

Sefer Yosippon as a Source for Hasmonean History: The Mysterious Story of John Hyrcanus and the Parthians

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The work known as *Sefer Yosippon* is a remarkable example of Hebrew historiography that largely paraphrases Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*. Likely written during the tenth century CE in southern Italy, possibly the Naples region, it is unique for its incorporation of materials from pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings. The composition appears to have emanated from a climate where Jews, Christians, and Muslims interacted with one another, likely during the tenth century CE Saracen invasions of southern Italy.¹ It was during this tumultuous era that *Yosippon's* author managed to access and integrate many non-Jewish texts into his narrative of Jewish history to offer new insights concerning some significant events of the past. The present study examines a unique section of *Yosippon* that likely came from an unknown work that contained new information about the Hasmonean high priest and ruler John Hyrcanus and his foray into lands later claimed as part of the Islamic world. Its contents may shed some additional light on the possible sources available to *Yosippon's* author and later redactors, as well as contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Jewish and Byzantine Christian scholarship in Italy.

1 Josephus' Account of John Hyrcanus in Parthia

The strange story of the Hasmonean high priest and ruler John Hyrcanus' participation in the 131 BCE Parthian invasion of Antiochus VII Sidetes shows that

1 For the date of *SY*, the author's likely social location, and the work's genre, see further the discussions and extensive literature cited in Bowman, "*Sefer Yosippon: Revelations*," 57–64; Bowman, "'Yosippon' and Jewish Nationalism," 23–51; Dönitz, "*Sefer Yosippon (Josippon)*," 382–389; Dönitz, "*Sefer Yosippon and the Greek Bible*," 223–234; Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 1–34; Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship*, 62–66; Grossman, "The Cultural and Social Background," 73–86; Veltri, *Gegenwart der Tradition*, 122–132; Zunz, *Gottesdienstliche Vorträge*, 154–165.

Sefer Yosippon, despite its late date of composition and redaction, should be considered a primary source for Hyrcanus' reign. To understand the importance of *Yosippon*'s account of this expedition, we must begin with a brief look at Josephus' perplexing story of how Hyrcanus and the Jews alone survived this disastrous campaign.

The reign of Antiochus VII Sidetes has been called the "swan song of the Seleucid Empire" because he was the last Syrian ruler to have made a concerted effort to halt Syria's political decline.² This was especially true of his effort to regain lands lost by his predecessor to the Parthians. According to our extant sources, he undertook an effort to subdue the Parthians after Hyrcanus succeeded his father, Simon. Only a few incomplete sources record Sidetes' invasion of Parthia.³ *Sefer Yosippon* and Josephus alone document Hyrcanus' participation in this campaign.⁴ The outcome of the invasion was a disaster for the Seleucid Empire: Sidetes died in battle fighting the Parthians; much of his army was killed and many of his soldiers were taken captive. Only Hyrcanus and his forces survived. Josephus was apparently so troubled that his readers would doubt the veracity of his account of how Hyrcanus and the Jews managed to return home that he took the unusual step of introducing his narrative with a reference to his sources: "We have the testimony of these things, also of Nicolaus of Damascus" (μάρτυς δέ τούτων ἡμῖν ἐστὶν καὶ Νικόλαος ὁ Δαμασκηνός). The position of the word καὶ is significant and should be translated as "also," suggesting that Josephus consulted other unnamed sources that documented the participation of Hyrcanus in this war.⁵ Unfortunately, Josephus' account provides little detail. He merely quotes from an unspecified source to show that Hyrcanus was not with Sidetes during the final battle. To show his readers, presumably pagans, that Hyrcanus had not betrayed Sidetes, he appends a comment explaining a Jewish holiday to show that his account is factual.

2 Quotation from Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 427. See further Ehling, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte*, 178–216; Fischer, *Untersuchungen zum Partherkrieg*, 29–48; Schwartz, "On Antiochus VII Sidetes' Parthian Expedition," 83–102.

3 The following offer short references to the war: Diodorus, 34/35.17.2; Aelian, *Nat. an.* 10.34; Appian, *Syriaca* 59; 68; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 11.68; Eusebius, *Chron.* 1.255–256; Ioannes Antiochenus, "Excerpta de insidiis," *FHG*, 4:561; Livy, *Periochae* 59.13; Orosius 5.190.310.

4 *AJ* 13.249; *SY* 29 (טז), ed. Flusser, *The Josippon*, 1.115–116. In the parallel passage in *BJ* 1.62, Josephus merely states that Sidetes fought the Medes and provides no information about the campaign. Josephus obtained much of his materials about the Parthians from the writings of Strabo and Nicolaus of Damascus. See further, Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue*, 278–280; Täubler, *Die Parthernachrichten*, 5–9.

5 *AJ* 13.250. For this observation, see Pucci, "Jewish-Parthian," 16.

“After defeating Indates, the Parthian general, and setting up a victory monument at the Lycus River, Antiochus 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.” He does not speak falsely in saying this; the Festival of Pentecost had come round, after the Sabbath, and we are not permitted to travel on the Sabbath or a festival.⁶

Josephus then mentions in passing that the Parthians killed Sidetes and much of the Seleucid Empire’s army in battle. His terse account provides no details. Rather, Josephus mentions that he does not provide them because the full story “has already been related elsewhere.⁷ This formula is presumably from Josephus’ unnamed source since he does not record any additional information about Sidetes’ invasion of Parthia in his books.

