtful that Judah's contact with the Roman Republic would have alleviated his difficult political situation, his diplomatic efforts represented

²⁵ The Maccabees and the Hasmonean rulers and kings sought relations with the Roman Republic beginning with the early days of their revolt. See 1 Macc 8:17–32; 2 Macc 4:11; Diodorus 40.2; Josephus, *War* 1.38; *Ant.* 12.414–29; Justin, *Epit.* 36.3.9. The writer of 1 Maccabees and Josephus record several important diplomatic efforts by the Hasmoneans (1 Macc 14:16–18, 24, 40) before 63 BCE, which, in their likely order, are: 1 Macc 8 (161 BCE); 1 Macc 12:3–4 (145/5? BCE); 1 Macc 14:24 (140? BCE); *Ant.* 14.145–148 (134? BCE [1 Macc 15:16–21]); *Ant.* 13.260–263 (early 120's BCE); *Ant.* 14.247–255 (ca. 112 BCE). Josephus, in *Antiquities* 14.145–148, and 247–255, apparently confuses two separate delegations and misdates some Hasmonean diplomatic activity from the reign of John Hyrcanus to Hyrcanus II, which complicates our understanding of early Hasmonean diplomacy and how it built on the diplomatic relations between the family and Rome before 63 BCE. He appears to have used 1 Maccabees as a source, but changed information based on his perceived understanding of what had taken place. Stern's (1961, 3–19) effort to decipher the confusing dates of these Roman treaties with the Maccabees sheds some light on this confusion and shows that the situation is more complicated than our sources reveal. Based on 2 Maccabees (4:11; 11:34–38), Judah's embassy was likely not the first contact between Jews and Romans, with the first contact likely dating to 174 BCE. For discussions of this issue, and for the authenticity of the treaties, see further Bar-Kochva 1996, 291–292; Fischer 1970, 73–82; Dąbrowa 2010b, 33–34; Giovannini – Müller 1971, 156–171; Liebmann-Frankfort 1969, 103–104; Schürer – Vermes – Millar – Black 1973, 194–195; Schwartz 2022a, 284–292; Sievers 1990, 68–72, 116–119; Zollschan 2004, 37–44; Zollschan 2017, 233–235. In the latter publication, Zollschan's interpretation of 1 Maccabees 8.23–32 and related documents proposes that Roman–Jewish relations during the Maccabean revolt were motivated by the Roman concept of diplomatic friendship, or *amicitia*, and there was no formal treaty between them. Coşkun (2018, 85–125) offers a sophisticated rebuttal in favor of the traditional view that Judah sent ambassadors after the Battle of Adasa in ca. March 161 BCE, and that the Senate accepted his request of friendship and alliance between the Romans and the Judeans. An oath, moreover, was sworn with his envoys and the Senate, and the consul C. Fannius reported it to the Senate proceedings in a letter to Judah; however, the ambassadors returned to the East too late to avoid the defeat of Judah at Elasa in 161/60 BCE.

²⁶ Seeman 2013, 122–127.

²⁷ As priests, Mattathias and his sons were qualified to become high priests. However, although it is possible the Romans assumed Judah was the high priest, Josephus's accounts of the seven-year span between the death of Alcimus in 159 BCE and the installation of Jonathan as high priest in 152 BCE, known as the *intersacredotium*, are confusing as he offers different lengths for this period and states both that Judah was not the high priest (*Ant.* 20.237) and that he was (*Ant.* 1312.426–434; cf. 1 Macc 9:11–22). This shows that our knowledge of this period rests on problematic sources and that even Josephus had trouble figuring out what occurred at this time. See further VanderKam 2004, 240–250.

²⁸ Dąbrowa 2010b, 33 n. 90.

a new approach that departed from the traditional Jewish, biblical-based, prohibition against foreign contacts. Nevertheless, from the second century BCE after the Battle of Pydna (168 BCE) the Romans frequently made agreements with small kingdoms. While the traditional posture of the Romans was inaction after making such treaties, Judah astutely recognized that the implied threat such an alliance posed: the possibility of Roman intervention was no mere warning but could materialize. This became evident when the Roman general Popillius Laenas in 168 BCE arrived in Egypt and presented Antiochus IV with a decree from the Senate that required him to abandon his invasion or be regarded as an enemy of the Republic.²⁹ Consequently, it was plausible that the Roman Republic could intervene in the region once again to curtail the territorial expansion of the Seleucid Empire. The fear that they could do so likely provided the Maccabees with some measure of protection or at least made the Seleucid Empire's monarch cautious in their approach to them.³⁰

More than the writers of 1 and 2 Maccabees and Josephus, *Sefer Yosippon's* author recognized the threat and wider significance of Roman expansion at this time, and its importance for the Maccabees. Consequently, he frames story of the Maccabean treaties with Rome against the larger background of the Mediterranean region, adopting a regional approach. He begins with a description of the Republic's victories over Carthage in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) and the Seleucid Empire's declining fortunes during the Sixth Syrian War (171–168 BCE), which he views as the fulfillment of Daniel (SY 21.1–8).³¹ He focuses on the Republic's opposing Antiochus IV in Greece and Hannibal's invasion of Italy: the geographical references in his account of the latter contain some anachronisms that reflect the author of *Sefer Yosippon's* era (SY 21.9–29).³² Although *Sefer Yosippon's* account of Hannibal's excursion through Europe is a bit fanciful, he writes that Hannibal and the Romans fought for ten years until Scipio eventually defeated him (SY 21.30–57). For *Sefer Yosippon's* writer, these events are connected: the great amount of gold and silver that the Romans captured from Carthage enabled them to wage their costly wars, and expand their Republic into the Middle East, which brought them into contact with the Seleucid Empire and the Maccabees.³³ Because the Romans had conquered Carthage, *Sefer Yosippon* implies that they could just as easily vanquish

²⁹ Polyb., 29.27.1–8; Diodorus 31.2; Livy 45.12.1–8; Appian, *Syr.*, 66.350–352; Justin, *Epit.* 34.3.1–3. Cf. Dan 11:29. For Roman treaties with small kingdoms, see Ehling 2008, 280–281; Gruen 1984, 45–46.

