בס"ד

“And moreover, everyone relies upon Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen.”

Abraham Zacuto, Flavius Josephus, and the Beginnings of Modern Jewish Historiography

From time immemorial, writers have often justified their own works by pointing out the flaws in those of their predecessors. Abraham Zacuto, the astronomer and historian who composed the first work of Jewish history since Flavius Josephus, was no exception. He explains that one of the reasons he composed his work was that:

While everyone relies on Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen, even though I do not, and even though he exaggerates and embellishes and makes calculations that are not supported by a literal reading of the Torah; but all this notwithstanding, he fulfills the desire of our people who wish to know all the things that are written about them” (*Yuḥsin* 6, 231b).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Reading between his lines provides insights into Jewish society’s reading habits at the time. The interest in history and learning about the past was not the preserve of scholars only, but was apparently quite widespread among the Jewish public.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given the dearth of contemporary historical works, the Jews were forced to rely upon Joseph ben Gorion’s composition. Failing to find any redeeming qualities in Joseph ben Gorion’s work, Zacuto accuses him of exaggerating and of presenting a chronology that contradicts the biblical one. This reality prompted Zacuto, a Spanish astronomer, to compose a work that fulfills the desire “of our people who wish to know all the things that are written about them” (Ibid.).

Following a brief biographical introduction of Zacuto and his work, the first part of this article will deal with Zacuto’s identification of passages ascribed to Joseph ben Gorion that were actually written by Joseph, son of Mattathias (better known as Flavius Josephus). The second part of the article, I will examine the various sources in which Zacuto recognized what he considered Josephus’ words, as well as to how credible Zacuto found them. This does not exhaust the set of affinities and connections between Zacuto and Josephus, but it does serve as a necessary introduction.

**Abraham Zacuto and *Sefer Yuḥsin***

Abraham Zacuto seems to have been born on the twelfth of August 1452 in Salamanca in the Kingdom of Castile. Born to a family with a lineage that had produced many Jewish scholars over the centuries, Zacuto received an outstanding Talmudic education from the greatest of Spain’s Talmudic scholars a mere generation before the Expulsion of Jews from Spain. At the same time, he studied astronomy at the University of Salamanca and produced astronomical charts in Hebrew that were translated into several other languages. In 1492, Zacuto was expelled from Spain along with all the other Jews who refused to convert to Christianity, and settled in Lisbon. In light of his proficiency in the field of astronomy, he was employed by the Portuguese monarchs to advise them on astronomical matters, and some claim that he even advised Vasco da Gama before he set off to India.

Despite his prominent position, Zacuto enjoyed no immunity from Portugal’s 1497 edict compelling all Jews to convert to Christianity. Leaving Portugal that year, he endured a harsh journey to Tunis, where he lived for several years. Later, he moved to Damascus and finally settled in Jerusalem, slightly before or in 1513. There, he learned in the Talmudical college of the *Nagid*, R. Isaac Shulal, and received the allowance that R. Isaac dispensed to the institution’s rabbinic scholars. Zacuto’s emigration to Jerusalem may have been a result of his faith and his own astrological calculations concerning the Eschaton and the Coming of the Messiah. Zacuto died in the month of Tevet 5274 (12/1513 or 1/1514).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Zacuto devoted most of his life and literary activity to astronomy and the production of fastidious astronomical charts that were used by Europe’s master mariners and explorers for decades.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, the importance of his contribution to Jewish historiography stems from his having been the first Jew since Josephus to write a book of history relating the story of the Jewish people and that of humanity, not merely limiting himself to describing the Torah’s transmission from generation to generation.

*Sefer Yuḥsin* is divided into two clearly distinct parts of unequal size. The first part comprises 80% of the book and is divided into five *ma’amarim* (compositions), again, of differing lengths. This part is heavily rooted in the chain of transmission genre, which describe the Torah’s historical evolution and the transmission of Jewish law; they also discuss the Jewish sages’ legal disputes that commenced with the giving of the Torah or the creation of the world and continued until the author’s very day.

