

# *Zena Ayhud (The History of the Jews): The Text and Context of the Ethiopic Version of Sefer Yosippon*

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This chapter presents an introduction to the reception of *Sefer Yosippon* among Coptic and Ethiopian Christians in the medieval period. Early versions of the Hebrew *Sefer Yosippon* were translated into Arabic sometime in the eleventh or early twelfth century, appearing in both Judeo-Arabic and Arabic scripts. The translation into Arabic script was later expanded through Christianized interpolations before an Ethiopic translation of this Copto-Arabic text was produced in the latter half of the fourteenth century. Although it is sometimes referred to in the manuscript traditions as *Maṣāhafa Yōsēf Wāldā Kōryōn* (or “The Book of Yosef ben Gorion”), this Ethiopic translation is more commonly known today as *Zena Ayhud* (or *The History of the Jews*). Medieval Coptic and Ethiopian scribes believed the author of *Sefer Yosippon* to be a certain Yosef ben Gorion, to whom they also ascribe the authorship of the books of Maccabees. The Greek books of Maccabees are largely absent from the Arabic and Ethiopic manuscript traditions of the medieval period. As a result, *Sefer Yossipon* fills a crucial literary gap in these northeast-African ecclesiastical history traditions. Beyond its utility as a historiographical source, moreover, the text serves as a source for rhetorical attacks against heretics and Jews in medieval Ethiopia. While the Ethiopic *Zena Ayhud* is a quite literal translation of its Arabic *Vorlage*, it would have been read in a very different socio-cultural context than its predecessor. This paper thus outlines the relevant social, historical, and cultural factors in medieval Ethiopia that shed light on how the *Zena Ayhud* would have been received by medieval Ethiopian readers given the distinct history of Jews and Judaism in the Ethiopian highlands.

## 1 Introduction

Like any Greek historian of skill, Josephus is adept at flourishing his histories with rhetorically ornamented speeches. He sets out in the *Bellum Judaicum* to persuade the reader that the war fought by the Jews against the Romans was

“not only the greatest war of our time but could well be one of the greatest collisions between states or nations” (*BJ* 1.1).<sup>1</sup> He proceeds to buttress this argument by inserting into the mouths of several of his *dramatis personae* gut wrenching speeches about the depth of the suffering and the scope of the destruction caused by the Judean revolt of 66 CE. Perhaps no other speech is more shocking to the senses than the short monologue that Maria—the infanticidal and cannibalistic mother—gives right before the destruction of the Temple, the tragic denouement of the siege of Jerusalem.

In the few short sentences that constitute this speech, Josephus weaves motifs from Greek tragedy and the Hebrew Bible to create a uniquely affective episode.<sup>2</sup> Prior to killing and consuming her infant son, Maria demands of him the following: “Come, become food for me, for the rebels an avenging spirit, and for the world a story (ἴθι, γενοῦ μοι τροφή καὶ τοῖς στασιασταῖς ἐρινὺς καὶ τῷ βίῳ μῦθος)” (*BJ* 6.207).

I bring up this passage to pose the following question: what nations would Josephus have had in mind when he mentions “the world?” His *Antiquitates Judaicae* makes it clear that he is aware of the ancient Ethiopian (read: Nubian) kingdom with its capital at Meroe (*AJ* 2.238–253). And no doubt his picture of the inhabited world, the oikumene, would have included the nebulously defined territories of *Aethiopia*, which approximated the territories in what is modern day Sudan, not Eritrea or Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

Despite all of this, there is no evidence that Josephus was aware of Aksum, or the Gəʿəz language utilized there. The Aksumite kingdom, with its influential port city of Adulis on the coast of the Red Sea, was reaching its apex

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Josephus’ *BJ* follow the translation in Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). In some instances, translations from Book 6 follow a literal translation supplied to the author by David B. Levenson and Thomas R. Martin. All translations from Arabic, Gəʿəz, and Amharic sources are my own.

2 Several works have analyzed the rhetorical strategies and the narrative function of this story in the *War*. For a discussion of motifs from Greek tragedy that Josephus employs in portraying Maria and her gruesome deed, see Chapman, “Josephus and the Cannibalism of Mary (*BJ* 6.199–219),” 397–403. For a detailed comparative analysis of the Maria Story within Latin and Hebrew receptions of Josephus, see Bay, “The ‘Maria Story’ in Greek, Latin, & Hebrew,” 1–105.