Josephus likely took his quotation about Hyrcanus in Parthia from a pagan work since it identifies him as a Jew. Although this expedition was important, this cryptic passage is all that Josephus preferred to record about it. However, he had a purpose in including a citation from this unknown account: he wanted to show that Sidetes died at least two days after he had left Hyrcanus. This was apparently important to Josephus, who wanted to emphasize that Hyrcanus had not betrayed Sidetes. His narrative implies that Sidetes was responsible for his death since he did not wait for the Jewish legions to arrive before he attacked the Parthians.

The historian Pompeius Trogus supplements Josephus’ succinct account by providing some background regarding Sidetes’ recklessness. He emphasizes the hubris of Sidetes, claiming that he was so overconfident of victory that he set out with an excessive number of noncombatants with him to Parthia that greatly slowed his march.⁸ According to Trogus, he nevertheless won three battles and forced the Parthians to flee towards Iran. Sidetes’ men, certain of victory, began to call him “the Great.”⁹ Confident that he would quickly capture Parthia, Sidetes refused to meet the envoys the Parthian monarch, Phraates II (= Arsaces VIII, 132–27 BCE = Ashraq in *Sefer Yosippon*), sent to negotiate.

None of the extant accounts record the circumstances of Sidetes’ death. Diodorus merely states that Phraates II killed three hundred thousand of

6 *AJ* 13.250–252.

7 *AJ* 13.253.

8 For Sidetes’ hubris, see further, Pompeius Trogus, *Philippic Histories* 38.10.1–4. The writing of the first-century BCE historian Pompeius Trogus is extant in an epitome by Justin that has been dated as early as 144 CE to as late as 395 CE. See Borgna, *Ripensare la storia universale*, 107–30; Seel, *Eine römische Weltgeschichte*, 346–347.

9 Trogus, *Philippic Histories* 38.10.6.

Sidetes' men in battle.¹⁰ Trogus mentions that the Parthians also captured some Seleucid soldiers and forced them to serve as conscripts to fight the Scythians.¹¹ Josephus' insistence that the improbable story of Hyrcanus' survival was true and documented in pagan sources leaves many questions unanswered. Most important of these is why the Parthians did not attack Hyrcanus and his troops on their way home? *Sefer Yosippon* provides a unique account of Hyrcanus' participation in Sidetes' invasion of Parthia that likely came from an ancient source about the Hasmoneans, which suggests that Josephus possibly excluded considerable information about this expedition and Hyrcanus' activities there.

2 Yosippon's Account of John Hyrcanus in Parthia

Sefer Yosippon provides two different explanations of how Hyrcanus survived Sidetes' Parthian campaign. One version agrees with the *Antiquitates Judaicae* in stating that Hyrcanus accompanied the Seleucid army to Parthia and that the army of Phraates II killed Sidetes in battle.¹² However, the third recension ("C") of *Yosippon* contains an intriguing addition not found in any other source that explains how Hyrcanus survived Sidetes' campaign with his army intact.¹³ According to this version, the Parthian monarch Ashraq (אשרק) sent a secret message to "king Hyrcanus" (המלך הרקנוס) reminding him that the Persians had built the Jewish temple. Reminding him of the Parthians' past support of the Jews, Ashraq asked Hyrcanus why he was helping the Greeks since they had recently defiled the Jerusalem sanctuary. Ashraq's dispatch urged Hyrcanus to betray Sidetes by holding back his forces and allow the Parthians

10 Diodorus, 37.17.1. For the likely events surrounding Sidetes' death, see further Atkinson, *A History of the Hasmonean State*, 64–68.

11 Trogus, *Philippic Histories* 42.4–5.

12 *SY* 29 (ט), ed. Flusser, *The Josippon*, 1.115–116.

13 The third recension (Recension C) text is from the 1544 Venice edition (pages 46–47, chapter 28 in Hominer, *Josiphon*). For other stories about Hyrcanus in *SY*, which more closely parallel Josephus' *AJ*, see *SY* 27–28 (בז–בח), ed. Flusser, *The Josippon*, 1.110–115. For the recensions of *SY* and their possible dates of compositions, see further Bowman, "Dates in *Sefer Yosippon*," 349–359; Flusser, *The Josippon*, 1.3–53; Dönitz, "Historiography," 963–967; Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 91–102; Dönitz, "*Sefer Yosippon* (Josippon)," 382–389. Dönitz provides sufficient evidence to show that the Byzantine scholar Rabbi Yehuda Mosconi compiled the third recension. For Yehuda Mosconi's use of classical Greek and Latin literature and his role in producing recension C, and his possible linguistic proficiency, see further Dönitz, "Historiography," 964–965.

to destroy the Seleucid army. Afterwards, Ashraq promised to make an alliance with Hyrcanus.

