Judaica: Neue digitale Folge 6 (2025)
https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2025.14

Steven B. Bowman, trans. *Sepher Yosippon: A Tenth-Century History of Ancient Israel*. Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Wayne State University Press, 2023. XXII + 530 pages, USD 49.99 (paperback), USD 99.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-81-434944-1

Carson Bay
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ
cbay@ias.edu

The Hebrew text called *Sefer Yosippon* (= *SY*), produced by an anonymous author in late-9th or early-10th century Southern Italy, has begun in the past decade or so to receive concerted attention at a level not witnessed previously. I would identify the most significant work on *SY* so far in this century as Saskia Dönitz's published dissertation, *Überlieferung und Rezeption des* Sefer Yosippon (Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Steven Bowman, however, has been publishing on *SY* (*inter alia*) for over thirty years. Now he has produced the first English translation of that work, and only the second modern European-language translation, following the German translation of Dagmar Börner-Klein and Beat Zuber published in 2010.[1] This is probably the most important advance made in the study of *SY* since the groundbreaking publication by David Flusser of the standard critical text in 1978. (Notably, Steven Bowman studied with David Flusser in Israel early on in his career.) This translation is very readable, attractive to hold, and ornamented with a number of helpful additions and annotations. This volume has the capacity to bring *SY* more fully into the mainstream of Jewish Studies, Medieval Studies, and other disciplines in coming years, and it is to be hoped that it will do just that.

For reference, *SY* contains a history that was already ancient at its writing (the fact that it is non-contemporary history has led some scholars not to count it as historiography proper). The narrative begins very early, with a Table of Nations based on Gen 11:10–32 and 1 Chronicles 1 (Chapter 1) and an integration of Roman antiquity with the history of ancient Israel (Chapter 2). Moving hereafter quickly through some episodes of Babylonian and Persian history, and just as briefly touching upon stories like that of Alexander the Great in Jerusalem (Chapter 10) and the origin of the Greek Jewish Scriptures (the "Septuagint") under Ptolemy II (Chapter 12), the narrative slows down when retelling events of the early-2nd century BCE. It focuses on Antiochus IV, the Hasmoneans, and eventually settles into the familiar pace of later Second Temple Period history. Well over half the work concentrates on the first century BCE and first century CE, and the final third of the work is on the Roman-Jewish War (66–70 CE) and the

[1] *Josippon: Jüdische Geschichte vom Anfang der Welt bis zum Ende der ersten Aufstands gegen Rom – Hebräisch-Deutsche Textausgabe* (Marix Verlag, 2010).

fateful meeting between Roman army and Judean rebels atop Mount Masada (74 CE), which *SY* rewrites in style (having the Judean rebels die whilst slaughtering Roman soldiers rather than by committing mass suicide). The vast majority of *SY*'s narrative, therefore, is based upon the work of Flavius Josephus, filtered through the editorial and scribal hands of late antique Christian translators and authors, working in Latin. *SY* marks the first time that this material makes it into Hebrew, and perhaps the first time that these events were narrated for an exclusively Jewish audience. As such, *SY* marks a highly significant point in the social and literary history of the Jews, of Western Europe, and in the reception and extension of classical historiography.

Bowman's translation of this text, while exceptionally helpful to scholarship, is not without its problems. None of these are devastating, but some could lead to errors or the further dissemination of misinformation within scholarship, others to misunderstandings of the Hebrew text, however minor. This review first outlines the contents, features, and (many) positive facets of this translation. It then highlights some representative examples of problems within the work, including both the translation itself and the supplementary information (introduction, notes, etc.). This approach aims at a fair and holistic review of this translation, one that will be the most helpful for future scholars who may find themselves approaching *SY* for the first time.

One could hardly ask for a more accessible translation of *SY*. Bowman's volume has an introduction that strikes a nice balance between too thorough and too concise. After this introduction, the reader is in possession of all the requested preliminary knowledge: why the text is dated to the tenth century (though late-ninth is not impossible), the literary nature of the work, and—more or less—the state of research over the last four decades. Bowman also gives an overview of David Flusser's research related to *SY* and, importantly, summaries of the main chapters of David Flusser's second volume, which contained extended commentary and scholarship on *SY* and, in its latter half, his critical apparatus. This is invaluable to the majority of modern readers, who do not have the requisite abilities in modern Hebrew to read Flusser. Furthermore, Bowman's notes throughout the translation are mostly translations of Flusser's own notes, supplemented by consistent and helpful notes by Bowman himself (marked "[SB]"). Altogether, this provides an accessible and serviceable translated text of *SY* that opens up this largely-ignored narrative for broader use within modern scholarship.

