

Ancient Jewish Historiography in Arabic Garb: *Sefer Josippon* between Southern Italy and Coptic Cairo

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Abstract

In this brief contribution, I examine multiple histories of the Hebrew narrative *Sefer Josippon*, trace back its reception and impact in thirteenth-century Coptic Cairo, and call for a renewed scholarly investigation into its Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic versions.

Keywords

Sefer Josippon – *Kitāb akhbār al-yahūd* – Jewish-Christian relations – Judaeo-Arabic – Second Temple period – Flavius Josephus – Maccabees

Introduction

Texts travel; they circulate, are disseminated, and are diffused. They are uncompromisingly bound to movement along two axes: diachronic transmission over time, in which the transmitter and receptor presumably share a common intellectual setting; and synchronic transmission, in which the transmitter stands apart from that setting and attempts to make sense of the text through translation, adaptation, or other means of literary appropriation. The subject of this article is the textual transmission of the Hebrew narrative *Sefer Josippon* in its (Judaeo-)Arabic versions. For medieval Jewish communities, it served as

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the principal source for the Second Temple period down to the fall of Masada. Few, if any, historiographical texts were more popular during the Middle Ages. Produced in southern Italy, it was read, copied, and studied among not only Byzantine but also Franco-German and Arabic-speaking Jewish communities. What is less well known is that through the medium of its Arabic translation the text was also highly esteemed among Coptic (and Ethiopian) communities. In this brief article, I will examine the text's multiple histories, trace back the reception and impact of *Sefer Josippon* on the banks of the Nile in thirteenth-century Coptic Cairo, and call for a renewed scholarly investigation into its Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic versions.

Sefer Josippon, otherwise known as *Sefer Joseph ben Gurion*, is a medieval historiographical compilation in Hebrew, composed anonymously in the first half of the tenth century in southern Italy. The text describes the history of the Jews from the time of the destruction of Babylon (539 BCE), with historical accounts on the Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and other empires. In the main, however, the narrative treats the period of the Second Temple, most prominently from the Maccabean Revolt (168/167–161/160 BCE) to the First Jewish-Roman War (66–73/74 CE).¹ The text is a compilation and based on a number of previous works, as the anonymous compiler himself does not fail to attest. He states: 'I have collected stories from the book of Joseph ben Gurion and from the books of other authors who wrote down the deeds of our ancestors, and I compiled them in one scroll.'² The narrative draws on the biblical books of Daniel, Esther, and the Maccabees as found in the Vulgate, as well as a Latin paraphrase of Josephus' *Jewish War* by Pseudo-Hegesippus, known as *De excidio urbis Hierosolymitana*, and Cassiodor's Latin translation of the *Antiquities of the Jews*.³ In addition, it incorporates excerpts of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, and Orosius' *Historiae adversum paganos*.

The exact date of the narrative is still debated among scholars. In Flusser's view it can be calculated on the basis of the date of destruction of the Temple, which is mentioned in the text as occurring 885 years earlier. This event is reckoned to the year 68 CE by Flusser, and it must therefore follow that the year of compilation was 953 CE. This assumption, however, is problematic

1 The best introduction to *Sefer Yosippon* in Hebrew is the recently published *Überlieferung und Rezeption des Sefer Yosippon* (Tübingen 2013) by S. Dönitz. A now somewhat dated edition was furnished by D. Flusser, ed., *The Josippon [Josephus Gorionides]: Edited with Introduction, Commentary and Notes* [Heb.], 2 vols. (Jerusalem 1980–81).

2 Flusser, *Josippon*, vol. 1, 144.

3 See Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 5–8.

with regard to several aspects, and it has failed to meet general acceptance.⁴ Circumstantial evidence suggests the first decades of the tenth century as the time of composition.⁵ For example, *Sefer Josippon* is mentioned in a letter to Hasdai ibn Shaprut dated to the first half of the tenth century. It is also quoted in Dunash ben Tamim's commentary on *Sefer Yetzira* (written after the death of Saadiah Gaon in 942 CE, who is mentioned as no longer living).⁶