Two prominent works that define this genre are the *Epistle of Sherira Geon* and R. Abraham ibn Dauod’s *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*. Notwithstanding Zacuto’s methodological innovations, including (1) his use of non-rabbinic and even non-Jewish sources to clarify chronology or other points, and (2) his willingness to disagree with the giants of traditional Jewish scholarship including Maimonides, this composition is not particularly innovative in and of itself. The second part, called the Sixth *Ma’amar,* is a separate, independent composition that addresses the history of humanity and of the Jewish people from the dawn of Creation to the author’s day. Thus, this book not only recounts the history of the Jewish people, but devotes considerable attention to non-Jewish philosophers, poets, and scientists, and, of course, significant political events in the course of human history (or, at least in the history of the West) that were not necessarily related to Jewish history.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In fact, some of Zacuto’s contemporaries do seem to have possessed very broad intellectual horizons. Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel is, of course, an outstanding example of this phenomenon. However, the fact that Abrabanel did not write a systematic, historical treatise indicates that he, too, did not perceive history to be a discipline worthy of pursuing in and of itself, but rather considered it a tool necessary for apologetics, for interpretation, or for other purposes.[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, we can deem Zacuto an innovator, or at the very least someone who inaugurated a new era for Jewish historical writing. Zacuto seems to have begun composing his work while still in Spain and completed it in 1504 in Tunis during the period of his wanderings.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Several manuscript versions of *Sefer Yuḥsin* have survived. The most important one is MS Oxford, Hunt. (Neubauer 2202) which was produced in the 1530s in Jerusalem. The second most important one is MS Oxford (Neubauer 2798) MS Heb. d. 16., produced in 1564 in Egypt. This manuscript contains the entire work (The end of the Sixth *Ma’amar* is missing in MS Hunt. 504.). Samuel Shalom printed the work for the first time in 1566 in Istanbul (Constantinople) in an anthology of Jewish historical writings.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shalom made quite a number of revisions and omitted some of the existing material. In 1857, Zvi Filipowski published another version that was based on Hunt. 404. At the end of the nineteenth century, Neubauer published the Sixth *Ma’ama*r’s missing pages, based on MS Oxford Heb. d. 16.[[9]](#footnote-9) As we will see below, Filipowski’s edition is far from satisfactory. It is easy to spot the passages where printing errors or faulty transmission in the manuscripts to which he had access led to him misunderstand Zacuto.

**Distinguishing between Joseph ben Gorion and Joseph son of Mattathias**

Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen is mentioned 25 times in *Sefer Yuḥsin* and he is the most frequently mentioned historical source in that work. By referencing Joseph ben Gorion, Zacuto embraced the centuries-old rabbinic tradition that deemed Joseph ben Gorion to be both the most authoritative and reliable Jewish source for Second Temple period history, in general, and about the destruction of the Second Temple, in particular. By Zacuto’s period, the belief that Joseph ben Gorion was not only one of *Sefer Josippon*’s sources but the work’s author, had been established.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, Zacuto refers to ‘*Sefer Ben Gorion*’[[11]](#footnote-11) several times and to ‘*Sefer Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen’*[[12]](#footnote-12) and so forth. In one passage, Zacuto dwells on establishing the author’s lineage: “And he was succeeded by Mattathias the High Priest and he was the last one. And if we examine the author’s preceding statement we discover that he [Mattathias] was the father of Joseph ibn Gorion who composed a book detailing the lineage”(*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6:244b). Zacuto links Joseph ben Gorion to Joseph, son of Mattathias, explaining that Mattathias the High Priest (whose identity we will discuss below) was Gorion’s father and thus Joseph ben Gorion’s grandfather. That is to say, the author of *Sefer Josippon—*Joseph ben Gorion—was none other than Joseph ben Mattathias, otherwise known as Flavius Josephus. Thus, we may conclude that Zacuto was well aware of Josephus’ works in one form or another.