3 See David Goldenberg’s discuss of ancient uses of the terms *Ethiopia* and *Kush* in Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 17–25. Generally speaking, Aethiopia/Kush encompassed the territories south of the southern border of Egypt, usually marked by the first cataract of the Nile. The Egyptians, and later the Greeks and Romans, employed these terms specifically in reference to the Nubian kingdoms and city states that populated the Nile Valley. But they also more broadly employed the term to describe all lands south of Egypt and the Sahara inhabited by black people. Furthermore, the term was often interchangeable with India.

as Josephus was putting ink to parchment on the *Bellum Judaicum*.<sup>4</sup> His ignorance of the region and language notwithstanding, however, Josephus' histories eventually do make their way into the Ethiopic literary tradition, although not until more than a millennium after his death, and not before undergoing several cycles of aggressive rebranding.

I will here focus on the Copto-Arabic adaptation of *Yosippon* and its subsequent Ethiopic translation, commonly known as the *Zena Ayhud*, or "the History of the Jews." I begin by providing an overview of the manuscript evidence for the Copto-Arabic text and a short outline of its contents.

After reviewing the Copto-Arabic text, I highlight the manuscript evidence and printed editions of the Gə'əz (or Ethiopic) *Zena Ayhud*. Sometimes referred to as the *Maṣəhafa Yōsēf Wāldä Kōryōn* (or "The Book of Yosef ben Gorion") in the manuscript traditions, the text fills the vacuum left by the absence of the Greek Maccabees in the Ethiopic biblical canon. I discuss the unique Maccabean tradition in the Ethiopic canon, known as the *Mäqabeyan*, which is central to understanding the reception of Josephus in the Ethiopian context. Finally, I conclude by sketching an outline of the ways in which the *Zena Ayhud* would have been read in medieval Ethiopia in light of the socio-political contexts of the period and the distinct treatment of Jews and Judaism in medieval Ethiopic literature.

## 2 The Arabic Versions of *Sefer Yosippon*

To begin, the popularity of *Yosippon* across communities of different languages and religions is demonstrated by the evidence we have of very early Arabic translations of the text that are made both in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic script and were in use among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Although scholars ignored these Judeo-Arabic and Arabic translations through most of the twentieth century, recent scholarship has begun a renewed analysis of them and their relationship to the Hebrew versions of *Yosippon*. The renewed interest in these important works was in part spurred by their discovery among the Cairo Genizah fragments. While a comprehensive analysis of all the known manuscripts and fragments of the Arabic versions of *Yosippon* remains a desideratum, several textual witnesses have been identified and collated by Shulamit

4 For a description of the early Aksumite kingdom, particularly the material evidence, see Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation*, 69–90.

5 For a brief but helpful review of the receptions of *Yosippon* in Arabic literature see Vollandt, "Ancient Jewish Historiography in Arabic Garb," 70–80.

Sela in her posthumously published (in Hebrew) two-volume work, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion* (2011).

Sela provides critical editions of both the Judeo-Arabic and Copto-Arabic (or Christian-Arabic) texts, as well as a translation and introduction in Modern Hebrew.<sup>6</sup> The manuscripts she consults for her critical edition of the Copto-Arabic text are provided here:<sup>7</sup>

1. MS London Or. 1326
2. MS London Or. 1336
3. MS Oxford Hunt. 238
4. MS Paris BN Sup. Ar. 2067
5. MS Paris BN 1906
6. MS Paris BN Ar. 5255
7. MS Vatican Ar. 693
8. MS London Or. 2598
9. Beirut Printing 1872

While the exact date when *Yosippon* is translated into Arabic cannot be established, the evidence indicates that these translations were made at the earliest stages of development in the Hebrew *Yosippon* traditions. The Judeo-Arabic and Copto-Arabic texts as they appear today lack the interpolations that characterize the later recensions of the Hebrew *Yosippon* traditions.<sup>8</sup> Out of the two Arabic versions, moreover, the Judeo-Arabic text remains a witness to the earliest layer of the Arabic adaptation of *Yosippon* to have survived, given that it does not contain the Christian interpolations present in the Copto-Arabic text.<sup>9</sup>

6 While there are no complete textual witnesses of the Judeo-Arabic version of *Yosippon*, Sela has edited and compiled approximately two-thirds of the sixty or so known manuscripts of the text (Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.543–544). However, according to Dönitz, there are still other fragments that have not been catalogued and are still in the identification stage (Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 104).

7 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.361.