Sefer Josippon in Arabic

In contrast to the date, scholars have generally agreed on the location of the anonymous compiler. He appears to have been active in southern Italy, which at that time was engulfed in hegemonic struggles between Byzantium, Lombardy, and Aghlabid Ifriqiya. Given the vicinity to the southern shores of the Mediterranean, it is not surprising that in its primal stages of transmission, soon after its compilation, *Sefer Josippon* seems to have predominantly been disseminated among Oriental Jewish communities. The earliest textual layer comes to light in the form of the fragments preserved in the Genizot.⁷ Very close to this early recension, and an important textual witness to it, is an equally early translation into Judaeo-Arabic, likewise only known from the various Genizot.⁸ To date, no evidence has come to light that might assist us in contextualizing the translation. What is more, *Sefer Josippon* is extant in a great number of manuscripts in Arabic script. Although more research is needed to determine exactly when the text was transcribed into Arabic and started being transmitted beyond Arabic-speaking Jewish communities, it is clear that

4 Cf., for example, B. Steven, 'Dates in *Sefer Josippon*,' in J. Reeves, ed., *Pursuing the Text: Studies in Honour of Ben Zion Wacholder on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (Sheffield 1994) 349–359.

5 As proposed by Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 10–11.

6 On the letter to Hasdai ibn Shaprut, see J. Mann, *Text and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati 1931–35) vol. 1, 86–90. See also G. Vajda, 'Nouveaux fragments arabes du commentaire de Dunash b. Tamim sur le "Livre de la Création",' *Revue des Études Juives* 13 (1954) 37–43, for the citations in Dunash ben Tamim.

7 For the multiple branches of transmission, see Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 35–101, esp. 39–44 on the Genizah.

8 The first fragment was published by A. Neubauer, 'Pseudo-Josephus, Joseph ben Gorion,' *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11 (1899) 355–364. Further finds were discussed in M. Sander and H. Nahmad, 'A Judeo-Arabic Epitome of the *Yosippon*,' in W. Jacob, ed., *Essays in Honor of Solomon B. Freehof* (Pittsburgh 1964) 275–299. The majority of known fragments in Judaeo-Arabic was published posthumously in S. Sela, *The Arabic Josippon* [Heb.], 2 vols. (Jerusalem 2009).

Coptic scribes also copied, disseminated, and preserved the narrative during the Middle Ages.⁹

The transmission history of *Sefer Josippon* is an intricate matter. The two *membra disjecta*, Mss Paris, BNF, Ar. 158 and Ar. 287, are usually dated to the thirteenth century and constitute the earliest piece of textual evidence for the dissemination of the text in Arabic script.¹⁰ The copy, however, is incomplete. In the Copto-Arabic tradition the book bears several titles: Ms. Paris, BNF, Ar. 1906 (743 Hijrī, corresponding to 1057 Anno Martyri = 1342 CE, the earliest dated complete copy) exhibits *Kitāb akhbār al-ʿIbrānīyīn al-musammā Kitāb al-Makkābiyīn al-mansūb ilā Yūsibūs wa-yusammā Yūsuf ibn Kuriyūn* (The Book of Historical Notices on the Hebrews, Called the Book of the Maccabees that is Attributed to Josephus, Who Is Also Known as Joseph ben Gurion). Others simply shorten the name to *Kitāb akhbār al-yahūd* (The Book of Historical Notices on the Jews). It had a recognized place in the list of binding biblical books until Patriarch Cyril IV (1874–1927 CE) gave the order to remove it. In his *Nomocanon*, the Coptic scholar al-Ṣāfi ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. ca. 1265 CE) states that, like the two books of the Maccabees, ‘the book of Joseph ben Gurion’ is, albeit not canonical in most congregations, yet *qabil* (‘accepted’).¹¹ He further adds the information that *Sefer Josippon* is one of the books of the Maccabees

9 Whether Ibn Hazm’s (994–1064 CE) quotations of the text are indeed decisive to establish the eleventh century as the date of transfer into Arabic script needs to be reconsidered. See S. Pines, ‘A Preliminary Note on the Relation Posited by Ibn Hazm between the Author of *Sefer Yosippon* and the Isawwiyya Sect and on the Arabic Version of this Book,’ *Jerusalem Studies of Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985) 145–153; *idem*, ‘Additional Observation Concerning the Arabic Translation of the Book of *Yosippon*,’ *Jerusalem Studies of Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985) 154–161. See further, Sela, *Arabic Josippon*, vol. 1, 258–259. On Ibn Hazm’s use of Jewish material and the different opinions on how it reached him, see also C. Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden 1996) 133–138.