³⁰ The Romans allegedly wrote a letter to Demetrius I (1 Macc 8:31–32) and soon afterward gave him a friendly reception (Polyb. 31.33.1–5; 32.2.1–3; 33.3.13). However, the conditions recorded in 1 Macc 8:23–30 did not promise the Maccabees military support; however, it states that each party will not aide the enemy of the other. Nevertheless, Judah's treaty with Rome was a major propaganda victory that led to additional Jewish support for his cause, as evident by letters from the Seleucids to the Jews, likely preserved out of order, in 2 Macc that show diplomatic moves by both sides to mitigate conflict. See further 1 Macc 8:23–32; 10:18–20, 25–45; 11:30–37, 57; 12:6–18, 20–23; 13:36–40; 14:20–23; 15:2–9, 16–24; 2 Macc 1:10b–2:18; 9:19–29; 11:16–21, 22–26, 27–33, 34–38. For the authenticity of the letters, although likely edited, see further Schwartz 2022b, 129–169, 519–529; Schwartz 2022b, 291–292. The implication of the Maccabean-Roman treaties is that the Jews and Romans were parties to these agreements as peers; however, the Romans retained the final say over the consequences of these agreements and the Judeans sought to adapt themselves to their recognition that Rome now dominated the Hellenistic states. See further MacRae 2021, 331–345.

³¹ Bowman 2023, 87 n. 1.

³² Bowman 2023, 87 n. 4.

³³ See further Börner-Klein 2010, 232–233.

the Seleucid Empire. The Maccabees recognized this and wisely sought friendship with the Republic, both to survive and to curtail any expansion of the Seleucid Empire into Judea. From *Sefer Yosippon*'s perspective, Judah was a skillful politician who used the Seleucid fear of Roman intervention, even if unlikely, as a potential threat that made the Seleucid rulers cautious in dealing with him and his family. If Rajak is correct, the Romans helped John Hyrcanus survive a siege by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus VII Sidetes merely by threatening him: mere verbal intimidation, as the Maccabees hoped, was enough to help them survive in their turbulent neighborhood.³⁴

Sefer Yosippon portrays Rome's overtures to the Maccabees after the Republic's encounter with Carthage and the Seleucid Empire as part of the Republic's efforts to expand into the Middle East by making an alliance with the Maccabees after their hostile encounters with Antiochus IV in Egypt. For *Sefer Yosippon*, Rome's involvement in Judea was not a haphazard affair, but part of the Republic's calculated plan to expand its influence as far as the Parthian border. The book's portrayal of Judah as diplomatically astute is expanded in the author's statement that the Maccabean alliance with Rome brought peace for eight months and allowed the sons of Mattathias to take advantage of it by conquering the strategically located port of Jaffa (*SY* 22.1–7). If not for the Republic's policy of territorial expansion, the Maccabean rebellion, *Sefer Yosippon*'s author implies, would not have taken place. He emphasizes this by quoting the letter the Romans sent to Judah (cf. 2 Macc 11:34–38) that highlights the covenant between the people of Rome and the people of Judea. For *Sefer Yosippon*'s author, this letter is a testament in which the Republic promises to protect the Jews and provide them with food during times of war (*SY* 21.58–65). The writer emphasizes the prosperity this brought by stating that Judea was quiet for eight months, allowing Judah to remove the wicked from among his people (*SY* 22.1–2).³⁵

Samuel Rocca emphasizes that the Roman Republic's alliance with the Maccabees focused on common adversaries. The Maccabees never opposed the interests of the Republic but frequently fought against its enemies. This relationship lasted until Mattathias's descendants had created a state that had become a local power and a potential threat to the Republic's interests in the region during the time of Alexander Jannaeus and his successors.³⁶ The Roman Republic had good reason to court the Maccabees as the period of their territorial conquests coincided with a violent time in Italy when the Republic wanted stability in the Mediterranean region and feared the expansion of the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic Empires. *Sefer Yosippon*'s account recognizes this and views the Maccabees as part of Rome's wider political interests in the region. For *Sefer Yosippon*, the Republic favored the Maccabees and made a treaty with them because it weakened their mutual adversaries. It also kept the Seleucid Empire's monarchs from seizing Judea lest they suffer Roman reprisals. This helped the Maccabees to gain a foothold in the region and expand the territory under their control. Consequently, fear of a second Roman intervention limited the reprisals of Antiochus IV Sidetes and other Seleucid rulers against the Jews because the Republic feared the Seleucid rulers taking control of the region, along with its valuable trade routes and Mediterranean commerce. Although the Maccabees

³⁴ See Rajak 2001, 81–97.

³⁵ *Sefer Yosippon* does not provide any answer to the letter from Rome.

³⁶ Rocca 2014, 47–78.

controlled a small county, its strategic position between the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic Empires made it vital for the Republic that it did not fall into the hands of either power, and that the Maccabees not become allies of a major rival. For *Sefer Yosippon*'s author, the best example of how the fear of Roman intervention helped the Maccabees remain in power and gain independence was the reign of John Hyrcanus when the Seleucid Empire likely had the opportunity, but refrained from, conquering Judea, and instead focused on the mutual enemy of the Seleucids and the Republic, the Parthians. This worked to the Republic's advantage as the Maccabees and the Seleucids fought Rome's greatest adversary; the outcome of this encounter could only weaken the Parthians, the Seleucids, or both. Either result would have favored the Republic. It is here where *Sefer Yosippon* shows knowledge of lost works that documented Seleucid-Parthian conflicts, which also recorded how the Jews benefitted from their contact with the Republic's most formidable Eastern adversary.