8 Sela suggests that the two Arabic versions of *SY* represent an earlier stage of the Hebrew *SY* tradition than all of the extant Hebrew textual witnesses. She writes, החקירה המשווה מגלה, כי שני נוסחים ערביים קדומים תורגמו מנוסח עברי קצר וטהור יותר מכל הכתבים העבריים שלפנינו ("The comparative analysis reveals that two earlier Arabic versions were translated from a shorter and purer Hebrew version than all the Hebrew texts before us") (Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 1.4). The oldest complete manuscript of the Arabic version is MS Paris 1906, which is dated to 1342.

9 In her analysis of this issue, Dönitz writes, "Ein genauer Textvergleich der judaeo-arabischen Übersetzung mit dem hebräischen Text an dieser Stelle ergab, dass die Lücke zwischen Kapitel 3 und Kapitel 7 in der judaeo-arabische Übersetzung dieselbe ist wie in den hebräischen Textzeugen der Kairoer Geniza und MS Vatikan Urb. 52. Daraus folgt, dass die judaeo-arabische Übersetzung des *SY* in einem frühen Stadium der Überlieferung des *SY* erstellt wurde, vermutlich von der Fassung, die in den hebräischen Geniza-Fragmenten des

Although this Judeo-Arabic text is quite important to the study of the transmission history of *Yosippon*, here I focus on the Copto-Arabic adaptation, which is sometimes referred to in the manuscript tradition as the *Kitāb akhbār al-yahūd*.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, this text maintains the broad outlines of the earliest and shorter version of the Hebrew *Yosippon* in terms of narrative order.<sup>11</sup> That said, the Copto-Arabic text does noticeably truncate certain sections of the Hebrew narrative, completely omits others, and at times rearranges the narrative order of some stories.

Within certain manuscripts in the textual tradition, as well as in Sela's critical edition, the text is divided into eight parts. Part One contains five major subsections: (1) The *Diaperismos*, or the division of the earth between Noah's sons;<sup>12</sup> (2) legends of the founding and early history of Rome;<sup>13</sup> (3) histories of the Persian kings, including the story of Esther and Mordecai;<sup>14</sup> (4) the account of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem and his subsequent journeys;<sup>15</sup> (5) the reign of Ptolemy in Egypt and the translation of the Septuagint.<sup>16</sup>

Part Two opens with the reign of Antiochus IV and the accounts of the martyrs who die under his rule.<sup>17</sup> The story of the Maccabean Revolt<sup>18</sup> and the histories of the Hasmoneans<sup>19</sup> are also covered in Part Two, with Part Three beginning in the middle of the accounts of the Hasmoneans. Part Three also relates stories that take place during the Roman conquest of Judea by Pompey, before covering the assassination of Caesar in Rome.<sup>20</sup> Part Four is dedicated to the acts of Herod the Great during his reign over Judea and surrounding

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SY erhalten ist" ("A detailed text-comparison of the Judeo-Arabic translation with the Hebrew text at this point shows that the gap between Chapter 3 and Chapter 7 in the Judeo-Arabic translation is the same as in the Hebrew textual witnesses of the Cairo Genizah and MS Vatican Urb. 52. It follows that the Judeo-Arabic translation of the *Yosippon* was created in the early stages of the tradition of the *Yosippon*, probably from the version which is preserved in the Hebrew Genizah-fragments of *Yosippon*") (Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 104).

10 Vollandt, "Ancient Jewish Historiography in Arabic Garb," 73.

11 For a synoptic list of chapter headings, which allows for a comparison of the narrative order in the Hebrew, Copto-Arabic, and Ethiopic versions of *Yosippon*, see Appendix E in Binyam, "Studies in *Sefer Yosippon*," 303–314.

12 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.367–371.

13 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.372–374.

14 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.375–382.

15 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.383–389.

16 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.390–393.

17 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.394–400.

18 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.401–407.

19 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.408–434.

20 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.435–448.

territories.<sup>21</sup> Part Five is a single chapter without a heading that narrates more stories about Herod the Great.<sup>22</sup>

Part Six begins by describing the reigns of the heirs of Herod the Great, from Archelaus to Agrippa II.<sup>23</sup> The rest of Part Six and the beginning of Part Seven relate the beginning of the First Jewish Revolt, focusing primarily on the three leaders of the rebellion—Eleazar son of Ananias, Yohanan the Galilean, and Simon.<sup>24</sup> Part Seven also recounts the coming of Titus to Jerusalem and the Roman siege of the city,<sup>25</sup> including stories about the great famine that takes place in Jerusalem, such as the account of the unnamed woman who kills and eats her infant son.<sup>26</sup>

Part Eight covers the end of the war in Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.<sup>27</sup> The text concludes with the death of Eleazar son of Ananias the rebel. Notably, it does not include the Masada episode that is present in the Hebrew *Yosippon*.<sup>28</sup> The Ethiopic translation of the Copto-Arabic text follows the order of its *Vorlage* quite closely; thus it features a nearly identical breakdown of sections and chapters, with only a few minor variants.