10 For a list of relevant manuscripts, see G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (hereafter *GCAL*), 5 vols. (Vatican 1944–49) vol. 1, 222.

11 M. Girgis, ed., *al-Ṣāfi ibn al-ʿAssāl: Majmūʿ al-qawānīn* (Cairo 1927) 17. The translation of al-Ṣāfi’s *Nomocanon* into Geʿez, known as *Fetha Nagast*, includes *Sefer Josippon* among the canonical books. See P. Strauss, ed., and P. Tzudua, trans., *The Fetha Nagast: The Law of the Kings* (Addis Ababa 1968) 13. See also A. Baumstark, ‘Der äthiopische Bibelkanon: ein Exemplar desselben mit einleitenden Bemerkungen,’ *Oriens Christianus* 5 (1905) 162–173. The translation into Geʿez of the Arabic *Josippon*, known as *Zeyna Ayhud*, is considered to be one of the first from Arabic to Geʿez. See M. Kamil, *Zēnā Aḥūd (Geschichte der Juden) von Josef ben Gorion (Josippon) nach den Handschriften herausgegeben* (Glückstadt 1937) for the version in Geʿez.

(*wa-huwwa Kitāb al-Maqqābiyīn*).¹² The encyclopaedia compiled by Shams al-Ri'āsa Abū al-Barakāt, also known as Ibn Kabar (d. 1324 CE), reiterates this information. He recounts that there are three books of the Maccabees (*al-Maqqābiyīn thalātha kutub*).¹³ From his summary it emerges that the third book is none other than *Sefer Josippon*.¹⁴

Non-Christian authors also confirmed this elevated status of *Sefer Josippon* as part of the Maccabean corpus. Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406 CE), in his famed *al-Muqaddima* (Prolegomena), lists three books of the Maccabees among the canonical books of the Coptic Church, all of them attributed to Joseph ben Gurion.¹⁵ According to him, Joseph ben Gurion is to be identified with Josephus Flavius, as he states:

He was called Yūsuf ibn Kuriyūn and was regarded as one of the most influential Jews and one of their generals when the Romans marched against them (...). Vespasian, the father of Titus, attacked him and besieged him with force. Yūsuf fled to one of the mountain passes

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- 12 Al-Šāfi states that in this he follows the Coptic of the Apostolic Constitutions, which mention three books of the Maccabees. However, the third book in the Coptic Constitutions should be identified with that of 3 Maccabees: see H. Tattam, ed. and trans., *The Apostolical Constitutions, or the Canons of the Apostles in Coptic* (London 1848) 210.
- 13 Kh. Samir, ed., *Abū al-Barakāt ibn al-As'ad ibn Kabar: Mišbāḥ al-ḡulma fī idāḥ al-khidma* (Cairo 1971) 210.
- 14 See Samir, *Mišbāḥ al-ḡulma*, 227–229. An epitomized version of the Arabic *Sefer Josippon* became known as the book of fifth Maccabees. There is a disagreement on its genesis. H. Cotton (*The Five Books of Maccabees* [Oxford 1832] xxxii and J. Wellhausen, *Der Arabische Josippus* [Berlin 1897] 47) postulated that 5 Macc. does go back to a lost Greek *Vorlage* of the 1st cent. CE. Sela followed this line of argumentation and considered it depended on an earlier, now lost, textual layer of the Hebrew *Sefer Josippon*. The absence of this earlier *Vorlage*, either in Greek or in Hebrew and a renewed comparison of the manuscripts suggests, however, that the work is nothing else than an epitome of the Arabic translation of *Sefer Josippon*, which suspends with most of the non-Maccabean episodes. Manuscript evidence indicates that book was transmitted among Melkites and Maronites.
- 15 See É. Quatremère, *Les Prolegomènes d'Ebn Khaldoun. Texte arabe* (Paris 1858) vol. 1, 418–419. The list is repeated in his *Kitāb al-ībar*, 7 vols. (Cairo 1867–68) vol. 2, 148; however, the reference to Yūsuf ibn Kuriyūn is not present there. See also A. Baumstark, 'Der Bibelkanon bei Ibn Khaldūn,' *Oriens Christianus* 4 (1904) 393–398, as well as W. Fischel, 'Ibn Khaldūn and Josippon,' in *Homenaje a Millás-Vallcrosa*, 2 vols. (Barcelona 1954–56) vol. 1, 587–598. This attribution is already proposed by Jerome and is also laid down in some branches of the Hebrew Josippon and medieval Jewish literature, see Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*.