III. John Hyrcanus: Conqueror of Parthia: A case of Betrayal? (*Sefer Yosippon* 27–30)

Like the works of Josephus, John Hyrcanus is the hero of *Sefer Yosippon*'s narrative of the Hasmonean period: the Jewish state peaks during his reign and begins a gradual decline following his death.³⁷ His tenure marks a turning point in the family's history as the tragic murder of his father Simon at Jericho by his son-in-law, Ptolemy, marked the end of the leadership of the sons of Mattathias: John, Simon, Judah, Eleazar, and Jonathan.³⁸ Hyrcanus, Simon's son, rallied his father's supporters and, after assuming the role of high priest and conducting the sacrifices in Jerusalem, pursued Ptolemy to Dagon. *Sefer Yosippon* includes a variation of the story of Ptolemy's mistreatment of Hyrcanus's family found in Josephus's narrative, and how the arrival of the sabbatical year forced him to abandon his siege of Ptolemy (SY 27).³⁹ The bulk of *Sefer Yosippon*'s description of his tenure deals with Hyrcanus's conflict with Antiochus VI Sidetes, who besieged him in Jerusalem at the start of his reign (SY 28).⁴⁰ What is significant about *Sefer Yosippon*'s account is the various explanations given for John's Greek sobriquet, Hyrcanus. The information found in this book suggests that the author of *Sefer Yosippon*, and likely

³⁷ 1 Macc 16:18–24; *War* 1.54–69; *Ant.* 13.228–300. For his reign, see further Atkinson, 2016, 47–79; Dąbrowa 2010b, 67–83.

³⁸ There are discrepancies in the names in the lists found in 1 Macc 16:2 and 2 Macc 2:22–23.

³⁹ *Sefer Yosippon* renders the account of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons (SY 15) somewhat freely but primarily relies on 2 Macc 7. The textual tradition used is uncertain, but many passages appear to be close to the Greek or Old Latin versions of 2 Macc 7. What is unique is that the author appears to respond to Christian martyrdoms to reclaim the Maccabean martyrs for the Jews and to portray them as akin to Christian saints, showing his elevated regard for the Maccabees in contrast to traditional depictions of them in Jewish literature. See further van Henten 2024, 345–367.

⁴⁰ *War* 161; *Ant.* 13.2370241. Bar-Kochva (2010, 399–439) proposes that Josephus has combined two conflicting accounts: the first, the long siege story, from Strabo, who took it from Posidonius, and the second, the reception story, taken from Nicolaus of Damascus. For a detailed discussion of Josephus's conflicting accounts of this event, and their likely dates, see further Atkinson 2016, 55–59.

a later redactor of the book, had access to an ancient source about the Hasmoneans and their encounters with the Seleucid Empire that has not survived. *Sefer Yosippon*'s content sheds new light on Jewish and Parthian relations, and raises the likelihood that Josephus chose to omit a significant historical incident to avoid any negative portrayal of Hyrcanus and the Jews of his day.

Scholars have long been puzzled over John's Greek sobriquet Hyrcanus. In his *War* and *Antiquities*, Josephus introduces him as Simon's third son John, whose name was Hyrcanus (Ἰωάννην, ὃς καὶ Ὑρκανὸς).⁴¹ Josephus consistently refers to him as Hyrcanus rather than by his Hebrew name. Hyrcanus is an unusual name and means "one from Hyrcania," which is a region on the Black Sea. It is the first Greek name acquired by a Hasmonean and is an anomaly since it is not a classical Greek name.⁴² Although Jerome, Eusebius, and others state that John received his Greek sobriquet Hyrcanus to commemorate his conquest of the Hyrcanians, scholars have universally rejected their explanations as fanciful.⁴³ In once section (*SY* 27.1–4), *Sefer Yosippon* introduces him after his father's death by stating: "he was the Yoḥanan called Hyrcanus, for when Yoḥanan had killed Orkanus (Hyrcanus), a great king at the time of his father, Shimon (= Simon) called his son Yoḥanan 'Hyrcanus,' after the name of the king he had killed, for his strength and bravery."⁴⁴ Like Josephus, *Sefer Yosippon* henceforth refers to him by his Greek name, Hyrcanus. According to his account, it not only commemorated his defeat and killing of a great ruler, but it was intended to highlight his strength and bravery: a description that was likely intended to recall Judah's nickname Maccabee that he too had received for his military prowess.⁴⁵

Sefer Yosippon introduces something new in his account when he refers to Hyrcanus as the "king of Judea" (*SY* 28.29, 33; 31.1). This is historically incorrect since the dynasty did not adopt the title until the reign of his son and successor, Judah Aristobulus.⁴⁶ Josephus, in contrast, states that Hyrcanus was only high priest and not a king.⁴⁷ Börner-Klein comments on the significance of this alteration that *Sefer Yosippon*'s author wanted to present the Maccabees and their descendants in the best light possible and consequently portrays Hyrcanus as a king on equal footing with the Roman Republic, whose Senate had shown his family great respect.⁴⁸ The writer was convinced that it was the Maccabean treaties with the Republic that gave the family of Mattathias legitimacy, and made the Hasmonean state a lawful nation of value to Rome.

Early in his reign, Hyrcanus faced his greatest crisis: a siege of his capital city of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII Sidetes, who took advantage of the turmoil in Judea by attempting

⁴¹ *Ant.* 13.228; *War* 1.54. His Hebrew name is Yoḥanan, which is occasionally translated as Jonathan but most commonly as John. The Hebrew form of his name is found on coins that he minted in Judea while his Greek name Hyrcanus written in Hebrew is found in *4QPapHistorical Text C* (4Q331 1 I 7). See further Atkinson 2016, 47–48.