When it comes to scholarship, one of the areas in which Bowman's introduction is not totally up-to-date is in its coverage of secondary literature. The volume does not clearly delineate the major recensions in which *SY* has come down to us: Flusser counted three (A, B, C), whereas Dönitz has demonstrated at least four (splitting recension A into two different recensions), in addition to showing that Flusser's edition does not adequately account for the most important manuscripts or provide a particularly likely version of *SY*'s earliest text.[2] Sometimes Bowman does signal this, but rather briefly. For

[2] See most recently Saskia Dönitz, "The Hebrew Manuscripts of *Sefer Yosippon*," in *From Josephus to Yosippon and Beyond: Text, Reception, Tradition*, ed. Carson Bay, Michael Avioz, and Jan Willem van Henten (JSJSup 215; Brill, 2024), 169–210.

example, on p. 19, at the beginning of *SY* 4, Bowman notes that *SY* 4–6 are "lacking in some MSS," but does not relay the fact that these chapters appear not to have existed in the earliest (we need not say "original") version of *SY*, something that Dönitz has again long since shown.[3] The overall impression given by this facet of this translation, therefore, is that it conveys a certain expertise on *SY* yet is not fully conversant with the current scholarly literature thereupon.

Another important issue for understanding *SY* has to do with the nature of its sources, a topic which has yet to receive adequate scholarly treatment. When it comes to *SY*'s sources, this translation does not evince a sound understanding of their nature or usage, relying as it does almost completely upon Flusser's footnotes, which have a good deal to say about *SY*'s most significant source, for example, i.e. the Latin text that it follows for the latter half (nearly forty chapters) of the work: *On the Destruction of Jerusalem* (*De excidio Hierosolymitano*, i.e. "Pseudo-Hegesippus," hereafter *DEH*).[4] In his introduction, Bowman rightly signals this work, itself based on Josephus' *Jewish War*, as one of *SY*'s major sources, alongside others, a list to which he *wrongly* adds "Josephus's *Bellum Iudaicum* and books 1–16 of his *Archaeologies* (or *Antiquities*)" (p. xi).[5] It has not been clearly demonstrated that *SY* used or even knew Josephus' *Jewish War*, and the section of the (Latin) *Jewish Antiquities* that it uses is restricted to *Antiquities* 13–15, corresponding to *SY* 27 to 50, with a few exceptions before and after this section.[6] Bowman's statement appears to be reflecting an argument put forth by David Flusser, but recently debunked by David Levenson, to the effect that five manuscripts which contain Latin *Antiquities* 1–16 plus *DEH* represented *SY*'s access to the Latin Josephus tradition.[7] What makes Bowman's statement more incongruous is a note at the beginning of *SY* 65 (p. 277,

---

[3] Saskia Dönitz, "*Sefer Yosippon* and the Greek Bible," in *Jewish Reception of the Greek Bible Versions: Studies in Their Use in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Nicholas de Lange, Julia G. Krivoruchko, and Cameron Boyd-Taylor (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 223–34.

[4] Bowman refers to this source a "theological/historiographical polemic" on p. xi, where he dubs it *De excidio Urbis Hierosolynitano* [sic]. Not only is *Hierosolynitano* misspelled in this title (the first *n* should be an *m*), but the title itself is a grammatical confusion, as the genitive *urbis* cannot be properly attached to its proper appositive. The title should have been given as either *De excidio Hierosolymitano* or as *De excidio urbis Hierosolymitanae*, both of which exist in the manuscript tradition.

[5] A minor detail is that no one talks about Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* as the *Archaeologies*, though that term is indeed closer to the Greek.

[6] There is some material from *Antiquities* 16 in *SY* 51, and perhaps from *Antiquities* 12 in *SY* 16 (on the death of Mattithias), and *Antiquities* 11 in *SY* 10 (on Alexander the Great). The recent work of David B. Levenson, "*Sefer Yosippon* and the Latin Josephus Tradition: David Flusser, Latin *Antiquities* Manuscripts, and the Hebrew Text," in *From Josephus to Yosippon and Beyond: Text, Reception, Tradition*, ed. Carson Bay, Michael Avioz, and Jan Willem van Henten (JSJSup 215; Brill, 2024), 211–323 provides the most thorough and up-to-date treatment of *SY*'s use of the Latin *Antiquities*, focusing on *Antiquities* 13.