The remainder of *Sefer Yosippon's* account of Hyrcanus in Parthia is somewhat reminiscent of Josephus as both agree that the Jewish legion remained behind while Sidetes continued his march, confronted the Parthians, and perished along with much of the Seleucid Empire's forces. According to *Yosippon*, after Ashraq had contacted him, Hyrcanus marched for two days with Sidetes. On the third day, Hyrcanus proposed a stratagem. He urged Sidetes to allow him and the Jews to stay behind while the Seleucid forces attacked Ashraq's army. Then, during the battle, Hyrcanus would appear with his soldiers and take the Parthians by surprise, presumably by outflanking them and attacking from the rear. Sidetes agreed to Hyrcanus' plan and let Hyrcanus' Jewish unit remain behind. Sidetes consented to this strategy because he was overconfident. *Yosippon's* account merely mentions that Ashraq defeated Sidetes, killed him, and destroyed the Seleucid army. Ashraq then concluded a pact with Hyrcanus that brought peace between their nations.

Although *Sefer Yosippon's* account undoubtedly contains some apocryphal elements, particularly its portrayal of Greeks as adversaries of the Jews, it makes three important claims. First, like Josephus, the author of the third recension of *Yosippon* states that Hyrcanus was absent on the battlefield when the Parthians killed Sidetes. Second, *Yosippon* insists that Hyrcanus and the Parthian king were secretly in contact with one another. Third, unlike Josephus, *Yosippon* states that the Jews and the Parthians signed a peace treaty that allowed Hyrcanus to return home. This is in keeping with *Yosippon's* penchant for highlighting, expanding, and inventing treaties, especially between the Jews and Romans, particularly beginning with the Maccabean revolt.¹⁴ Although Josephus goes to great lengths to explain why Hyrcanus did not fight the Parthians, he glosses over the subsequent details of how the Jews managed to traverse Parthian territory in peace to reach Jerusalem. Instead, he simply states that the Parthians released Sidetes' brother, Demetrius II, from captivity and that he was reinstated as king upon his arrival in Syria. However, Josephus does not describe the details of this event, merely stating that this "has already been related elsewhere." He presumably means that this information can be found in the writings of other historians.¹⁵ Yet, a close reading of Josephus' subsequent account suggest that he has exaggerated Hyrcanus' strength while obscuring his and his successors' possible Parthian connections.

14 See further Börner-Klein, "Jews and Romans," 228–238.

15 *AJ* 13.253.

Josephus claims that after Sidetes' death, Hyrcanus II conquered lands in the Seleucid Empire and Idumaea. This is unsupported by the archaeological record, which shows that he did not undertake any military action until fifteen years after he returned from Parthia.¹⁶ Although much of our history of the Parthian Empire for Sidetes' reign and for the decades after his death is lost, the extant writings show that subsequent Parthian kings retook the lands he had captured during his expedition with Hyrcanus. This includes the important city of Babylon that had once been part of the Seleucid Empire, which Sidetes occupied during his campaign.¹⁷ Upon his return to Jerusalem, it appears that Hyrcanus wisely avoided interfering in the Seleucid Empire at a time when it was still at war with the Parthians. Yet, despite frequent fighting between Sidetes' successors and the Parthians, the latter never attacked the Hasmonean State. Although *Sefer Yosippon* may not appear to be the best witness for a peace treaty between the Hasmoneans and the Parthians, indirect evidence suggests that its account of Hyrcanus' relations with Phraates II is plausible.

Miriam Pucci proposes that the third recension of *Sefer Yosippon* used a Byzantine chronicle that had been translated into Hebrew, which preserves material from a lost ancient pagan source that included an account of Hyrcanus' participation in Sidetes' invasion of Parthia.¹⁸ There is some historical evidence to support the existence of such a treaty between the Jews and the Parthians that *Yosippon's* redactor may have copied from this lost source. The Talmud recounts the visit of a Parthian delegation to Jerusalem seeking an alliance with the Jews against the Armenian monarch Tigranes II. This took place in approximately 85 BCE, during the reign of Hyrcanus' son, the High Priest and Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus. This embassy, if historical, may provide evidence of a treaty between the Hasmoneans and the Parthians that possibly predates Jannaeus.¹⁹ A note in an astronomical diary from Babylon, dated to 83 BCE, mentions a person named "Alexander," who appears to be Jannaeus.²⁰ Given the date of this text, it may record his pact with the Parthians. These brief references appear to presuppose friendly relations between the Jews and the Parthians not recorded in Josephus.

16 *AJ* 13.254–258; *BJ* 1.62–66. For this evidence, see further Atkinson, *A History*, 67–69.

17 See further, Atkinson, *The Hasmoneans and their Neighbors*, 40.

18 Pucci, "An Unknown Source," 331–38; Pucci, "Jewish-Parthian," 13–25.

19 *y. Naz.* 5.3 (iv.G); *y. Ber.* 7.2 (III.F–G). For discussions in favor of the historicity of the Talmudic evidence that an alliance also existed between Phraates II and Hyrcanus, see Neusner, *A History*, 25–26; Pucci, "An Unknown Source," 331–338; Pucci, "Jewish-Parthian," 13–25; Sievers, *The Hasmoneans*, 140–141; Zollschan, *Rome and Judaea*, 259–264.

20 Sachs and Hunger, *Astronomical*, No. 476–477 no. 82A. For this identification, see Assar, "A Revised Parthian," 73–74.

If we are to propose a possible scenario for a Hasmonean-Parthian alliance, Hyrcanus' reign would fit. Numismatics suggest that this was not the first time he travelled to Parthia. His previous unrecorded journey there may also explain his mysterious Greek sobriquet "Hyrcanus" as well as *Sefer Yosippon's* account of Hyrcanus' contact with the Parthian king.