⁴² Ilan 1987, 2.

⁴³ See Eusebius, *Chron.* 1:130–131; Syncellus, *Chron.* 1:548; Jerome, *Chron.* 2:131; Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.* 26.2. For doubts, see Schürer *et al.* 1973, 101–102; Schwartz 1990, 4.

⁴⁴ Translation from Bowman 2023, 105.

⁴⁵ See Bar-Kochva 1989, 147–148.

⁴⁶ See *War* 1.70; *Ant.* 13.301. Cf. Strabo 16.2.40.

⁴⁷ *Ant.* 13.230.

⁴⁸ Börner-Klein 2010, 236.

to annex his kingdom.⁴⁹ In his description of Sidetes's siege of Jerusalem, *Sefer Yosippon*, like Josephus, highlights the Seleucid monarch's respect for Judaism when he did not violate the sanctuary. The writer contrasts his pious action with its earlier desecration by Antiochus IV. This led to Sidetes's becoming known as the Pious (*SY* 28.24–25; *Ant.* 13.243–244). However, perhaps the most puzzling section of Josephus's account of Hyrcanus is his narrative of his participation as a vassal in Sidetes's invasion of Parthia. It is here where *Sefer Yosippon* and its redaction contain some important, and largely overlooked information, suggesting the existence of a lost account of Seleucid-Hasmonean history that included a section on the Parthians.

Antiochus VII Sidetes invaded Parthia in 131 CE. It was a failure that ended in his death there in 129 BCE and led to the destabilization of the Seleucid Empire and decades of civil war among his descendants and their rivals for the throne.⁵⁰ Josephus's terse account is puzzling for its explanation of how Hyrcanus survived. According to Justin's epitome of the *Philippic Histories* of Pompeius Trogus, Sidetes won three victories but as winter approached, he had to quarter his troops throughout Parthia. When his soldiers abused the Greek locals, they denied his men needed supplies.⁵¹ What happened next is rather perplexing.

Josephus is the only extant classical writer who mentions the participation of Hyrcanus in this expedition. He describes it in the following brief passage in his *Antiquities* that suggests he feared his readers would not believe it. Consequently, he takes the unusual measure of citing his sources and states that other unnamed books also documented this event:

On this we have the testimony of several writers, also of Nicolaus of Damascus, who writes as follows, "After defeating Indates, the Parthian general, and setting up a victory monument at the Lycus River, Antiochus (Sidetes) remained there two days at the request of the Jew Hyrcanus because of a festival of his ancestors during which Jews are forbidden to travel." Nor does (Nicolas of Damascus) speak falsely in saying this; for the Festival of Pentecost had arrived following the Sabbath, and (Jews) are not permitted to travel either on the Sabbath or on a festival. (*Ant.* 13.250–252)

Josephus next briefly states that the Parthian monarch Phraates II (= Arsaces VII, 132–127 BCE) attacked and killed Sidetes. He then abruptly switches topics in his narrative to describe how Hyrcanus immediately began to conquer Syrian cities after the 129 BCE death of Sidetes; however, archaeological evidence shows otherwise as he waited until fifteen years later, after civil wars had weakened the Seleucid Empire, to take lands

⁴⁹ Josephus's description of the termination of Sidetes' siege of Hyrcanus in Jerusalem is both confusing and repetitive, suggesting that he has taken material from various sources and either did not know what took place, or, perhaps more likely, wanted to obscure some of the details. For detailed discussions and sources, see further Atkinson 2016, 55–59; Bar-Kochva 2010; Dąbrowa 2010b, 81–82; Fisher 1970; Schwartz 1996, 83–102. For recent archaeological discoveries of Hyrcanus's defensive construction after the siege, and the possible location of the Akra Simon captured (1 Macc 14:36–37) in the Giv'ati Parking Lot excavations in Jerusalem, see Zilberstein 2021, 37–52.

⁵⁰ For details, see Ehling 2008, 217–277; Overtoom 2020, 224–226. For a discussion of the extant sources for this event, see Atkinson 2016, 62–67; Dąbrowa 2010b, 67–72.

⁵¹ Justin, *Epit.* 38.10.6–7.

in Syria.⁵² But the most unusual thing about Josephus's account is that he offers no explanation of how Hyrcanus and his forces survived and returned home intact. His statement that Nicolaus and other writers described Hyrcanus's participation in this campaign suggests that the details were once widely known, and available to anyone who wanted to consult them in some library. *Sefer Yosippon* here supplements Josephus's narrative, possibly using an unknown ancient source.

Sefer Yosippon's account of Sidetes's Parthian expedition quotes from Josephus (Joseph ben Gurion) and mentions that other writers recorded it. He also names Nicolaus of Damascus as a source (SY 28). The author of *Sefer Yosippon* describes what happened after Hyrcanus stayed behind with his military force to celebrate a religious festival; however, he focuses on the hubris of Sidetes and his foolish decision to attack without the Hasmonean troops:

Antiochus went by himself with his camp and did not wait for Hyrcanus, so that Hyrcanus would not gain honor for warring against the Persian king. Antiochus attacked Arsaces, king of Persia, and fought with him, and many Greeks fell in that battle, and King Antiochus ended his days in that battle. (SY 28.41–44)⁵³

But *Sefer Yosippon* has more to say about this perplexing incident. It is what Bowman has called an “open book” as it was subjected to various alterations, many of which were quite substantial to include entire passages or chapters referred to as “interpolations.”⁵⁴ The most famous of these are the incorporation of material from the *Alexander Romance* that documents Alexander the Great's visit to Jerusalem, which are based on Hebrew translations of Greek and Latin Alexander traditions, and a Jewish version of the *Testimonium Flavianum* in *Sefer Yosippon's* chapter on Philo's embassy to Rome (SY 58).⁵⁵ While the version *Sefer Yosippon* quoted above parallels Josephus's *Antiquities* and states that Sidetes died in Parthia, it too does not explain how Hyrcanus survived and returned home. However, the text commonly known as the “third version” of *Sefer Yosippon*, which in its present form has been dated sometime before 1160/1161 CE, includes an extensive interpolation that documents how Hyrcanus survived.⁵⁶

