

A MEDIEVAL HEBREW WORK ON THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM DURING THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

by CLEMENS THOMA*

ספר יוסיפון: יוצא לאור סדור ומגה על-פי כתב-יד בלוחית מבוא. ביאורים וחילופי גרסאות מאת דוד פלוסר, כרך א: ירושלים: מוסד ביאליק תשל"ט. 491 עמ.

The Josippon [Josephus Gorionides], edited with an introduction, commentary and notes by David Flusser. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978, 491 p. (Vol. I).

The Hebrew work *Josippon* was a factor of considerable importance in the Christian-Jewish dialogue of the Middle Ages, and the early modern period. People like Baronius participated in the debate on the Christian side, and Azaria de Rossi on the Jewish. Rabbenu Gershom (960-1028), the founder of the German diaspora, copied the book personally almost one thousand years ago. All the important Jewish commentators – including Rashi, cited it. For medieval Jewry, it was an important source of knowledge for their own history. Already in the eleventh century, the *Josippon* was translated into Arabic, and later from Arabic into Ethiopic. Part of the *Josippon* was incorporated in an old Russian chronicle of the eleventh century, though without citing its source. *Josippon* was also printed at a very early date. There were translations into Latin, Czech, Polish, Judeo-German, and Judeo-Slavic. The work was very popular among the Jews. It was read particularly on Chanukka, and on the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Josephus Flavius is referred to as Josephus ben Gurion in the text. The Israeli statesman David ben Gurion chose his name on the basis of this source.

The *Josippon* deals with the Second Temple period from the end of the Babylonian exile (Cyprus) up to the tragic end of the Jewish rebels at Masada. This as well as its historiographic and high artistic values are the reasons for its extraordinary importance. The editor, Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has demonstrated on the basis of internal criteria and an explicit reference in a manuscript, that *Josippon* was written in southern Italy, in the Byzantine domain

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in the year 953 C.E. Flusser has shown that the author's initial main source was a Latin manuscript, which included sixteen of the twenty books of the *Jewish Antiquities (Antiquitates)* by Josephus Flavius, and a Latin recension of the *Jewish War (de bello judaico)*, called Hegesippus. The second main source of the Hebrew author of the *Josippon* were deuterocanonical books of the Vulgata, which also dealt with the Second Temple period.

The name of the author of the *Josippon* was quickly forgotten. By the eleventh century, the work was attributed to Josephus Flavius, as he is frequently mentioned in the book. Thus the work gained great influence among Jews. It was considered to be a reliable source of information concerning the Second Temple period, and the Temple's destruction. A Jewish priest and army commander was alleged to be its author. *Josippon* was regarded in part, as being of even greater value as a source than the Talmud. In the first half of the twelfth century, the supposed authorship of Josephus Flavius was inserted into the work itself. In a Hebrew gloss dating from this period, which can be found in all later standard Hebrew prints, Josephus Flavius identifies himself as the author. He states that he wrote *Josippon* in Hebrew for the Jews, whereas the Romans were informed by another book known as the *Jewish War*.

Muslim interest, and even more so, that of the Christians, was soon aroused by the alleged antiquity of *Josippon*, and the fame of its "author." About a century after *Josippon* was composed, the Spanish Muslim scholar Ibn Hasm used it as a source of information regarding John the Baptist, and Jesus. In the twelfth century, a learned cleric from Oxford collected copies of the work in order to search for the text of *Testimonium Flavium*. He as well as later Christian theologians not only wanted to learn from the *Josippon* — what Josephus Flavius had written about Jesus, but also with the help of this information to show the heresy of the Jews. This deliberate use of the *Josippon* by Christians against the Jews was repeated during the Renaissance period, but in a different manner. In connection with this, one has to bear in mind that the medieval author did not conceal his identity. He specifically referred to Josephus Flavius as a source. Only later, in the twelfth century, was his authorship concealed. Most of the Renaissance humanists read the second recension of the *Josippon*, in which Josephus Flavius appears already as its author. However, the discerning eyes of humanists trained for source-criticism easily noticed that the work could not have been written by Josephus Flavius. Therefore they referred to *Josippon* as 'another Jewish insolence,' in claiming that a work mentioning Franks, Allemans, and Burgundians had been written by Josephus Flavius.

In the original text of the *Josippon*, which is preserved in the new critical edition provided by David Flusser, there are sections on John the Baptist — based on Hegesippus — but not on Jesus. But quite early, a slanderous story on Jesus, and the origin of Christianity was interpolated in some of the manuscripts of *Josippon*. Modern scholars are aware of the fact that this is an interpolation. In Flusser's edition, it is printed with annotations (pp. 439-442). In some manuscripts the inter-

polation dealing with Jesus was summarized. As one can see from the two manuscripts of the recension, a sentence referring to Jesus existed already in the revision of the *Josippon* from the half of the twelfth century. However, it is not found in the first printed edition. A Christian censor most certainly deleted it from the manuscript copy. This process of deletion can still be seen in a manuscript from the Borgianus collection. In this manuscript, a censor blotted out words with a thick nibbed pen in several places. The Catholic scholar Baronius, a librarian at the Vatican, saw the thick lines over the word Jesus and thought that the impudent Jews had crossed out the sentence. Outraged he wrote: "It seems the page itself cries out." Had he checked the manuscript further, he would have realized that Church censorship was to blame for the mishap, and not Jewish disbelief.

Since the *Josippon* became pseudepigraphical, the earlier printed editions differ greatly from the original text, and therefore many scholarly errors were committed. The work was regarded as a source of information for popular Jewish beliefs in the Second Temple period. Therefore it was backdated in order to show old and hidden sources of Judaism. David Flusser was able to find manuscripts of the original text, and edit them in their original version – the false and romantic glitter fading away. We now have a work more than one thousand years old, a monument of bygone Hebrew-Jewish culture, in medieval southern Italy, which has almost no equals. The old Hebrew author was not a dreamer but a realist, an inspired artist, and an important historian. He used his sources, known to us as well, more faithfully than his contemporaries, Jew and non-Jew alike. This becomes evident from David Flusser's new critical edition. The qualities of the author of the *Josippon* are now recognized. He was not a slave of his sources, but a real historian who knew how to draw the correct conclusions from his sources. Even today, his work can contribute to our understanding of Jewish history during the Second Temple period – even though the sources used by the author of the *Josippon* are available to us. Moreover, *Josippon* is an important, indirect witness to the Judaism of its time and surroundings. Reading the original *Josippon*, we discover a fine piece of work by an exceptional Hebrew writer.

The new edition of the *Josippon* is intended to be the basis for further publications on the subject of *Josippon*. It contains the critically edited *Josippon* text with commentary, as well as a detailed introduction on general historical, textual-critical, and literary-historical problems. In a second volume, the *apparatus criticus* will follow, on which the text is based, as well as the detailed introduction and indices.

This 491 page edition with its introduction and commentary is a significant work. David Flusser worked with meticulous care, and a brilliant mastery of the sources. Neither medievalists, Judaic scholars nor those involved in the Christian-Jewish dialogue can overlook this work in the future. David Flusser deserves credit and appreciation for his contribution to the world of scholarship.

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