3 The Possible Historical Background to Sefer Yosippon's Account of John Hyrcanus in Parthia

Like Josephus, *Sefer Yosippon* prefers to call the Hasmonean high priest and ruler, John, by the Greek sobriquet Hyrcanus. This name is unprecedented for a Jewish leader or high priest. In his *Bellum Judaicum* and *Antiquitates Judaicae*, Josephus introduces him as John, who was also called Hyrcanus (Ἰωάννην, ὃς καὶ Ἵρκανός).²¹ Throughout his works, Josephus refers to him as Hyrcanus instead of his Hebrew name Yehohanan (יהוחנן).²² Because the name Hyrcanus etymologically means "one from Hyrcania," it is difficult to explain how John acquired it and why Josephus and *Yosippon* refer to him as Hyrcanus. Although several Christian writers believed he received the name Hyrcanus because of his conquest of Hyrcania, modern scholarship has discounted this explanation since there is no evidence he was ever there.²³ Nevertheless, *Yosippon's* account, when read in light of numismatic evidence and a close reading of Josephus' writings, suggest that Hyrcanus likely fought in Hyrcania during a previous campaign there with the Seleucid Empire's army.

Although our extant historical sources only record a single invasion of Parthia by Sidetes in which Hyrcanus participated, a Seleucid gold victory stater, dated to year 179 of the Seleucid era (=134/133 BCE), commemorates his previously unknown victory over the Parthians.²⁴ Because in 135 BCE Sidetes besieged Hyrcanus in Jerusalem, this coin cannot commemorate this attack

21 *AJ.* 13.228; *BJ* 1.54.

22 It is sometimes translated as Jonathan, but most frequently as John. The Hebrew name "John" (יהוחנן) is found on coins that Hyrcanus minted in Judea. See Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins*, 30–31; 44–45; 257–258. Hyrcanus (יהוחנן) is also mentioned in *4QpapHistorical Text C* (4Q331 1 i 7). See Atkinson, *The Hasmoneans and their Neighbors*, 47–48.

23 See Eusebius, *Chron.* 1.130–131; Syncellus, *Chronicle* 1:548; Jerome, *Chron.* 2.131; Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 26.2.

24 Houghton, "A Victory Coin," 65 and plate 6. See further Atkinson, *The Hasmoneans and their Neighbors*, 45; Ehling, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte*, 237–238.

since it clearly depicts the conquered nation as the Parthians.²⁵ Josephus' account makes it clear that after the termination of the siege, Sidetes forced him to become his unwilling ally in his planned invasion of Parthia. The date of this coin shows that it was minted to commemorate a defeat of the Parthians that occurred prior to Sidetes' siege of Hyrcanus in Jerusalem.²⁶ The Iranian historian Gholamreza F. Assar writes that the design on this coin leaves little doubt it was struck to celebrate an otherwise unattested victory of Sidetes, which he suggests took place before the end of the reign of the Parthian monarch Mithridates I (= Arsaces VI; 165–132 BCE). Assar proposes that Sidetes during this campaign briefly penetrated as far as Seleucia on the Tigris. This, he suggests, explains why Phraates II, upon taking the throne, failed to issue an inaugural tetradrachm: he was busy fighting Sidetes and unable to mint the customary coins to mark the beginning of his reign.²⁷ It is plausible that Hyrcanus served in this earlier campaign to liberate Seleucia on the Tigris, Babylon, and possibly Hyrcania from the Parthians.²⁸ A close reading of *Sefer Yosippon* in light of the numismatic evidence provides indirect evidence for Sidetes' earlier activities in the east in which Hyrcanus likely participated.

No text or inscription states that Sidetes reached the kingdom of Cappadocia. Yet, Trogus implies that the Cappadocian ruler was among the eastern monarchs who joined him when he set out to invade Parthia with Hyrcanus.²⁹ These rulers joined the expedition because they wanted Sidetes to free their lands from Parthian rule. Coins from the region suggest that Sidetes was successful in liberating these territories from Parthian control. The Cappadocian king Ariarathes VII Philometor (116–99 BCE) and his successors minted coins bearing the posthumous portrait of Sidetes.³⁰ There is no reason to commemorate Sidetes several decades after his death unless he had done something favorable for the Cappadocians. Phraates II's father, Mithridates I, had conquered the kingdom. After the Cappadocians revolted and broke free of Parthian rule, Mithridates I fought again to capture it. After nearly losing the territory again, Mithridates I's ally, Tigranes, helped him retain Cappadocia

25 This is evident by the coin's Parthian iconography, namely its depiction of the biga used by Mithridates I. See further Houghton, "A Victory Coin," 65 and plate 6.

26 For the dating of the siege sometime after the beginning of the Sabbatical year of October 135 BCE, see further Atkinson, *A History*, 55–56.

27 Assar, "Genealogy and Coinage," 46.

28 Mithridates I captured these regions in 141 BCE and used them as a base to expand his realm to the neighboring regions. See further, Bivar, "The Political History of Iran," 32–38.

29 Trogus, *Philippic Histories* 38.10.

30 Atkinson, *A History*, 66; Krengel and Lorber, "Early Cappadocian Tetradrachms," 51–104 and plates 9–18.

and its wealth as part of their anti-Roman alliance.³¹ These coins may indicate that Sidetes liberated Cappadocia from the Parthians and made a treaty with its rulers. It provides strong evidence for some prior military assistance between the Seleucid Empire and the Cappadocian kings not recorded in any of our extant records. Sidetes' appearance on these coins indicates that he was responsible for this apparent pact, and that he had campaigned in the region during an unrecorded expedition.