Pucci proposes that the author of the interpolation of *Sefer Yosippon* contained in the edition known as the “third version” consulted a Byzantine chronicle translated into Hebrew that included material from a lost ancient pagan source about Sidetes's Parthian

⁵² It is more likely that Hyrcanus's military actions were raids for plunder or the extortion of ransom and not campaigns of territorial expansion or ethnic cleansing. For this evidence, see further Atkinson 2016, 67–69; Finkielstejn 1998, 33–63; Lorber 2021, 326–328.

⁵³ Translation from Bowman 2023, 110–111.

⁵⁴ Bowman 1995b, 31.

⁵⁵ For the different recensions of *Sefer Yosippon*, the extant manuscripts, and their possible dates of compositions, see further Bowman 1995a, 349–359; Flusser 1978, 1.3–53; Dönitz, 2011, 963–967; Dönitz 2013, 91–102; Dönitz, 2016, 382–389; Dönitz 2024, 169–209. For other stories about John Hyrcanus in *Sefer Yosippon*, which more closely parallel Josephus's *Antiquities*, see SY 27–28 in Flusser 1978, 1.110–115.

⁵⁶ The text is printed in the 1544 Venice edition of *Sefer Yosippon* edited by Hominer (1967, ch. 28). *Sefer Yosippon's* over 60 manuscripts so differ from one another, and represent at least three recensions with numerous alterations and interpolations, that its transmission history should be regarded as a fluid one. Consequently, there is no single official version of the composition. See Dönitz 2024, 169–171.

campaign.⁵⁷ According to this account, Phraates II sent a secret message to Hyrcanus encouraging him to form an alliance and betray Sidetes. Hyrcanus agreed, waited in the rear, and did not come to Sidetes's aid when the Parthians attacked the Seleucid army. Then, Phraates II and Hyrcanus made a treaty that allowed the Hasmonean army to return home in peace. Although *Sefer Yosippon*'s history contains legendary elements, the same is true of Josephus, who often incorporated dramatic episodes in his accounts of the Hasmoneans to make them more entertaining.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, we should carefully weigh these and other sources by comparing them with all available historical evidence to determine their veracity.

The plausibility of *Sefer Yosippon*'s claim that Hyrcanus made an alliance with the Parthians to betray Sidetes is important to consider as it may shed new light on political affairs during the Roman Republic as well as the Roman Empire of Josephus's day. Such an alliance, if it did exist, makes political sense as the Jews and the Parthians were both subjected to hostile acts by the Seleucid Empire; consequently, a joint alliance between them would have been natural at this time as well as later. Although the late date of *Sefer Yosippon* may appear to be an impediment to accepting that its author had access to ancient sources, the writer's sophisticated approach to his sources, which included the Hebrew and Latin Bibles, 1 and 2 Maccabees, *De excidio Hierosolymitano*, the Latin version of Josephus's *Antiquities*, as well as midrashic texts and Roman rhetoricians and historians, in addition to anti-Jewish materials, shows that he strove to present an accurate and impartial version of history. Bowman concludes that he "is possibly the only true mediaeval historian to have written on par with the best of modern historiography" while Flusser writes that he adopted a critical approach to his sources, making him a gifted historian with excellent historical insight.⁵⁹ *Sefer Yosippon*, moreover, existed in several versions, which later critical editors expanded with the results of their original research using ancient works to continue the tradition of critical historical research begun by the book's original author. The long version of *Sefer Yosippon*, Recension C, according to an introduction by the 14th CE scholar Judah Mosquoni (1328 CE until after 1370 CE), refers to shorter versions of the book, most notably the edition produced by the twelfth-century CE Spanish scholar Abraham Ibn Daud. Mosquoni appears to have consulted Josephus's text in Greek or Latin and possibly other translations of it. He also took non-Jewish sources in Latin and incorporated them into *Sefer Yosippon*. Mosquoni came from Byzantium and spent time in several countries researching his edition of *Sefer Yosippon*, before moving to Majorca.⁶⁰ He provides a witness to the continued interest

⁵⁷ Pucci 1981, 331–338; Pucci, 1983, 13–25.

⁵⁸ Josephus presented his works orally before placing them in written form, which explains many of his more unusual and interesting digressions that often interrupt his narratives. His focus on producing entertainment led him to include sensationalistic stories about some Hasmoneans. His account of Judah Aristobulus is the best example as it is a tragedy that contains many legendary elements. See *Ant.* 13.301–319; *War* 1.70–84; Atkinson 2016, 20–21. Josephus's description of the sky army, which he apparently witnessed, is another example of miraculous elements scattered throughout his history that, although of doubtful historicity, enhance the dramatic elements of his works and shows his concern to entertain his audience. See *War*, 6.288–289. Cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.

⁵⁹ Bowman 2024, 390; Flusser 1987, 386–397.

⁶⁰ Dönitz 2024, 198–201. Ibn Daud lived in Castile during a time when the administration granted religious minorities considerable autonomy. Other distinguished Andalusian scholars, such as Joseph

in Josephus's works and later efforts to enhance them through the inclusion of new historical research. This raises the question of who wrote *Sefer Yosippon* and from where did its author, and redactor, obtain new historical materials?