[7] See Levenson's essay mentioned above, and David Flusser, "Der lateinische Josephus und der hebräische Josippon," in *Josephus—Studien, Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und dem Neuen Testament. Otto Michel zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet*, ed. Otto Betz, Klaus Haacker, and Martin Hengel (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 122–32. The manuscripts are Naples BNN V F 34 (saec. X-XI), Rome BAV Latin 1998 (saec. XI), Florence BML Plut 66.1 (saec. XI), Pisa BC 20 (saec. XIII)—all from Italy—along with London BL Harley 3691 (1457), which also contains Latin *War* 1.552–2.373 and 5.365–67 in between Latin *Antiquities* 1–16 and *De excidio Hierosolymitano*.

n. 1) concerning the conflation of Joseph(us) the author/historian and another Joseph, Joseph ben Gorion, mentioned at *DEH* 3.3.2. The note ends with a true statement: "While it is mentioned in *BJ* 1.2.568, there is no reason to assume that the author knew *BJ*, which was not available in Latin."[8] Yet Bowman lists *BJ* as one of *SY*'s sources in his introduction. But the footnote is correct: indeed, there is no good reason to assume *SY*'s use of the Latin *BJ* anywere. However, to say that "it was not available in Latin" is patently untrue; it was 'more available' than virtually any Latin text at the time of *SY*'s writing, and certainly *SY*'s author would have had easy access to it had he had the knowledge and desire.

A final feature of this translation to be commented upon is its proffering of two different versions of the ending of *SY*, as well as highly valuable appendices on related Hebrew literature and later additions made to *SY*, including major chapters within the historically-standard version (*not* the critical edition, but the version most commonly read among Jewish Hebrew readers) of the 1510 Constantinople edition, reprinted *inter alia* in Hominer's 1978 text and chapters of the broader Alexander Romance, a version of which was added relatively early on to *SY*. These additions make this not just a translation of an important text, but a multivalent tool for historians of numerous medieval texts not often read or cited in scholarship. Topped off with a sources Index and general Index, in addition to a bibliography, this volume makes for a versatile tool in the hands of interested readers. Yet caveats must be given.

In terms of problems with this translation, one systematic issue involves inconsistency in rendering divine names. Bowman routinely translates *SY*'s special, shortened version of the Tetragrammaton (יי instead of יהוה) as "God," as in the first sentence of Ch. 2 (p. 7). This is rendered odd by the fact that the Hebrew terms more usually rendered "God" in English—i.e. אל and אלהים—appear in *SY* as well, and by the fact that the English translation tradition already has a convenient and suitable way to render God's covenant name: namely, Lord (with small caps). It is also rendered inconsistent by Bowman's translation of יי with "Lord" (twice) in *SY* 1 (p. 3). Whether the avoidance of this latter translational solution was accidental or whether it was a conscious departure from what is admittedly a largely Christian English-language convention historically, the non-use of Lord represents a missed opportunity of what would have been a clearer rendering on several levels.[9] Moreover, if this convention was designed to avoid Christianization at some level, Jewish tradition has a built-in solution: one could render יי with "G-d," which would have the added aptness of rendering a name for God, modified for purposes of piety, with a similarly modified English term. This issue, however, is literary,

[8] We should note also the unfortunate collation here of the old (from William Whiston) and new (from Benedict Niese) numbering systems for the *Jewish War*: this should have read "*BJ* 1.568," as the "2" is from a numbering system no longer used by scholarship.

[9] Cf. the first sentence of *SY* 3 (p. 15), where Bowman translates אלהים as "God" but simply replaces יי with the pronoun "He." However, later in the same chapter (p. 16), and elsewhere—as at *SY* 73 (p. 318)—Bowman renders יי אלהינו as "the Lord our God," apparently violating his own rule. (However, earlier in the same speech of *SY* 73, Bowman renders יי אלהיך simply as "God".) We also find יי as just "God" on p. 16 and then again five times on p. 17 (with one sequential instance totally omitted).

linguistic, and theological, and does not affect *SY*'s historical narrative, thus leaving the historiographical value of this translation untinged.