and hid himself there. He succeeded then in capturing him but showed favour and remained with him.¹⁶

The identification of Joseph ben Gurion, the alleged compiler of *The Book of Historical Notices on the Hebrews*, with the historian Josephus Flavius also occurs in some of the manuscripts in Arabic text. For example, in a passage on biblical books that follows the translation account of the Septuagint from Hebrew into Greek under King Ptolemy II, the aforementioned Ms. Paris, BNF, Ar. 1906 notes that:

Altogether there are 43 books [in the canon]. However, three hundred years after Ptolemy's translation, the author of these words availed himself to compile their narratives into his book[s] of history. These are three additional books (...).¹⁷

It therefore appears that the popularity of *Sefer Josippon* among Coptic communities, and its inclusion in the list of accepted or even binding books, was due to its association with the books of Maccabees. All of the sources discussed above, including the manuscripts themselves, lack a clear distinction between *Sefer Josippon* and the Maccabean corpus. The identification of Joseph ben Gurion with the historian Josephus Flavius added to this elevated status.¹⁸

The Reception of *Sefer Josippon* among the Eastern Churches

As a prefiguring of martyrdoms and revolt against the unjust exercise of imperial authority, the Maccabean books had a prominent standing among miaphysite Churches. All four books are extant in Syriac translation.¹⁹ Furthermore,

16 *Kitāb al-‘ibar*, vol. 2, 116, as quoted in Fischel, ‘Ibn Khaldūn,’ 589.

17 Ms. Paris, BNF, Ar. 1906, fol. 21r. The passage is a later addition and absent in other manuscripts.

18 In some branches of the transmission in Hebrew, *Sefer Josippon* was also considered as the Aramaic original of Josephus' writings; see Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption*, 91, and Flusser, *Josippon*, vol. 2, 74–75.

19 Only 1–2 Maccabees are available in a critical edition: M. Albert, A. Penna, K. Jenner, D. Bakker, and N. Chiemi, eds, *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version. Part IV, fasc. 4: Ezra and Nehemiah—1–2 Maccabees* (Leiden/Boston 2013). The books of the Maccabees are usually included in the famous Syriac pandect codices: Codex Ambrosianus (7a1) includes 1–4 Macc. and a fifth book, which is book VI of Josephus' *Jewish War*; Ms. Paris, BNF, Syr. 341 (8a1) contains 1–3 Macc.; and Ms. Cambridge, CUL,

following Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Syriac tradition attributed some of the Psalms to the Maccabees.²⁰ The narrative on the seven Maccabean brothers and their mother (known as Shemoni in the Syriac) seems to have been especially widespread.²¹ In contrast, in the Coptic language the books of the Maccabees are far less well attested, with only small fragments existing in Sahidic and in Akhmimic.²² This vacuum may explain the general appeal of the Arabic version of *Sefer Josippon* among Arabic-speaking learned Coptic circles from the thirteenth century onwards, as a source for the historic events of the Second Temple period and in particular the Maccabees. It indeed appears that the reason why scholars resorted to the text was the general scarcity of historiographical sources on this span of time.

In addition to the aforementioned scholars, al-Ṣāfi ibn al-ʿAssāl and Shams al-Riʿāsa Abū al-Barakāt, a number of medieval Coptic intellectuals made use of *Sefer Josippon*. The first of them was Ibn Kātib Qayṣar ('the son of the secretary of Qayṣar', fl. 1260 CE). Not much is known about his life, though his father appears to have held a prominent position in the secretarial service of the Seljuk Amir 'Alam al-Dīn Qayṣar.²³ He was active in the fields of theology, biblical commentaries, and translations, and Joseph ben Gurion is cited in his

Oo. 1.1,2 (the Buchanan Bible, 12a1) includes 1–4 Macc. 1–2 Macc. are also found in a list of canonical books (Sinai, Syr. 10, ninth century): see A. Smith Lewis, *A Catalogue of the Syriac mss. in the Convent of S. Catharine on Mount Sinai* (London 1894) 4–16.