Perhaps the greatest mystery of *Sefer Yosippon* is the cultural location of its unnamed author, who is generally dated to the early 10th century CE and, based on some of its historical allusions—particularly to Muslim soldiers fighting a “jihad” at the time of the Saracen invasions of Southern Italy—to the Italian Peninsula.⁶¹ Several cities have been proposed as the likely location where he wrote *Sefer Yosippon*, such as Naples, where the library of Duke Sergius was located, Bari, a center of medieval scholarship, or perhaps northern Italy where many of the classical works the author cited were likely available in the great library of the monastery of Bobbio in Piacenza in northern Italy: many of these manuscripts in turn were dispersed throughout monastic and papal libraries in Italy.⁶² Bowman raises the possibility that *Sefer Yosippon*'s author may have consulted Nicholas of Damascus's massive history still extant at the time in Constantinople and cited in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' encyclopedia; there is evidence that Jewish scholars had access to the great royal library in the Blachernai palace in Constantinople.⁶³ While there is no direct evidence that *Sefer Yosippon*'s author, or Jews in Italy, used monastic libraries, his extensive use of pagan and Christian texts, particularly Roman literature, at a time of great turmoil when Saracen invasions impacted both Jewish and Christian communities could have led to intellectual exchanges among members of both faith communities. If so, then *Sefer Yosippon* may be a unique witness to unknown Jewish-Christian cultural exchanges in Italy of which we know little. But there is evidence from other contemporary writers for the existence of ancient histories that documented the Hasmoneans, the Seleucid Empire, and the Parthians at the time *Sefer Yosippon* was written and redacted.

The Christian chronicler George Syncellus (died after 810 CE), who lived in Palestine before residing in Constantinople, provides evidence suggesting that there were ancient histories about the Hasmoneans available in his day. He describes an unattested siege of Tyre by John Hyrcanus's son, Alexander Jannaeus, along with a counterattack by the Nabateans and the Itureans.⁶⁴ Although Josephus does not mention this episode, coins showing that Ascalon declared its independence at the beginning Jannaeus's reign, along with coins from Tyre celebrating the city's autonomy in 103 BCE, suggest that Tyre, and likely other coastal cities, had fought against Jannaeus when he besieged Ptolemais at the beginning of his reign.⁶⁵ It appears that Jannaeus, shortly before his death, attacked Tyre in retaliation for its earlier assault against him when he had besieged Ptolemais and was in turn attacked by forces from several coastal cities that recently had asserted their

ben Meir ha-Levi Ibn Migash (1077–1141 CE) and Meir ha-Levi Abulafia (ca. 1170–1244 CE), also lived there. Toledo during Ibn Daud's time, moreover, was a major translation center, “the school of Toledo,” and he appears to have had access to many texts, including print and manuscript editions of *Sefer Yosippon* in Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Arabic versions. See further Vehlow 2013, 11–30.

⁶¹ See Grossman 1999, 73–86; Dönitz 2011, 959–960.

⁶² For discussions of the possible location of the author, see Bowman 2019, 58–59; Bowman 2023, xii–xiv; Flusser 1987, 393.

⁶³ Bowman 2024, 395.

⁶⁴ *Chron.* 559.5–12.

⁶⁵ See Brett 1937, 456–458; Kindler 1978, 52–52; Atkinson 2016, 110–112.

independence from the Seleucid Empire. Josephus likely omitted these incidents to avoid making the Hasmoneans look bad; nevertheless, he does record that Jannaeus was forced to relinquish valuable lands to the Nabatean monarch Aretas with no explanation: this act that greatly weakened his kingdom.⁶⁶ Looking at his campaigns, it is clear that Jannaeus had overextended himself in his effort to annex the coastal territories of the Seleucid Empire, prompting his enemies to make an alliance against him. At the end of his reign, as Syncellus suggests, he faced assaults from enemies to his north and east. Syncellus, moreover, also claims that Jannaeus died while making preparations to fight the Itureans: an incident not mentioned in Josephus's puzzling account of his death.⁶⁷ Also, Schwartz proposes that Syncellus's list of cities under Jannaeus's control at the time of his death, which greatly differs from Josephus's inventory in *Antiquities* 13.395–397, is derived from an ancient and more accurate list than Josephus, suggesting he copied it from some unknown source about the Hasmoneans.⁶⁸ Given Syncellus's location in Constantinople, it is likely that he obtained this information from a library there. Given this evidence, it is plausible that the author and redactors of *Sefer Yosippon* had access to lost historical texts that documented Hasmonean history and existed in libraries centuries later. This is particularly true regarding the relationship between the Hasmoneans and the Parthians.

If *Sefer Yosippon*'s story of a Jewish-Parthian alliance is true, it would suggest that Josephus deliberately omitted it from his history. He would have had a good reason to do so since the Romans in his day feared a Jewish-Parthian alliance: many believed that the Jews had always conspired with the Parthians. A tradition preserved in the Talmud—a work *Sefer Yosippon* shows no acquaintance with—may suggest that there was a coordinated Jewish and Parthian alliance against the Seleucid Empire: it claims that Jews attacked Antioch and may lend some historical plausibility to the claim of *Sefer Yosippon* that Hyrcanus betrayed Sidetes. According to the Talmud, Jews assaulted Antioch during Hyrcanus's reign, which implies a coordinated Jewish opposition to the Seleucid Empire.⁶⁹ Its mention of a Parthian delegation visiting Jerusalem during the reign of Hyrcanus's son, Alexander Jannaeus, in approximately 85 BCE, suggest that the Parthians sought an alliance with him against the Armenian monarch Tigranes II. It has been suggested that this presupposes a previous alliance between the two powers that goes back to Hyrcanus.⁷⁰ If we are to offer a suggestion as to why such material is missing in Josephus's

⁶⁶ *Ant.* 13.393–334.

⁶⁷ *Chron.* 59.5–12. See further Atkinson 2016, 131–132.

⁶⁸ Schwartz 1990, 1–8.