In fact, most of the problems with Bowman's translation are naturally of such a philological nature. This means that, while rendering accessible a valuable pre-modern historical text, Bowman's translation cannot be safely assumed to render the underlying Hebrew text exactly at any point. At times, however, there may be poetic value in such policies. So, for example, at the end of a speech (of Joseph ben Gorion = Josephus) at *SY* 73 Bowman renders ויי אלהינו האריך אפו as "and the Lord our God has been long suffering" (318).[10] It may be perfectly legitimate to translate the phrase האריך אפו—literally, "has deferred his wrath"—with the euphemistic paraphrase, "has been long suffering" (though usually one would say "longsuffering" or "long-suffering").[11] However, the very next line, and the last line of that speech, reads thus: על כן שפך עלינו חרון אפו. Bowman translates this: "therefore, He has poured out His wrath upon us." It is the wrath (אף) of God that is at the center of this passage, but the intensity of that idea here as suggested by lexical density becomes invisible in Bowman's translation. Now, it might be supposed that only scholars with a text-critical orientation would notice or care about such issues. And fair enough. But the reader of this translation should know that they are there. In a similar vein, we could note Bowman's translation at the beginning of *SY* 2 (p. 7), where we find "When God (יי) had dispersed the sons of Adam *over the earth* (על פני האדמה)" as opposed to the optional, more poetic, and more literal "from upon the face of the ground" (cf. English translations of Gen 4:14a), "earth" versus "ground" often helping delineate between ארץ versus אדמה. For, at times, the Hebrew idiom is aesthetically appealing and worth preserving (as would be especially apt here, as Bowman preserves Hebraic spellings of proper names even of very well-known figures and places). Just so at *SY* 3 (p. 17) where Bowman translates what one of Nebuchadnezzar's oldest servants thinks to himself about Daniel: "Is this not Daniel who interpreted to Nebuchadnezzar his dreams and was correct in all his words and none of his words failed?" This final clause renders the Hebrew ולא נפל מכל דבריו ארצה, and it would have been nice to see this preserved in "and none of all his words fell to the ground."[12]

Occasional infelicities crop up with Bowman's renderings of *SY*'s verbs and participles. For example, in *SY* 1 (p. 5), we read that "When the Ishmaelites captured the land of Tarsus, its inhabitants fled to the border of the children of Yavan (Byzantium), and they fight against the Ishmaelites of Tarsus."[13] While following the move from finite

---

[10] The phrase האריך אפו matches Prov 19:11a verbatim. It is extremely common for *SY*'s Hebrew vocabulary and phrasing to find exact antecedents in the Hebrew Bible.

[11] Some such un-Hebraizing language is virtually unavoidable, and its presence in this translation is fully to be expected and rarely problematic. All the translations of the Hebrew Bible undertake such non-literalizing modifications as a matter of course. For example, in *SY* 1 (p. 3) Bowman translates ויאמרו איש אל רעהו with "and they said to one another," which is a totally acceptable way to translate a Hebrew phrase that literally means "and they said, a man to his neighbor." Compare most any English translation of Gen 11:3—of which this phrase in *SY* is a direct quotation—or of similar phrases, such as איש-באחיהו at Job 41:17 (41:9).

[12] Similarly, ויחשב בלבבו could have easily been rendered "and he thought in his heart" rather than "and he thought to himself."

[13] ויהי כאשר לכדו הישמעאלים את ארץ תרסוס ברחו יושביה בגבול בני יון והם נלחמים עם הישמעאלים אשר בתרסוס.

verbs (ברחו ,לכדו) to participle (והם נלחמים), the change from past to present tense, as opposed to past imperfect ("and they were fighting"), is jarring to the English reader. Similarly awkward is the second paragraph of *SY* 2 (p. 7), which has: ויהיו בני תובל מתגאים על בני כתים לאמר. I would render this, "And [it was that] the sons of Tubal boasted [or were arrogant toward] the sons of the Kittim, saying: …" Bowman uses the present tense: "The Children of Tubal boast over the children of Kittim, saying: …"[14] Preceded and proceeded as it is by past-tense verbs (which make sense for a historical narrative), present-tense uses like this can making following the translation difficult. And such tense renderings appear throughout this work. Some awkwardness also occurs with nouns. In *SY* 3 (p. 17), the direct object את הגולה is translated as "the exile" in the sentence: "King Cyrus vowed to build the temple of our Lord that is in Jerusalem and to send the exile from Babylon to Jerusalem and to restore all the vessels to the temple in Jerusalem." If there was ever a time to add something—"the exiled *community*" or "*those in* exile" or even "the exiled *remnant*"—this was it.