This numismatic evidence suggests it is plausible that Sidetes sent a force to Parthia earlier than the expedition recorded by Josephus and *Sefer Yosippon* in which Hyrcanus participated. During this prior campaign, Sidetes liberated Cappadocia from Parthian rule. The Jews may have participated in the expedition. It is also plausible that the Seleucid Empire's army reached and fought in the Parthian territory of Hyrcania. Hyrcanus may have distinguished himself in a military victory there, earning the sobriquet Hyrcanus. A close reading of Josephus' accounts suggest that he used a source whose author possibly documented this campaign, which could provide the background for *Yosippon's* account of Hyrcanus' interactions with Parthia's king.

In approximately 138 BCE, Simon's envoys returned from Rome with letters from the Senate ordering none of the local monarchs to harm the Hasmoneans.³² It was at this time that Sidetes attacked Tryphon in Dor. The accounts preserved in 1 Macc 15 and Josephus disagree whether Simon aided Sidetes or whether the Seleucid monarch rejected his offer of help and was hostile to the Jews. According to 1 Macc 15:26–31, Sidetes rebuffed Simon's offer of military assistance to fight Tryphon at Dor. However, in *Bellum Judaicum* 1.50, Josephus states that Simon made a military alliance with Sidetes and helped him fight Tryphon at Dor. He then writes: "Subsequently, he [= Simon] was an auxiliary to Antiochus [= Sidetes] against Tryphon, whom he besieged in Dor, before he went on his expedition against the Medes" (αὐθις δὲ γίνεται καὶ Ἀντιόχῳ σύμμαχος κατὰ Τρύφωνος, ὃν ἐν Δώροις πρὸ τῆς ἐπὶ Μήδους στρατείας ἐπολιόρκει). Here, Josephus may allude to an earlier and unrecorded expedition against the Parthians by Sidetes that took place about the time Sidetes fought Tryphon. If, as Josephus suggests, Sidetes was also preparing a campaign against the Parthians (=Medes), this would explain why he needed Simon's help at Dor. The Parthians during this era took advantage of the civil wars in the Seleucid Empire to attack it and seize land. Consequently, Sidetes had to deal with potential conflicts both within and on the border of his kingdom. The Hasmoneans posed another threat to his empire: he needed them on his

31 Trogus, *Philippic Histories* 38.1–3.

32 1 Macc 15:2–10. See further, Sievers, *The Hasmoneans*, 128–129.

side to serve in his armed forces. The previously cited numismatic evidence suggesting that Sidetes was in Parthian territory earlier than Josephus recorded suggests that this campaign likely took place at the same time he was fighting to take sole possession of the Seleucid Empire against his rivals.

It is possible that Sidetes sent some of his forces to attack the Parthians while he and Simon besieged Tryphon at Dor in 138 BCE, or perhaps earlier. Because Simon had stationed Hyrcanus at Gazara (=Gezer) in command of a military unit, it is feasible that he took part in this expedition as part of the Hasmonean contingent Simon loaned him. If so, then Hyrcanus likely had been to the region of Parthia, which could explain why, according to *Sefer Yosippon*, the Parthian monarch apparently knew him and had no trouble convincing him to betray Sidetes. *Yosippon* does not mention that Hyrcanus had been in Parthia on a prior campaign. However, the text states that “Ashraq, king of Persia, dispatched a clandestine message to king Hyrcanus” (ישלח אשרק מלך) (פרס כתב בהחבא אל הורקנוס המלך). Here, *Yosippon* implies that Ashraq knew how to communicate with Hyrcanus in secret and expect a response to his message, which may allude to some prior contact between the two. Likewise, the narrative assumes that Hyrcanus knew how to respond to Ashraq without Sidetes learning of their correspondence. It is possible that the two knew of one another from Hyrcanus’ earlier foray into Parthian territory.

The Parthians were undoubtedly aware that Hyrcanus was not a willing ally on Sidetes’ campaign. Rather, he was forced to become a Seleucid vassal to preserve his kingdom after Sidetes had besieged him in Jerusalem at the start of his reign. Although the extant accounts imply that Sidetes became the ruler of the Seleucid Empire at the time he besieged Hyrcanus in Jerusalem, the extant evidence suggest that he governed substantial portions of his kingdom before the Parthians captured his brother, Demetrius II.

According to the traditional reconstruction of the history of the Seleucid Empire for this period, Sidetes left Rhodes, where he was residing, after he was informed the Parthians had captured his brother, king Demetrius II, and taken him to Parthia as a hostage. 1 Macc 15:10 dates Sidetes’ arrival in Syria to the Seleucid year 174 (= October 15, 139 BCE to October 4, 138 BCE), shortly after the Parthians had captured Demetrius II in 140 BCE.³³ However, the dates provided by the Babylonian records and the numismatic evidence suggest that Josephus, Posidonius, Diodorus Siculus, and Appian used biased and inaccurate sources that likely were written by supporters of Sidetes. Although these authors emphasize that Sidetes traveled to Syria to become king after his