⁶⁹ *b. Sot.* 33a. That this Talmudic story takes place during the reign of Hyrcanus is evident by this passage's mention that when he sent his sons, Aristobulus and Antigonus, to besiege Samaria during the reign of Antiochus IX Cyzicenus (115–95 CE), who helped defend the city from the Hasmoneans, God purportedly spoke to Hyrcanus in the temple telling him of their success. Josephus (*Ant.* 13.281–282) also preserves this story, showing that it is ancient.

⁷⁰ *y. Naz.* 5.3 (IV.G); *y. Ber.* 7.2 (III.F–G). The Talmud refers to the Parthians as the Persians. For discussions in favor of the historicity of the Talmudic evidence that an alliance also existed between Phraates II and Hyrcanus, see Efron 1987, 148–150; Debevoise 1938, 94–95; Neusner 1965, 25–26; Pucci 1981, 333–335; Pucci 1983, 13–25; Sievers 1990, 140–141; Zollschan 2017, 259–264. If the suggestion that the mention of “Alexander” in a note in a Babylonian astronomical diary is Alexander Jannaeus, this may provide additional support for an alliance with the Parthians against Tigranes II, cf. Sachs – Hunger 1996, 477, no. -82A, ‘rev., l. 23’ [(Red.) Cf. van der Spek *et al.* 2025, 829: “[...] there is no evidence that he [i.e. Alexander Jannaeus] ever reached Babylonia. One might speculate that this Alexander was appointed to some

books, the longstanding Roman fear of a Jewish-Parthian alliance during Josephus's day may provide an explanation.

The Jews had a long relationship with the Parthians that went back to the early period of Hasmonean rule when many Jews lived in military colonies in the Parthian Empire and Armenia.⁷¹ But from the perspective of the Roman Republic any favorable Jewish and Parthian relations threatened their hold over the East, and possibly their control of overland trade and maritime commerce. In 53 BCE, after the Parthians defeated the legions of Crassus at the Battle of Carrhae and then killed him, they took many Roman legionnaires captive along with the legionary standards.⁷² When the survivors of Crassus's legions reached the Galilee, Jews there attacked them.⁷³ This event, of which Josephus merely alludes to without any explanation as to why it occurred, suggests that many Jews at the time supported the Parthians against the Roman Republic. Although Crassus's defeat became part of Octavian's ideology, as he became determined to regain the lost standards and soldiers taken captive, the Romans had a major problem with his loss. Crassus, many ancient sources related, had invaded Parthia merely for greed and ambition to fulfill his desire for glory.⁷⁴ Many considered it an unjust war since the Parthians had not broken their treaty with the Romans or harmed them.⁷⁵ Consequently, the Romans feared retaliation. It occurred during the tenure of the quaestor C. Cassius Longinus, who repulsed a Parthian invasion at Antioch in 51 BCE.⁷⁶ But the greatest danger to the Republic in the East likely came from the Jews. The partisans of the Hasmonean prince Aristobulus II fought to evict the Romans from the region: Josephus provides little information about his anti-Roman activities other than that after a battle Longinus managed to regain control of the region.⁷⁷ Then, in 40 BCE, Pacorus, son of King Orodes II of Parthia, and the Parthian satrap Barzaphranes, invaded Parthia, aided by the Roman traitor Quintus Labienus Parthicus, a former partisan of Pompey.⁷⁸ The Hasmonean prince Antigonus cooperated with them: the Parthians made him king, forcing the Roman Senate to appoint Herod the Great king of Judea and send Gaius Sosius, governor of Syria, with Roman troops to assist Herod in defeating Antigonus and expelling the Parthians. Yet, this took three years and Herod became king in 37 BCE. Yet, the Parthian threat was not over. Later, in 54 CE, Tiridates, the brother of the reigning Parthian monarch, claimed the throne of Armenia. This caused the *legatus* of Syria to delay moving troops to Judea during a time of unrest, further resulting in the destabilization of the country, which led to the beginning of the First Jewish Revolt.⁷⁹ In 79 CE, a man claiming to be

office by the king (see r20'), perhaps to quell a revolt [...] and that he then had a conflict with the Greek (or Hellenized) community in Babylon, possibly the instigators of the revolt."]. See further, Assar 2006, 73–74.

⁷¹ Antiochus III had settled 2,000 Jewish families in Parthia to help him control troubled areas. See Josephus, *Ant.* 12.147–153; Smallwood 1981, 120–128.

⁷² Plut., *Crass.* 24–25; Overtoom 2020, 56–64, 213–214.

⁷³ See *Ant.* 14.120; *War* 1.180; Cassius Dio 40.28.

⁷⁴ Plut., *Crass.* 14.4; Velleius Paterculus 2.46.2; Appian, *Civil War* 2.18; Cassius Dio, 40.12.1.

⁷⁵ Cicero, *Fin.* 3.22; *Str.* 16.1.28; Plut., *Crass.* 16.3; Appian, *Civil War*, 2.18; Cassius Dio 40.12.2.

⁷⁶ Cassius Dio 40.28–29; *Ant.* 14.119; Livy, *Per.* 108; Justin, *Epit.* 42.4; Cic., *Att.* 5.20; *Fam.* 2.10; *Phil.* 11.14.35.

⁷⁷ *War* 1.180; *Ant.* 14.120. The leader of Aristobulus II's forces, Peitholaus, is mentioned in the Dead Sea Scroll 4QHistorical Text F (4Q468e 4).

⁷⁸ *War* 1.286–393; *Ant.* 14.386–15.195.