- 20 See F. Baethgen, 'Siebzehn makkabäische Psalmen nach Theodor von Mopsuestia,' *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 6 (1886) 261–288 and 7 (1887) 1–60; R. Devresse, 'Le Commentaire de Theodore de Mopsueste sur les Psaumes,' *Revue Biblique* 37 (1928) 340–366; *idem*, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste* (Vatican 1948); C. Schäublin, *Untersuchungen zu Methode und Herkunft der Antiochenischen Exegese* (Köln/Bonn 1974) 90; S. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ 2006) 139–140.
- 21 W. Witakowski, 'Mart(y) Shmoni, the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs, in Syriac Tradition,' in R. Lavenant, ed., *VI Symposium Syriacum, 1992: University of Cambridge, Faculty of Divinity, 30 August–2 September 1992* (Rome 1994) 153–168; as well as S. Peterson, 'Martha Shamoni: A Jewish Syriac Rhymed Liturgical Poem about the Maccabean Martyrdoms (Sixth Maccabees)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania 2006). The text exists in an Arabic translation: see GCAL, vol. 1, 223–224.
- 22 The famous Sahidic Crosby-Schøyen codex contains 2 Macc. 5:27–7:41: see J. Goehring, *The Crosby-Schøyen Codex Ms 193 in the Schøyen Collection* (Louvain 1990). For 4 Macc., see E. Lucchesi, 'Découverte d'une traduction copte du quatrième livre des Maccabées,' *Analecta Bollandiana* 99 (1981) 302.
- 23 On Ibn Kātib Qayṣar, see M. Swanson, "Ibn al-Rāhib," in D. Thomas, A. Mallett, and J. Monferrer Sala, eds, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 4 (1200–1350)* (Leiden 2012) 453–456.

commentary on Revelation.²⁴ Another contemporary of al-Šāfi, Abū al-Shākir al-Rāhib (mid-thirteenth century CE), quotes *Sefer Josippon* in two of his compositions.²⁵ An encyclopaedist in his scholarly production, he distinguished himself as theologian, historian, and the author of linguistic treatises. His *Kitāb al-shifāʾ fi kashf mā istatara min lahūt al-Masiḥ wa-ikhtafa* (The Book of Healing of What Was Hidden of the Divinity of Christ) contains a few sparse references to Joseph ben Gurion.²⁶ Much more extensive are the quotations in his *Kitāb al-tawāriḫ* (Book of History).²⁷ It is made up of three parts: the first on calendar reckoning, astronomy, and chronology; the second on civil and ecclesiastic history, beginning with biblical history; and the third on the history of councils. *Sefer Josippon* is predominantly (and frequently) quoted in the second section, in particular with regard to the Second Temple period.²⁸ The quotations are usually introduced by *qāl Yūsuf ibn Kuriyūn* ('and Joseph ben Gurion recounts').

Ibn al-Rāhib's *Kitāb al-tawāriḫ* served as a major source for another Copto-Arabic historiographical account. Jirjis ibn al-ʿAmīd ibn al-Makīn (1205–73 CE) wrote a universal chronicle, *al-Majmūʿ al-Mubārak* (The Blessed Collection), consisting of two sections. The first encompassed the period from the creation and covered pre-Islamic times; the second dealt with the Islamic period down to 1260 CE.²⁹ For the pre-Islamic period, al-Makīn used the Bible and Ibn al-Rāhib's *Kitāb al-tawāriḫ*, including the references to Joseph ben Gurion,

24 As quoted in G CAL, vol. 1, 223. On the commentary, see also S. Davis, 'Introducing an Arabic Commentary on the Apocalypse: Ibn Kātib Qaysar on Revelation', *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008) 77–96.

25 On Ibn al-Rāhib, see A. Sidarus, *Ibn ar-Rāhib's Leben und Werk. Ein koptisch-arabischer Enzyklopädist des 7./13. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg 1975).

26 G CAL, vol. 1, 223.

27 One epitome of the work has become known by the title *Chronicon Orientale*. On the long-lasting debates as to the authorship, see Sidarus, *Ibn ar-Rāhib's Leben und Werk*, 41–45. In Echellensis' Latin translation, *Chronicon Orientale: nunc primum latinitate donatum cui accessit supplementum historiae orientalis* (Paris 1651), Joseph ben Gurion is quoted there as *Joseph Gorionis filius*. On Copto-Arabic historiography and its models, see J. Den Heijer, 'Coptic Historiography in the Fātimid, Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Periods', *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996) 67–98.