Another feature of the translation, one which does not *de facto* constitute a problem or error but which could open the translation to critique, is variation in the translation of terms, often in close proximity to each other (cf. the variant renderings of אף discussed above). For example, when retelling the story of the Rape of the Sabine women in *SY* 2 (pp. 7–8), the plural noun בחרים is translated as "young men (of the Kittim)" at first and then "best men" (of the Sons of Esau) in the next paragraph.

There are also some interpretive additions made to the Hebrew, which may or may not be warranted and/or helpful. Just so in the middle of *SY* 2 (p. 10), where we find the line: וגדודי אפריקא פושטים בארץ כתים יאספו בני כתים אל הר כפיטוליאו מפני גדודי גוונדלי. Bowman has: "When the African hosts invaded the land of Kittim, the Kittimites assembled on Mount Capitolio *out of fear of the Vandal hordes*." The Hebrew only says that the Kittimites—which Bowman elsewhere calls children/sons of (the) Kittim—assembled on the Capitoline "before" (literally "before the face of") the Vandals, with no mention of fear. Why the augmentation? To balance such additions one occasionally finds omissions in the translation: in *SY* 4 (p. 21) we find: "When the king saw Daniel seized by the chiefs, he was anxious and greatly amazed, and he realized that on account of him they had established the law." The final part of this sentence translates וידע כי למענו אסרו וקיימו את הדת, yet only one of these two final 3rd-person plural verbs (apparently קיימו, and not אסרו) is translated. Granted that not much is lost in this omission. More, perhaps, is lost in Bowman's rendering of a statement made by the king later in the same paragraph, as he responds to the conspirators: "You have conspired against Daniel. You must not provoke him. Leave him alone, for he is a Jew and his God is awesome and terrible and mighty, and he will demolish and destroy you!" The Hebrew for this final clause is פן יפרוץ בכם וישחית אתכם, which should read "lest he demolish you and destroy you." By dropping פן from the translation, the sentence loses something of its original admonitory force.

[14] I also find strange here "Children" versus "children."

Among the more minor translational issues I would count the occasional infelicities of English; for example, "very huge aqueduct" (for גשר עצום מאד) in *SY* 2 (p. 11). The adverb + adjective string "very huge" is awkward in English, though it does reflect the Hebrew (most English translations will use "very great" for עצום מאד—see Num 32:1). Similarly minor is the occasional switching of tenses, as in *SY* 2 (p. 13) where we read that the city (of Sorrento) "was covered by the sea" rather than the literal rendering of ויכס עליה הים, "and the sea covered it [over]."[15] Such changes are minor and do not affect the quality of this translation, but ought still to be pointed out in a review.

The critiques made above draw upon only a handful of chapters in the translation; an expansion of such criticisms across the entire work would not only make such a review as this unmanageable in size, but would, more importantly, constitute an unnecessary and pedantic, not to say over-critical, criticism of such a notable scholarly accomplishment. The above criticisms of this project are necessary to include in a review such as this; otherwise, the vast majority of readers of such a text would use it unaware of its problems and errors. But these criticisms should not be taken to suggest that this work is unuseful to scholars, or that it should not be used, or that it needs to be replaced. Indeed, this translation *is* extremely useful, *should* be used, and *need not* be replaced (at least until a new Hebrew edition of *SY* is available, providing a better textual basis than that given by Flusser). At the same time, the reader of this translation—especially if he or she is not reading it alongside the Hebrew text—should read it with awareness of the issues present in the volume, whether translational or bibliographic, as the sampling of concerns articulated above exist across the entirety of the work.

In conclusion, Bowman's is a beautiful volume, visually and linguistically, and one that scholars will and should use moving forward. Hopefully this translation will help to stimulate interest in *SY*, a valuable object of study for scholars in many disciplines and an interesting text to a broad range of readers. And hopefully this review will help the reader frame Bowman's project vis-à-vis the state of research as it concerns *SY* and vis-à-vis the Hebrew text that underlies this first English version of *Sefer Yosippon*.

---

[15] Interestingly, earlier in this same line, we find in Bowman's translation "But a spring of oil welled up within the city" (of Sorrento), though here the Hebrew does connote the passage: אך עיר צורינטו נבקע בתוכה מעיין שמן ("the city of Sorrento was split in the middle by a spring of oil"). Cf. *SY* 3 (p. 15), where we find "a great war ensued" for התגרו מלחמה גדולה (lit. "they plunged into a great battle"; cf. Deut 2:24b).