### 3 *Zena Ayhud: The Ethiopic Version of Sefer Yosippon*

Although some manuscripts refer to the Ethiopic translation of the Copto-Arabic *Yosippon* as the *Maṣāḥafa Yōsēf Wāldä Kōryōn* (or “The Book of Yosef ben Gorion”), it is more commonly known today as *Zena Ayhud* (or “The History of the Jews”). Mural Kamil collated a critical edition of the text in 1937, relying on the following twelve manuscripts:<sup>29</sup>

21 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.449–471.

22 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.472–477.

23 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.478–483.

24 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.484–501. Immediately following the chapter on the return of Agrippa II to Rome and the beginning of the rebellion led by Eleazar son of Ananias, the heading of the following chapter reads, “These are the histories of Yosef ben Gorion, the author of the book (هذه اخبار يوسف ابن كرون صاحب الكتاب) (490).”

25 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.502–515.

26 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.516–519. The unnamed mother is identified as Maria in *BJ* 6.201 and *DEH* 5.40.1, and as Miryam in *SY* 86.

27 Sela, *The Arabic Book of Yosef Ben Gorion*, 2.520–535.

28 See Steve Bowman’s discussion of the popularity among medieval Jewish societies of the Hebrew *Yosippon*’s account of the Masada episode, which details how the Masada episode in *Yosippon* differs from Josephus’ account of the event: Bowman, “‘Yosippon’ and Jewish Nationalism,” 4.

29 Kamil, *Zena Ayhud*, xii–xiv. The letters in parentheses in front of each manuscript refer to Kamil’s sigla.

1. (A): MS Paris BN Abb. 38 (16th cent.)
2. (P): MS Paris BN Abb. 77 (16th cent.)
3. (R): MS Paris BN Abb. 124 (16th/17th cent.)
4. (D): MS London Or. 822 (17th cent.)
5. (N): MS London Or. 823 (18th cent.)
6. (E): MS London Or. 824 (18th cent.)
7. (O): MS London Or. 825 (18th cent.)
8. (M): MS London Add. 24, 989 (1861)
9. (L): MS Berlin 6 fol. 397 (17th cent.)
10. (B): MS Berlin 62 Peterm., II Nachtr. 57 (17th cent.)
11. (F): MS Frankfurt Ruppellschen No. 2 (18th cent.)
12. (S): MS Strasburg No. 4366 Ethiop. 5 (1841)

More manuscripts of the text have been identified since Kamil's edition, including several that are currently in the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library in Collegetown, MN.<sup>30</sup> A comprehensive list of all the manuscripts of the ZA does not yet exist, and the present list is a step in that direction. A copy of Kamil's critical edition, together with an Amharic translation of the Gə'əz text, was published in 2006 by the Mahibere Kidusan Press in Addis Ababa, under the direction of the editorial board of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.<sup>31</sup>

The introduction to the Amharic translation mentions Josephus, but also misidentifies him (along with most of the broader medieval tradition) as Yosef ben Gorion and the author of *Yosippon*:

**የሴፍ ወልደ ኮርዮን /Flavius Josephus/... የነበረ የፖለቲካ፣ የታሪክ ሰው የነበረ ካህን እና በውትድርና ሙያ የተሰማራ ነበር። ተወልዶ ያደገውም በኢየሩሳሌም ሲሆን በዚያ ወቅት አይሁድ ክሮማውያን አገዛዝ ነጻ ለመውጣት ትግል ውስጥ የነበሩበት ዘመን ነበረ። የሴፍም የጦርነቱ ተሳታፊ ነበረ። በትግሉም ውስጥ የነበረው ሚና ምን እንደሚመስል በዚህ መጽሐፍ ተብራርቷል።**

Yosef ben Gorion /Flavius Josephus/... was a priest, politician, and historian who was also trained in warfare. He was born and grew up in Jerusalem during the period when the Jews were engaged in a struggle to gain freedom from Roman oppression. And Yosef was also a participant in the war. He has explained in this book how the events of the war unfolded.<sup>32</sup>

30 There are at least eight manuscripts of the *Zena Ayhud* in the HMML that I have been able to identify: MS EMLL 21, MS EMLL 258, MS EMLL 4773, MS EMLL 6240, MS EMLL 7404, MS EMLL 7961, MS EMLL 8140, and MS EMLL 8155.