33 See further Atkinson, *A History*, 63–67.

brother's capture and asserted his family's right to the throne against the illegitimate ruler Tryphon, the Babylonian records and the numismatic evidence suggest he was a usurper.³⁴

The extent of the territories under the control of Sidetes, based on the dates of the coins he minted, suggest that he arrived in Syria much earlier than indicated in any of our extant sources.³⁵ Sidetes appears to have taken advantage of the Seleucid Empire's conflicts with the Parthians to stage a coup before Demetrius II invaded the Parthian Empire and was imprisoned there. This would explain the puzzling decision of the Parthians to release Demetrius II after Sidetes had attacked their kingdom. The sources indicate that they did so because they were convinced Demetrius II would wage a war against his sibling that would destabilize the Seleucid Empire. The best explanation for the behavior of the Parthians is that Sidetes was a usurper, who successfully took advantage of the fighting between the Seleucid and the Parthian Empires to take at least substantial portions of his brother's kingdom.

Both Josephus and 1 Maccabees indicate that Simon was eager to make an alliance with Sidetes. Given the previously discussed evidence that Sidetes arrived in Syria much earlier than the sources indicate, it is probable that Simon supported his plan to seize the throne from his brother. The Hasmoneans likely played a major and unrecognized role in the history of the Seleucid Empire by helping to bring Sidetes to power. His reign led to decades of civil war in Syria that destabilized the country, which later allowed Hyrcanus to expand the Hasmonean state with no opposition from his neighbors. *Sefer Yosippon* may bear witness to the existence of lost sources known to its author and several Christian writers that documented Hyrcanus' military activities in Parthia. This is especially true concerning how Hyrcanus survived Sidetes' invasion of Parthia. Whereas Josephus attributes it to Hyrcanus' piety to observe a religious holiday, *Yosippon* portrays Hyrcanus as a clever leader who skillfully betrayed Sidetes. His version not only supplements the rather obscure story in the *Antiquitates Judaicae*, but it may shed some new light concerning how Josephus shaped his accounts of Second Temple history by omitting significant events.

34 For additional evidence in support of thesis, see Passehl "Demetrius."

35 See further Houghton, "The Revolt of Tryphon," 138.

4 Additional Evidence in Support of *Sefer Yosippon's* Account of John Hyrcanus in Parthia

It is impossible to prove the historicity of *Sefer Yosippon's* account of Hyrcanus' betrayal of Sidetes. However, the surviving evidence hints at extensive, unrecorded, Jewish contacts with the Parthians, making it probable that *Yosippon*, and its redactor(s), used ancient sources that document Hyrcanus and his successors' alliances with the Parthians.

In his narrative of Pompey's 63 BCE conquest of Jerusalem and his termination of the Hasmonean state, Josephus states that the Hasmonean high priest and king Aristobulus II was prepared to surrender the city to Romans.³⁶ Yet, Pompey treated him harshly, taking him and his family to Rome where he forced them to march as prisoners in his triumph.³⁷ In contrast, *Sefer Yosippon* claims that Pompey had good reason to treat Aristobulus II harshly. According to *Yosippon*, Pompey took him captive since he had rebelled against the Romans after the death of his father, relying on Mithridates, King of Pontus.³⁸ Flusser proposes that this material came from a Byzantine chronicle that added this information to material found in Eusebius' work, which served as *Yosippon's* principal source for this story.³⁹ *Yosippon's* apparent source also suggests that Aristobulus II was acting contrary to Roman interests. Trogus' account of this time contains information lacking in Josephus that may support *Sefer Yosippon's* portrayal of Aristobulus II. During his reign, the Roman Republic feared a possible Hasmonean-Parthian alliance. Trogus, like *Yosippon*, alludes to a more specific reason, or at least, circumstance for Pompey's 63 BCE conquest of Judea and his termination of the Hasmonean state. His work contains evidence that the Jews were involved in piracy of the type the Republic had commissioned Pompey to eradicate.⁴⁰

36 *BJ* 1.139–40.

37 Pompey also took two sons, Alexander and Antigonos, and two daughters of Aristobulus II to Rome. Absalom, the uncle and father-in-law of Aristobulus II, was among the captives. *AJ* 14.71, 79; *BJ* 1.154–158; Plutarch, *Pomp.* 39.2; 45.4; Appian, *Mithridates* 116–17. For Pompey's triumph, which was held September 21, 61 BCE, see Velleius Paterculus 2.40.3; Pliny, *Nat.* 7.97–98.

38 This passage is from the text known as "An Alexander Geste" preserved in the De Rossi manuscript from Parma, no. 1087, and printed as an appendix to the critical edition of Hominer, *Josiphon*, 11.43–45 (p. 488).

39 Flusser, "An 'Alexander Geste,'" 180–91. See also Pucci "An Unknown Source," 335–336; Pucci, "Jewish-Parthian," 17–18.

40 Trogus, *Philippic Histories (Prologue)* 39. 40.2.4; cf. Strabo 16.2.40. See further, Atkinson, "Judean Piracy," 127–145.