28 For the purpose of this article I have consulted Ms. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Or. Fol. 434. The relevant section starts at fol. 121v.

29 To date only parts of the section on the Islamic period have been published: see T. Erpenius, ed., *Historia Saracenicæ* (Leiden 1625). For the purpose of this article I have consulted Ms. Munich, Bayerische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Ar. 376 for the first part, available at <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0003/bsb00030225/images/>.

as the principal sources for his history.³⁰ Through the intermediation of this chronicle other Muslim authors, such as Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442 CE), became acquainted with *Sefer Josippon*.³¹ A copy seems to have been available to the Qurʾān commentator and polymath al-Biqāʿī (1407–1480 CE). In a lengthy excursus appended to his interpretation of the *Sura al-Isrāʾ* (17:7), which mentions the destruction of the Temple, he summarises the account of the siege of Jerusalem.³²

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to readdress the question of when the Arabic version of *Sefer Josippon* was introduced to Coptic scholarly circles or, to put it differently, when the originally Judaeo-Arabic translation left its Jewish communal boundaries. By their very nature, Jewish copies of the *Sefer Josippon* in Arabic were transmitted in Hebrew script. Exactly when the text was transcribed into Arabic script and embarked on its prosperous history among the Copts is difficult to determine. From the moment that Hebrew script was replaced by Arabic script the barrier that separated the bulk of the Jewish from the non-Jewish population became obsolete and texts were likely to be transmitted even beyond Jewish communities. With regard to Maimonides' *Dalālat al-Ḥāʾirīn* (Guide for the Perplexed), transcription and subsequent transmission in Arabic script are to be accredited to non-Jewish copyists. Of particular interest in this context is the Muslim scholar ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (557/1162–629/1231), who apparently learned Hebrew script for precisely that

30 The dependence of Ibn al-Makīn on Ibn al-Rāhib is discussed by Sidarus, *Ibn al-Rāhib's Leben und Werk*, 28 and 44–45; and M. Plessner, 'al-Makīn,' in M. Houtsma, T. Arnold, R. Basset, and R. Hartmann, eds, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1st ed., 1913–36), now available through Brill Online, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-1/al-makin-SIM_4479.

31 See E. Tisserent and G. Wiet, 'La Liste des patriarches d'Alexandrie dans Qalqachandi,' *Revue de l'Orient Chretien* 23 (1922/23) 123–143; Fischel, 'Ibn Khaldūn'; *idem*, *Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt: His Public Functions and Historical Research, 1382–1406. A Study in Islamic Historiography* (Berkeley, CA 1967) 117, 132, and 144.

32 See *Nazm al-durar fi tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*, 22 vols (Hyderabad 1969–84) vol. 11, 343–377. The passage corresponds to Flusser, *Josippon*, vol. 1, 343ff. On al-Biqāʿī, see W. Saleh, 'A Fifteenth-century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqai and His Defence of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qurʾān,' *Speculum* 83 (2008) 629–654.

purpose.³³ Maimonides' *Guide* was also read and received by Coptic scholars. The first to quote him were al-As'ad Abū l-Faraj Hibat Allāh ibn al-'Assāl (d. before 1259 CE) and Mu'taman al-Dawla Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn al-'Assāl (d. after 1270 CE). Not by coincidence, both were brothers of the aforementioned author of the Copto-Arabic *Nomocanon*, al-Ṣāfi ibn al-'Assāl.³⁴ The three brothers belonged to the well-known family of scholars who are usually grouped under the name *Awlād al-'Assāl*, 'the sons of al-'Assāl [the honey-maker]' or 'the 'Assālides.' Georg Graf described them 'as the centre of the literary Golden Age of the Copts in the thirteenth century.'³⁵ Their oeuvre, encompassing jurisprudence, canon law, theology, philosophy, and linguistic tracts, was characterised by a universalism of sources and great intellectual openness. There are therefore indications that suggest that the same scholarly circles that showed great interest in Maimonides' *Guide* also adopted the Arabic *Sefer Josippon*. Al-Ṣāfi is the first to mention *Sefer Josippon*, in his *Nomocanon*. Ibn Kātib Qayṣar, for whom we possess early quotations (see above), also belonged to the 'Assālides circle. And it may not be a coincidence that the earliest manuscript, Ms. Paris, BNF, Ar. 158 and Ar. 287, dates from the time of the 'Assālides.