31 Tsehayə, trans., *Zena Ayhud*.

32 Tsehayə, *Zena Ayhud*, 5. The page numbers for the introduction are given according to the order of the first letter of the Amharic syllabary read vertically. For the reader not familiar with the script, I have here rendered ሠ as 5.

While this description gets the broad outline of the life and career of Josephus correct, it follows the confusion found in both the Hebrew and Arabic *Yosippon* traditions and asserts that Josephus wrote the medieval work.<sup>33</sup> The introduction further cites two sources, a certain Abuna (or Patriarch) Gorgios as well as the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, as authorities that ascribe authorship of the text to Yosef ben Gorion.<sup>34</sup> This author, “the master of the book” (በዐለ ሙጽሐፍ) as he is often called at the opening of passages in the *Zena Ayhud*, effectively becomes a biblical author in the Ethiopic tradition.

The translation of the *Zena Ayhud* can be dated generally to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, a period during which a large number of texts are translated from Arabic into Ethiopic.<sup>35</sup> This may be framed within the Ethiopic literary tradition as it is conventionally divided into two categories: (1) early translations from Greek, Syriac, and Coptic that take place during the Aksumite period (*ca.* between the fourth and seventh centuries CE); (2) translations from Arabic and the production of indigenous texts that appear in the medieval period (*ca.* between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries). The first stage is characterized by translations of biblical texts, apocryphal texts, patristic writings, homilies, and hagiographies.<sup>36</sup>

The latter stage is dominated by translations from Arabic sources, but also features the composition of indigenous texts. The Arabic works themselves stem from different provenances, having been translated from Greek, Syriac, or (like in the case of *Yosippon*) Hebrew sources. Works from several genres are translated during this time, including more translations of biblical texts, hagiographies, and several historiographical works, one of which is the *Zena Ayhud*.<sup>37</sup>

This literary renaissance, influenced so heavily by translations from Arabic, was spurred by political developments taking place both within and outside

33 This confusion stems from SY's reading of *DEH* 3.5.2.

34 Tsehayə, *Zena Ayhud*, 5. I was not able to find a reference to Yosef ben Gorion in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, which does, by contrast, mention the anonymous author of the Hebrew SY (See Myers, “Historiography,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 351).

35 As early as 1907, Enno Littmann makes the case that the *Zena Ayhud* is translated from the Arabic version of *Yosippon* “in der Periode der Übersetzungsliteratur aus dem Arabischen (1270–ca. 1430)” (Littmann, *Geschichte der christlichen Literaturen*, 207).

36 Examples include the Book of Enoch, Jubilees, Baruch, Fourth Ezra, Qërellos (Cyril of Alexandria), Qalmēntos (Clement of Rome). For a more detailed discussion, see Bausi, “Ethiopic Literary Production,” 503–532.

37 For a list of medieval Copto-Arabic historiographical works and their corresponding Ethiopic translations, see my unpublished dissertation: Binyam, “Studies in *Sefer Yosippon*,” 66.



medieval Ethiopia. It follows the revival of close relations between Ethiopian and Coptic monastic and ecclesiastical institutions, which itself was a product of the rise of the so-called Solomonic Dynasty.<sup>38</sup> This line of Christian rulers actively propagates Christianity as the religion of the land. They legitimize their sovereignty in part by commissioning the translation and production of religious and historiographical works aimed at contextualizing and glorifying the place of Ethiopia in wider cultural (and even biblical) narratives.

Two rulers in particular have been suggested as the potential patrons of the translation of the *Zena Ayhud*. First, Kamil has suggested that the Ethiopic translation was most likely produced as part of the ecclesiastical reforms that take place during the reign of Yekūnō Amlāk (r. 1270–1285), who commissioned the translation of several works into Gə'əz.<sup>39</sup> In 1270, Yekūnō Amlāk put an end to the non-Christian Zagwē kingdom and ushered in the Solomonic Dynasty.<sup>40</sup> In order to consolidate his newly-gained power, Yekūnō Amlāk allied himself with the Amhara and the Christian communities of the Shāwa region, extending the Christian territories farther south.