Josephus may refer to an earlier Hasmonean offense against the Republic when he states that Hyrcanus II had accused Aristobulus II of raiding neighboring territories and committing acts of piracy at sea.⁴¹ Zollschan also finds earlier hints in the extant literature that the Jews engaged in piracy during the reign of Hyrcanus II's son, Alexander Jannaeus. According to Josephus, Jannaeus was the first Hasmonean ruler to employ mercenaries from Cilicia.⁴² She notes that Josephus describes these men as auxiliaries, namely soldiers, in the Hasmonean army. This was problematic because Cilician pirates hired themselves out as soldiers to such an extent that the name "Cilician" became synonymous in the minds of Romans with pirates.⁴³ Strabo even writes that the principal Hasmonean port of Joppa served as a base of operations for pirates.⁴⁴ This blatant defiance of Rome's directive against pirates, coupled with Roman perceptions that the Hasmoneans had a long relationship with the Parthians, made the Romans suspicious of the Jews.⁴⁵ Consequently, when Pompey arrived in the region, he was angry that the Jews had failed to comply with Rome's earlier law and had allowed pirates to plunder its trade routes to the detriment of the Roman Republic.

Trogus wrote his book when the Romans increasingly began to worry about a possible Jewish and Parthian alliance against the Republic. The Republic sought to counter this relationship by circulating a letter to various Middle Eastern nations, including the Parthians, which mentioned Rome's friendship with the Jews.⁴⁶ Yet, many Jews resided in Parthia. Tigranes II also had deported many Jews to Armenia adjacent to Parthian territory.⁴⁷ This undoubtedly made the Roman Republic suspicious of the Jews. After the death of Crassus in Parthia, many Jews revolted against his general, Cassius, when he and the survivors of his failed Roman invasion of the Parthian Empire reached the Galilee.⁴⁸ Although Josephus does not explicitly connect these events, this Jewish revolt against the Romans broke out at the same time the Parthians were crossing into Judea. The Jews reinforced the Parthian legions to help them conquer the Galilee. In 40 BCE, the Jewish-Parthian alliance became

41 *AJ* 14.43.

42 *BJ* 1.88; *AJ* 13.374.

43 Zollschan, *Rome and Judaea*, 267–268.

44 16.2.28.

45 For additional evidence, see Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue*, 273–297.

46 1 Macc 15:16–24; *AJ* 14.145–147. For a dating of the passages in 1 Maccabees to the 140s BCE, see Goldstein *1 Maccabees*, 493–494.

47 Moses of Khoren, *History of Armenia* 2.14; Neusner, *A History*, 26.

48 For the Roman Republic's wars with the Parthians and Jewish involvement with the Parthians, see further Bivar, "The Political History of Iran," 24–66.

clear to all. In that year, the Parthians made the Hasmonean prince Antigonus king, which forced Marc Antony to seek support in the Senate to install Herod as Judea's monarch to halt their advance. The Republic was forced to send the Roman general Gaius Sosius with Roman troops to Judea to help Herod fight in Jerusalem to take power.⁴⁹

In light of these events and the stories of supposed Jewish contacts with the Parthians, we can better understand Trogus' brief allusions to Jewish activities that the Roman Republic would have viewed as dangerous because they opposed its political and commercial interests and its expansion in the Middle East. The evidence of Jewish relations with Rome's enemies, the Parthian Empire, and pirates, made Pompey determined to annex the Hasmonean state. By taking control of Jewish territory, Pompey also hoped to prevent Parthian expansion in Judea, which would have given the Parthians unhindered access to the Mediterranean. Based on the evidence for a long history of favorable relations between the Hasmoneans and the Parthians, it is plausible that *Sefer Yosippon* accurately records Hasmonean alliances with the Parthians and Hyrcanus' probable betrayal of Phraates II. References to Hyrcanus' earlier campaign in Hyrcania recorded by Christian writers may shed some possible light on *Sefer Yosippon's* sources for this information.

5 *Sefer Yosippon's* Historical Sources for Hasmonean History

Although *Sefer Yosippon* likely dates to the tenth century CE, its incorporation of ancient texts suggests that its author, and those who added to the work, had access to an extensive collection(s) of Greek, Latin, and other ancient writings. These include such diverse works as Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and his commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Sallust's *De Catilinae Conturitione*, Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputations*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Livy, as well as other ancient Greek and Latin works. Despite its incorporation of classical writings, *Yosippon* is a unique Jewish composition that combines materials from Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae* with a variety of Jewish and Christian texts, such as the Vulgate, *De excidio Hierosolymitano*, Orosius, as well as ancient materials that likely came from a Byzantine chronicle translated into Hebrew.⁵⁰ *Yosippon* was also redacted several times with the incorporation of materials from such texts

49 See further, Atkinson, *A History*, 160–165. Several authors comment that many of the residents of Syria and the neighboring lands favored the Parthians. See Cassius Dio 49.19; Horace, *Odes* 3.6; Tacitus, *Germania* 37.