A further parallel is the transmission of Saadia Gaon's (882–942 CE) translation of the Pentateuch, also originally written in Judaeo-Arabic, known as *Tafsīr*. There is evidence that it was the Assālides who actively fostered the inclusion of Saadia's *Tafsīr* into their field of study and thus probably paved the way for the inclusion of the text in the canons of the Coptic Church. For example, Ms. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Or. 112 (olim 21), the earliest copy of the *Tafsīr* of Coptic provenance, was copied by the monk

33 For details, see G. Schwarb, 'Die Rezeption Maimonides' in der christlich-arabischen Literatur,' *Judaica* 63 (2007) 1–45. On 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, see S. Hopkins, 'The Languages of Maimonides,' in G. Tamer, ed., *The Trias of Maimonides* (Berlin 2005) 85–106, at 90–93. Furthermore, Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Nihmī, the scribe of Ms. Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Carullah 1279, on which the Arabic-script edition of the *Guide* by H. Atay, ed., *Maimonides: Delaletü'l-Hairin* (Ankara 1979), is based, apparently had basic reading skills in Hebrew: see F. Rosenthal, 'From Arabic Books and Manuscripts v: A One-volume Library of Arabic Philosophical and Scientific Texts in Istanbul,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955) 14–23, at 20, no. XVI. Finally, the Coptic scholar al-As'ad Abū al-Faraj Hibatallāh ibn al-'Assāl transcribed parts of Maimonides' Judaeo-Arabic writings into Arabic script: see G. Graf, 'Ein Traktat über die Seele verfasst von Hibatallāh Ibn al-'Assāl,' *Orientalia* 9 (1940) 374–377; and W. Abullif, *Dirāsa 'an al-Mu'tamin ibn al-'Assāl wa-kitābihi "majmū' usūl al-dīn" wa-taḥqīqihī* (Cairo/Jerusalem 1997) 86, no. 24.

34 See again Schwarb, 'Die Rezeption Maimonides.' To be precise, al-As'ad and al-Ṣāfi had the same mother; Mu'taman was their half-brother, born after their father's second marriage.

35 GCAL, vol. 2, 387.

Gabriel, a historically not insignificant person.³⁶ In the earlier half of his career, before he became Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, he served as secretary to the al-‘Assāl family. He accompanied them during their travels to Damascus in search of manuscripts and was responsible for the transcription of many texts either by them or central to their literary production. Furthermore, Ms. Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, Mxt. 664, another early Coptic copy of the *Tafsīr*, belonged to the personal library of al-Amjad Abū al-Majd ibn al-‘Assāl, al-As‘ad’s and al-Ṣāfi’s half-brother. Saadiah’s translation had the function of acquainting Coptic intellectuals with the otherwise inaccessible Hebrew *Urtext*.³⁷

It therefore appears that the ‘Assālids, and the circle of scholars whom they gathered around them, had a keen interest in texts of Jewish origin, which were all written in Judaeo-Arabic and at a certain point were transferred into Arabic script. Whereas Maimonides was their point of reference for philosophy, the biblical text in Hebrew was studied through Saadiah’s *Tafsīr*. The Arabic translation of *Sefer Josippon* complemented both fields of learning and served as a source of Jewish historiography of the Second Temple period. It is particularly in the light of this context that a renewed scholarly occupation with the Judeo-Arabic and Arabic versions of *Sefer Josippon* might yield intriguing new insights into medieval Jewish-Christian relations.

In this contribution I have traced the reception on the banks of the Nile in thirteenth-century Coptic Cairo. The sources presented pose many questions. Further research will have to determine why the destruction of the Second Temple solicited great interest in Coptic and Muslim historiography in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and in which contexts (and one might say with which agenda) *Sefer Josippon* was quoted.

36 A study of copies of Saadiah’s *Tafsīr* in Arabic script is in preparation by the present author.

37 On this aspect, see my forthcoming ‘An Unknown Medieval Coptic Hebraism? On a Momentous Junction of Jewish and Coptic Biblical Studies,’ in A. Grafton and G. Most, eds, *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach* (Cambridge, forthcoming).