Secondly, Manfred Kropp has put forward the reign of Amdā Sīyōn, who took the throne in 1314, as one potential period in which to place the translation of the ZA.<sup>41</sup> Amdā Sīyōn succeeds in conquering the most important Muslim strongholds in Ethiopia, including Īfat, which was considered the center of Muslim political power.<sup>42</sup> He thus succeeds in not only consolidating the victories of Yekūnō Amlāk, but also in further extending the Christian territories beyond Shāwa and Amhara.<sup>43</sup> Kropp suggests that the scribal cultures that flourished during the reign of Amdā Sīyōn (1314–1344) could have served as the starting-point of the *Zena Ayhud*.<sup>44</sup>

38 Bausi, "Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene," 217–224.

39 Kamil, "Translations from Arabic in Ethiopic Literature," 61–63. Witold Witakowski similarly places the translation at around the same time, namely around 1300 CE (Witakowski, "Ethiopic Universal Chronography," 287). For more, see also Ayenachew, "Territorial Expansion and Administrative Evolution under the 'Solomonic' Dynasty," 57–85.

40 According to Tadassee Tamrat, "the origins and early life of Yekūnō Amlāk still remain very obscure. On his father's side tradition makes him a descendant of Dilna'od, who is said to have been the last Aksumite king deposed by the Zagwē. His mother is nevertheless said to have been 'one of the slaves' of a rich Amhara chief in Sägärat ... On the eve of the downfall of the Zagwē dynasty, Yekūnō Amlāk had apparently established a virtually independent kingdom of his own" (Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 66).

41 Kropp, "Arabisch-äthiopische Übersetzungstechnik," 314–346.

42 Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 134.

43 See the helpful map of the conquests of Amdā Sīyōn in Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 133.

44 Kropp, "Arabisch-äthiopische Übersetzungstechnik," 315–316.

Neither Kamil nor Kropp, however, mention a colophon that is present in several manuscripts, which I suggest could be quite relevant to dating the translation of the *Zena Ayhud*. The colophon is a benediction praising God and noting that the text was written by Yosef ben Gorion. In a majority of the manuscripts utilized by Kamil, the colophon concludes as follows: **ወምሕረቱ፡ ይኩኑ፡ ላዕለ፡ ገብሩ፡ ንዋየ፡ ማርያም፡ ለዓለም፡ ዓለም፡ አሜን** (“and may his [God’s] mercy be on his servant, Nəwāyā Māryām, forever and ever, amen”).<sup>45</sup> The reference here is to an Ethiopian ruler who reigned from 1371 to 1380 and adopted the imperial name Nəwāyā Māryām (or “the Vessel of Mary”) upon his succession.<sup>46</sup> If this benediction is part of the original translation, rather than having been added during a later copying, it would be reasonable to conclude that the *Zena Ayhud* must have been translated either during or shortly after the reign of Nəwāyā Māryām, which would give us a *terminus ante quem* of around 1380 CE for the text’s translation into Ethiopic.

#### 4 Provenance of the *Zena Ayhud*

Identifying the precise location of the translation of the *Zena Ayhud*, moreover, continues to be a difficult task. Part of the reason is that medieval Ethiopian scribal cultures existed in many different parts of the Christian *oikumene*. Ethiopian monks traveled widely during this time and often took their manuscripts with them. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is evidence of both short- and long-term Ethiopian presence in places like Upper and Lower Egypt, the Levant, Cyprus, and Rome.<sup>47</sup> Both textual and archeological evidence demonstrate the presence of Ethiopian monastics in Coptic monasteries in Egypt as early as the ninth century. The political revolutions of the thirteenth century in Ethiopia, moreover, led to a resurgence of Ethiopian travelers abroad and resulted in the first settled Ethiopian communities around the Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup>

The four main centers of Ethiopian diasporas were located in Jerusalem, Qusqam, Cairo, and the Wadi-al-Natrun.<sup>49</sup> These largely monastic com-

45 Kamil, *Des Josef Ben Gorion (Josippon) Geschichte Der Juden: Zēnā Aihūd*, 1. Kamil’s earliest manuscript, and the one most important to his critical edition (i.e. MS Paris BN Abb. 38), does not have the reference to Newaya Maryam.

46 Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 149.

47 Kelly, “Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas,” 426–427.

48 Kelly, “Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas,” 428.

49 Kelly, “Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas,” 428. Additionally, Anthony O’Mahony has highlighted several pieces of documentary evidence of the sustained presence of Ethiopian

munities were oriented around an Ethiopian monastery overseen by a prior and often patronized by Christian rulers from the homeland, as well as local benefactors. There appears to have been frequent contact between the various communities, with some priors even at times overseeing the affairs of a monastery in a different location.<sup>50</sup> Ethiopian scribes translated many works into Gə'əz in these different linguistic and cultural settings. However, because the monks traveled with relative frequency (after all, Gə'əz is derived from a term meaning “free, wanderer”) and because they took their manuscripts with them, it is difficult to identify surviving manuscripts with their place of origin.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, given the large growth of monastic houses in Ethiopia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the possibility of the ZA's translation taking place in Ethiopia is relatively high and so cannot be ruled out. As part of their program to extend territories into non-Christian regions, Christian rulers employ the influence of the royal court on the Ethiopian churches to evangelize non-Christians.<sup>52</sup> In this effort, the royal patronage of monastic houses becomes an important tool of evangelization and Christian education.