⁷⁹ See Millar 1993, 66–69; Overtoom 2020, 113–114.

the deceased Nero took refuge in the East with pretenders to the Parthian throne while in 82/3 CE Domitian forced the Parthian monarch Pacorus II to surrender another man claiming to be Nero.⁸⁰ For many Romans, the greatest threat to their Empire was from Parthia: however, many Romans considered the Jews Parthia's longstanding ally and therefore their adversary as well. The problem Josephus faced was that Parthia still had a considerable Jewish population, whose loyalty to the Roman Empire was in doubt.

Josephus wrote an earlier version of his *War* to Jews in the Parthian Empire and adjacent regions to encourage them to not revolt against the Roman Empire.⁸¹ Justin's epitome of the *Philippic Histories* of Pompeius Trogus suggests that the Roman Republic was suspicious of the Hasmoneans because of their long relationship with the Seleucid Empire, and that the Jews had conspired against their interests by tolerating piracy. This made many Romans wary of the Jews and was the apparent reason why Pompey, after his 63 BCE conquest of the Hasmonean state and his termination of its monarchy, cut off the Jews's access to the Mediterranean Sea by seizing their harbors (*War* 1.156). Trogus's account also suggests that the Romans believed the Jews were in league against them with Parthia's neighbor and Rome's adversary, the Nabateans (*Prol.* 39; 40.2.4).⁸² Vespasian, whom Josephus had fought against and who later became his patron, was concerned with Parthia and undertook a fortification of Syria's eastern border to protect the Roman Empire from it.⁸³ Although our sources for this time are incomplete, it appears that Vespasian's governor, M. Ulpius Traianus, undertook some non-military action that temporarily alleviated tensions between the Romans and the Parthians.⁸⁴ During Domitian's reign when Josephus resided in Jerusalem and wrote his *Antiquities*, many Romans doubted the Jews's loyalty to the Roman Empire, prompting him to write his tract to the Jews under Parthian rule urging them not to revolt against Roman Empire.⁸⁵ It was likely fear of disloyalty of the Jews, and his precarious status as a former rebel who had fought against Rome, that led Josephus to omit any accounts of Parthian-Jewish relations from his writings. Later references to such an alliance dating to the reign of Hyrcanus's son, Alexander Jannaeus, provide additional evidence for the existence of sources regarding this political relationship that Josephus ignored in his books.⁸⁶ Domitian considered the Parthians such a threat to the survival of the Roman Empire that he planned a campaign against them.⁸⁷ Given this background, we can understand the reluctance of Josephus to mention any cooperation between the Hasmoneans and the Parthians in his books.

⁸⁰ See further Debevoise 1938, 200–202, 214–215.

⁸¹ *War* 1.1–6. Josephus's Greek in his introduction to *War*, and the Atticizing style and numerous classical allusions, suggest that it is a fresh work that was based on an earlier Aramaic text and not a translation of it. See further Hata 1975–1976, 89–108.

⁸² See further Atkinson 2022.

⁸³ See further Atkinson 2016, 4–17.

⁸⁴ Dąbrowa 1998, 60–61.

⁸⁵ For this and other examples that demonstrate the Roman Empire's fear of a Jewish-Parthian alliance, see Atkinson 2016, 172–177.

⁸⁶ *b. Sot.* 33a; *y. Naz.* 5.3 (IV.G); *y. Ber.* 7.2 (III.F–G). Because *Sefer Yosippon* shows no knowledge of the Talmud, these citations provide an independent witness to some of the traditions preserved in his book regarding alliances between the Jews and the Parthians.

⁸⁷ It did not take place until the reign of Trajan (113–117 CE). See Millar 1993, 80–89.

IV. Conclusion

While *Sefer Yosippon*'s late date may make one cautious to accept its historical accounts as accurate, its author displays an extensive knowledge of classical works in Greek, Latin, along with Jewish and Christian writings, that reveal considerable historical research on the part of its author and redactors. The book, moreover, shows no acquaintance with the Babylonian Talmud, suggesting that its author and redactors obtained materials from non-Jewish sources. Because some of the traditions in *Sefer Yosippon* reflect stories found in other writers, including the Talmud, it is probable that its author had access to surviving histories of the Hasmonean period that are no longer extant, some of which may have been known in some form (written or oral) in Europe and the Middle East. This was particularly true of its accounts of Parthian-Jewish relations of which Josephus largely omits in his historical writings. Consequently, despite its late date of composition, *Sefer Yosippon* should be regarded as a witness to lost historical works, whose contents may be accurately reflected in this medieval history of ancient Israel. The discovery of a Seleucid gold victory stater Antiochus VII Sidetes minted, which appears to commemorate his previously unknown victory in Parthian before his invasion of the country with Hyrcanus, shows that there is much we do not know about Seleucid and Parthian relations, and the Hasmonean's role in them.⁸⁸

Because *Sefer Yosippon* supplements our accounts of the Maccabean Rebellion, providing a slightly different perspective regarding its origin that modern scholars have also proposed, it suggests that the origins of this event remain largely a mystery. Also, its narrative of Hyrcanus and his successors suggests that the Jews and Parthians had a more favorable relationship with one another that may also be alluded to in Justin's epitome of the *Philippic Histories* of Pompeius Trogus. Recent scholarship on *Sefer Yosippon*, moreover, has demonstrated that its date of authorship was much earlier than Flusser realized, and that the 953 CE date of the colophon widely cited to determine the date of its authorship is actually part of the book's sub-editing. Most of *Sefer Yosippon*'s content is much earlier. The book was widely disseminated and considered so important that various authors continued to research it and add new material-based sources available to them.⁸⁹ Consequently, the serious historian should consider the likelihood that late works, such as *Sefer Yosippon*, may contain ancient and reliable information about the past that is not documented in our extant sources that was available to its authors and redactors in libraries, which are now lost.

⁸⁸ For this coin, see Houghton 1989, 65.

⁸⁹ Dönitz 2013, 91–102; Ian 2017, 805–808; Ta-Shma 1993, 17–24.

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