50 See further, Dönitz, "Historiography," 963–965; Flusser, "An 'Alexander Geste,'" 165–184.

as the Hebrew *Alexander Romance*, passages from the Septuagint, and additions to the book of Daniel.⁵¹

Scholars have proposed many places throughout Italy, such as Napoli, Bari, and monasteries including Bobbio in Piacenza, where copies of many texts were dispersed to other monastic and papal libraries, as the origin for many of the Greek and Latin works cited in *Sefer Yosippon*. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to show that such as *Yosippon's* author or redactors could have gained entry to such monastic collections.⁵² Yet *Yosippon's* contents show that these proposed locales in Italy likely contained ancient manuscripts of unknown Second Temple Period texts, copies of them, and/or now—lost books that cited from unknown Jewish and pagan writings. This should not be seen as remarkable since the ninth century CE Byzantine Christian writer Syncellus incorporated ancient and previously unknown information about the Hasmoneans from unknown sources. He documents an unattested siege of Tyre by Hyrcanus' son, Jannaeus, and records a list of cities he conquered that is independent of Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*. The latter is preferable to Josephus' account while the former incident is supported by the historical record.⁵³ Although Syncellus' late date would appear to make his work an unlikely source for new information about the Second Temple Period, he, like *Sefer Yosippon*, clearly had access to ancient and unknown writings from that time. The existence of such ancient texts should not be surprising, for a study of surviving scrolls from fifty literary collections and libraries from the second century BCE to the third century CE found that many of these manuscripts were 150–500 years of age, with an average lifespan between 200–300 years. Because of their ages, and the mention by the famed physician and philosopher Galen that the libraries on the Palatine hill in his day were between 200 and 450 years old at the time of the fire of 192 CE, it is feasible that the authors and redactors of *Yosippon* had access to texts containing ancient sources from the Second Temple Period.⁵⁴ Italy, with its vast literary collections, would have been ideal local for *Yosippon's* author and redactors to find new sources of information about Jewish history not recorded in Josephus' writings.

51 Dönitz, "Historiography," 953–970.

52 For these and other observations on the difficulties in locating the sources used throughout *SY*, see further Bowman, "*Sefer Yosippon: Revelations*," 59–60.

53 See further, Atkinson, *A History*, 16–17, 130–132.

54 See Houston, "Papyrological," 233–267; Galen, *On the Avoidance of Grief*, 13.

6 Conclusion

Sefer Yosippon is a unique Hebrew composition produced in an era of great Jewish intellectual activity in southern Italy when works such as *piyyutim*, chronicles, mystical writings, and translations of historical and secular works, flourished.⁵⁵ Steven Bowman places *Sefer Yosippon* within the Byzantine inspired revival when major works such as the encyclopedic project of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which stimulated historical studies in numerous languages, were produced.⁵⁶ *Yosippon* reflects a period of great learning, yet also reflects the time of this author(s). *Yosippon's* account of Yosef ben Gorion's offer of absolution from sins to those who joined him in martyrdom, for example, appears to reflect Christian views of noble death at a time when Muslim soldiers were fighting a "jihad" during the tenth century CE Saracen invasions of Southern Italy.⁵⁷ If Dönitz's identification of the author of the third recension (C) as the Byzantine Rabbi Yehuda Mosconi is correct, then *Yosippon's* content suggest that he had access to texts that included ancient documents containing materials about the Hasmonean period.⁵⁸ The references to Hyrcanus' conquest of Hyrcania in Christian sources suggest that such works were extant in at least several major intellectual centers. Consequently, *Yosippon* should be included among the sources of ancient Jewish history alongside Josephus and other Second Temple Period Jewish authors. His incorporation of such materials not only supplements our knowledge of this era, but it also provides a window into some of the sources and information Josephus apparently chose to omit in his writings, namely Jewish contacts with the Parthians. Like *Yosippon's* author, whose portrayals of Jewish history reflect the tumultuous political events of his day, Josephus' accounts of the Hasmoneans are as much literary compositions as historical narratives since he too was influenced by the political landscape of his time when many Romans feared that the Jews were in still in league with their Parthian adversaries. For Josephus, the less said about such contacts the better for himself and the Jews of his day.

Sefer Yosippon should be regarded as a text that supplements Josephus' historical writings that also preserves unique materials about the Second Temple Period. Although it is not surprising that such sources were available

55 See further, Bowman, "Dates in *Sepher Yosippon*," 353

56 Bowman, "Yosippon' and Jewish Nationalism," 28–29.

57 See further Grossman, "The Cultural and Social Background," 73–86; Dönitz, "Historiography," 959–960.

58 See further Dönitz, "Historiography," 964–965.

at the time of *Yosippon's* composition and redactions, the mystery is how its author and redactors gained access to the vast amounts of classical sources cited throughout the work. Because *Yosippon* shows no acquaintance with the Babylonian Talmud, but was written at a time when Jews, Christians, and Muslims were in contact with one another, it may attest to some unknown relationship between Jews and Christians, or perhaps a Jew and a Christian, when such resources were shared.⁵⁹ This tumultuous time when Saracen invasions plagued both communities could have brought Jews and Christian communities together. It is possible that this climate led to intellectual exchanges among some Jews and Christians. If so, then *Yosippon* may also bear witness to a previously unknown time of Jewish-Christian cultural exchange in southern Italy of which we know little. *Yosippon's* knowledge of and interest in classical writings makes its author and redactors unique figures in Jewish history. *Yosippon* also is our only extant witness to some of the lost writings of the Hasmonean era that documented Jewish history. Consequently, *Yosippon* should be considered a valuable witness to the Second Temple Period and read alongside the *Bellum Judaicum* and the *Antiquitates Judaicae* for the light it sheds on the Hasmonean period and for what it tells us about Josephus' historical methods, particularly what he excluded from his books.

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59 Those who note the absence of Talmudic references or allusions in the text include, Bonfil, "Between Eretz Israel," 20–30; Bowman, "Sefer Yosippon: Revelations," 58–59; Dönitz, "Sefer Yosippon (Josippon)," 388.

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