Monasteries such as Dabra Hayq, Dabra Libānōs, and Debre Dāmō become institutions for the production and dissemination of not just monastic rules, but political, social, and ecclesiastical norms as well.<sup>53</sup> Their literary outputs are characterized by a concern for three objectives: (1) to legitimize the rule of Christian kings in Ethiopia by inscribing their histories within broader biblical and historical narratives; (2) to inscribe the boundaries of orthodoxy over against heresies within Christianity; (3) to levy invectives against non-Christian religions practiced in the Ethiopian highlands and neighboring regions.

The *Kəbrä nägäšt* is easily the best example of the first objective.<sup>54</sup> Although indigenously produced in Ethiopia, the work draws from numerous Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources circulating in Syria, Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt over the course of the late antique and early medieval

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in Jerusalem and their contacts with both Coptic and Syriac Christians. The main center of the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem was the monastery at the Grotto of David on Mount Zion, which remained under Ethiopian control until 1559 (O'Mahony, “Between Islam and Christendom,” 148–153).

50 Kelly, “Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas,” 433.

51 For the various usages and derivatives of the root **ገዕዝ** (*gə'za*), see Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez*, 172–173.

52 O'Mahony, “Between Islam and Christendom,” 156–157.

53 For brief introductions to Ethiopian monastic life and literature, see Alessandro Bausi, “Monastic Literature,” 993–998, as well as Kaplan, “Monasteries,” 987–993. See also Kaplan, “Monasticism,” 443–447.

54 For an introduction of the text and some relevant secondary sources, see Uhlig, “Kəbrä Nägäšt,” 364–368.

periods. It narrates the arrival of Judaism in Ethiopia at the time of King Solomon. In particular, the core of the text outlines the legend of the Queen of Sheba and her son Menelik I, whom she conceives after her union with King Solomon. Menelik’s followers steal the Ark of the Covenant from Israel and bring it with them to Ethiopia. Menelik returns to his motherland as a conquering hero aided by the power of the Ark, becoming the first divinely authorized ruler of Ethiopia. This legend was widely circulated to legitimize the claim that the Christian rulers who followed Yekünō Amlāk all descended from the Solomonic dynasty. The *Kəbrä nāgästä* also highlights Ethiopia’s displacement of Israel as the true nation of God, which occurs on account of the sins and rebellious nature of the *Ayhud* (or “the Jews”).

The Ethiopic Books of the Maccabees, known as the Maqabeyan, are further examples of important works indigenously produced in medieval Ethiopia. There are no modern, critical editions of the Mäqabəyan, but they are extant in more than forty known manuscripts.<sup>55</sup> The texts are commonly grouped into three books in the manuscript tradition as ፩ መቃብያን (1 Mäqabəyan), ፪ መቃብያን (2 Mäqabəyan), and ፫ መቃብያን (3 Mäqabəyan), although at times 2 Maqabeyan and 3 Maqabeyan are conflated into one book. Despite the absence of a literary dependence on the Greek books of Maccabees, the Mäqabəyan display several interesting parallels with the Greek Maccabean tradition. The three texts heavily emphasize the themes of idolatry and martyrdom for one’s faith in the face of persecutions. They reflect a deep cultural aversion to the magic and “pagan” rituals of indigenous religions in Ethiopia, and the real or imagined threat they presented to the preservation of Christian orthodoxy.

An analysis of how *Yosippon* would have been read in medieval Ethiopia must necessarily take into account the fact that the *Zena Ayhud* is read as a biblical text and as one of the books of Mäqabəyan. This understanding of the place of the *Zena Ayhud* within Ethiopic literature is succinctly summed up in the introduction to the Amharic translation of the Gə’əz text, wherein it is described as follows:

፱፯ቱ የብሉይ ኪዳን መጻሕፍት የሕግ፣ የታሪክ፣ የጥበብና የመዝሙር እንዲሁም የትንቢት መጻሕፍት የሚባሉት ከመጽሐፈ ኢያሱ ወልደ ነዌ እስከመጽሐፈ ሄኖክ ያሉት ፳፪ መጻሕፍት ናቸው። ከእነዚህ የታሪክ መጻሕፍት ውስጥ ከሦስቱ የመቃብያን መጻሕፍት አራተኛ ሆኖ የሚቆጠረው የዮሴፍ ወልደ ኮርዮን ዜና አይሁድ መጽሐፍ ነው።

55 See the list of the earliest known manuscripts in Binyam, “Ethiopic Books of Maccabees (Mäqabəyan).”

The 46 books of the Old Testament are divided into four parts called the Books of the Law, the Books of History, The Books of Wisdom and Psalms, and the Books of Prophecy. There are twenty-two books between the Book of Joshua son of Nun to the Book of Enoch. Within these Books of History, the *Zena Ayhud* of Yosef ben Gorion is counted as the fourth of the three books of Maccabees.<sup>56</sup>

An analysis of the audience reception of the text, furthermore, must also consider several aspects of the distinct history of Jews and Judaism in Ethiopia that would have influenced the reading of the text. First, it is important to note the semantic range of the term *ayhud* (or “Jew”), which in medieval Ethiopic literature carried with it the negative connotations associated with words like *heretic*, *sorcerer*, or *pagan*.<sup>57</sup> More often than not, the reference to the *ayhud* is purely rhetorical, addressing an imagined group of Jews, or other classes of religious opponents. It is quite often employed as a pejorative and alienating label against Christians considered to be heretical.<sup>58</sup> No group refers to itself by the label *ayhud*, given the ubiquitous negative associations with the term.<sup>59</sup> In fact, members of the Beta Israel community never refer to themselves as “Jews” prior to their contact with European Jews in the nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup>

Second, it is important to contextualize the interpretation of the *Zena Ayhud* by analyzing usages of the term *ayhud* in other medieval Ethiopic texts. The *ayhud* are negatively portrayed in a range of genres within medieval Ethiopic literature, including theological works such as homilies and biblical commentaries, quasi-historical mytho-legends (like the *Kəbrä nügäšt*), and in hagiographies (perhaps the most popular genre of the period). The conversion of certain Jews to the “true faith” is an often-recurring motif in Ethiopic

56 Tsehayə, trans., *Zena Ayhud*, 1 (or *v*).

57 Dege-Müller, “Between Heretics and Jews,” 257.

58 Steven Kaplan pinpoints the first known usage of *ayhud* as a heresiological term: “In c. 1332, we have the first clear mention of Judaized groups around Lake Tana in the chronicle of the war of Amda Seyod [*sic*], when the king sent out troops to fight the rebels ‘which resemble the crucifiers of Christ, the Jews, who are the inhabitants of Samien, Waggera, Salamt and Wagade” (Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 55).

59 Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 653: “The Invention of Ethiopian Jews: Three Models.”

60 Cf. Tamrat’s discussion of the origins of the Beta Israel, which reads as follows: “the exact origin of the word *Falasha/Fälasi* or when it is used for the first time to designate the Beta Israel is not known with certainty. The translations of the word can be ‘a landless person, an exile, stranger, monk, or ascetic.’ A decree of unclear date, but allegedly issued by the fifteenth-century King Yeshaq, states: ‘He who is baptized in the Christian religion may inherit the land of his father, otherwise let him be a Falasi” (Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 201).

hagiographies (e.g. the *Tä'amrä Märyām*, or the *Miracles of Mary*), as are stories of supernatural punishments levied against Jews who refuse to believe in the Christian faith. In one example, the devil promptly makes an appearance and carries away to hell a certain Jew who dared to throw an icon of the Virgin Mary into a latrine.<sup>61</sup> Also, as mentioned above, texts like the *Kəbrä nägäšt* contain as central narrative threads the claim that God has abandoned the Jews of Israel and has chosen the Christians of Ethiopia as his people.

In conclusion, although the *Zena Ayhud* is a quite literal translation of its Arabic *Vorlage*, it would have been read in a very different socio-cultural context than its predecessor. Its reception as a biblical text is important for explaining the precise and literal manner of the Ethiopic translation, as well as the enduring perception of the work as one of the books of Maccabees. Additionally, the varied meanings of *ayhud*—as a reference to Jews, heretics, sorcerers, pagans, exiles—must all inform the question of audience reception of *Yosippon* in Ethiopia. A fruitful avenue for further research would be comparing the anti-Judaism in medieval Ethiopic literature with the Greco-Roman *Adversus Iudeos* traditions of late antiquity. In this paper, I have shown the broad outlines of the study of the reception of *Yosippon* in Ethiopia, a topic of study that is very much still in its nascent stage.

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61 Dege-Müller, "Between Heretics and Jews," 266.

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