Indeed, this identification was already accepted among medieval Christians.[[13]](#footnote-13) While Jewish authors were aware of Josephus’ books in Greek and in Latin translation, they apparently did not use them. Regardless, they were forced to confront the issue of the contradiction or connection between the names “Joseph ben Gorion” and “Joseph son of Mattathias.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Zacuto’s older contemporary, Don Isaac Abrabanel, seems to have been the first Jew truly acquainted with Josephus’ original writings (presumably in Latin translation).[[15]](#footnote-15) However, Abrabanel does not note a connection between the names “Mattathias” and “Joseph.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, Zacuto is the first Jew to have explicitly linked “Joseph son of Mattathias” and “Joseph ben Gorion” and argued for a genealogical connection between Mattathias (son of Theophilus), the last high priest, and Joseph ben Gorion.[[17]](#footnote-17) The problem is that there is no clear evidence that Zacuto was familiar with *The Wars of the Jews* or *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, which are the only two books in which Josephus mentions his father’s name. In light of this fact, we must assume that Zacuto’s comments are based on secondary literature that mentioned Joseph, son of Mattathias in connection with the Second Temple’s destruction.

Apparently, *Antiquities of the Jews* is the most likely source for Zacuto’s knowledge. While Josephus does not mention his father’s name in the aforementioned works, he does mention that his father wrote a book on the Jews’ war against the Romans in the introduction to *Antiquities* (Ant. 1.4). In this twenty-volume work, Josephus relates how King Agrippa overthrew Joshua ben Gamliel and gave the high priesthood to “Matthias the son of Theophilus, under whom the war of the Jews with the Romans began” (Ant. 20.223). It first appears possible that Zacuto may have determined, based on the words of Josephus at the beginning and end of *Antiquities*, that Joseph ben Gorion was Joseph, son of Mattathias, which swiftly led to his further conclusion that Mattathias the son of Theophilus was the father of Josephus/Joseph ben Gorion. However, if this is the case, it is difficult to explain Zacuto’s comment: “And if we examine the author’s preceding statement [we discover that he (Mattathias) was the father of Joseph ibn Gorion.” Zacuto’s hints that his conclusions are based on some “author.” Who is this mysterious figure?

Over fifty years ago, José Luis Lacave drew scholarly attention to the Sixth *Ma’ama*r’s unique chronology. Noticing the relatively frequent mention of *The Chronicles of the Gentile Kings* in the Sixth *Ma’amar*, Lacave surmised that a Christian chronicle provided the Sixth *Ma’amar*’s structure. After scouring Spain’s medieval, historical literature and the Christian—Spanish chronicles, Lacave was forced to conclude that he still did not have a satisfactory answer to Josephus' provenance. I believe that we can now resolve this dilemma and, indirectly provide new insight into how familiar Zacuto was with Josephus.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The structure of Zacuto’s presentation and its contents in the Sixth *Ma’amar* indicate a great affinity for Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo’s work, *Supplementum* *chronicarum*.[[19]](#footnote-19) This book was first printed in Venice in 1483 and quickly gained wide circulation throughout Europe. In order to explore the deep affinity between Zacuto and da Bergamo, we must examine how Mattathias son of Theophilus’ is integrated into Zacuto’s presentation:

Following this, Agrippa the son of Agrippa ruled from the year 249 for 21 years and he was very knowledgeable (*hakham*) and fluent in Latin and he was the last of the kings. And then a great dispute arose between the sages and the priests. And Honi the High Priest served then and he was righteous. Mattathias the High Priest succeeded him and he was the last [high priest]. And if we examine the author’s preceding statement we discover that he [Mattathias] was the father of Joseph ibn Gorion who composed a book detailing the lineage”(*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6:244b).

The key to identifying Zacuto’s source is the year in which Agrippa II came to power. The year 249 does not, of course, correspond to the Christian calendar, nor does it correspond to *minyan ha-shetarot* (an ancient system of dating used by ancient and medieval rabbis). Neither can this date be referring to the count from Creation since the number indicating thousands of years is absent. Even if we assume that the text is referring to the year 3249 since Creation (512 BCE), a 560-year gap still remains between that year and the year Agrippa II actually came to power: 50 CE, which is the year 3810 according to the Jewish calendar. The solution to this conundrum lies in Foresti’s book where he writes the following about the year 5249 since Creation:

Agrippa igitur iunior magni Agrippa filius & prædicti Herodis nepos, ultimus iudæorum rex… regnauit annis 21. Vir certe prudentissimus atque Hebræa Latináq; lingua eruditissimus. (Foresti, *Supplementum*, 172a)

While Zacuto does not quote Foresti directly, he adopts all the elements from Foresti’s narrative. Beginning with the aforementioned chronology, he continues with the twenty-one years Agrippa II reigned and the description of his extraordinary knowledge of Hebrew and Latin, and ends by describing him as the last of the kings—“ultimus iudaeorum rex.” However, it must be noted that later in the passage, Mattathias, the son of Theophilus is described as the last of the high priests—“hic ultimus iudæorum pontificum suit.” Nor does Foresti does not mention the connection between Mattathias, son of Theophilus and Joseph, son of Mattathias, let alone Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen.

In order to solve the mystery of Zacuto’s possible source, we need to analyze the following bibliographical comment he made concerning Joseph ben Gorion/son of Mattathias: “Kintairu, a Spanish philosopher in the year 278,[[20]](#footnote-20) and at that time Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen [the priest] son of Mattathias the High Priest” (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6:244b). Here, too, Zacuto follows in Foresti’s footsteps. After a description of Galba’s reign, which according to Foresti began in 5272, there is a segment that addresses “viri doctrinis excellentes.” In this segment, two personages are mentioned. The first is the philosopher Quintillianus, who is referred to as “*rhetor*.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Foresti mentions that he was born in Spain. Following this, Foresti recounts the story of “Iosephus Iudaeus sacerdos & Maththiae eius getis sacerdotis filius, historicus quidem celeberrimus atquw philosophus insisgnissimus” (Foresti, *Supplementum*, 176b). Later in this segment, Foresti describes Josephus’ books, including *The Wars of the Jews*. This chronological and thematic linkage between Quintillianus and Josephus once again attests to Zacuto’s reliance on Foresti. Although Foresti still does not make the connection between Mattathias, son of Theophilus the High Priest and Joseph, son of Mattathias, Zacuto almost certainly made the connection between these individuals. Zacuto assumed that if Joseph, son of Mattathias mentioned by Foresti was a priest, it would make sense to conflate this Mattathias with the Mattathias mentioned above (Mattathias, son of Theophilus) who was also a priest. And, furthermore, since Joseph, son of Mattathias wrote a book about the war of the “Jews with the Romans, as Zacuto’s source noted (that is to say, as Foresti—the “author” Zacuto mentioned above—noted), Zacuto can identify him with the Joseph ben Gorion with whom he was familiar from *Sefer Josippon*.

**Distinguishing between Flavius Josephus and Joseph ben Gorion or between Antiquities and Josippon**

Zacuto believed that *Sefer Josippon*’s author’s biographical material on Joseph ben Gorion came from Foresti’s work. However, what are we to make of the citations of Joseph ben Gorion/son of Mattathias himself? Was *Sefer Josippon* the only work Zacuto was reading? Is it possible that like Abrabanel, he also read Josephus in the original? Did he possess other sources that cited Josephus?

Zacuto definitely possessed a copy of *Sefer Josippon* and made frequent use of it. For example, Zacuto wrote that the fire on the altar in King Solomon’s time disappeared in King Menasseh’s time: “And Joseph ben Gorion recounts that Jeremiah concealed it [the fire] and the Men of the Great Assembly discovered it” (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 1:24b). The story of the concealment and discovery of the altar fire, indeed, appears in *Sefer Josippon* 7 (pp. 44–45) and is not mentioned in any of Josephus’ works.[[22]](#footnote-22) Later, Zacuto explains at length why the Eastern Gate was named after “Nicanor.” He cites rabbinic sources at length recounting that Nicanor was an Egyptian Jew who donated doors to the Temple and that a miracle was performed on his behalf (tYoma 2: D7). He subsequently cites another reason: “And in *Sefer Joseph ben Gorion* it says that Nicanor’s Gate also received this appellation because a Greek general named Nicanor was killed there during the Hasmonean period” (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 1:74b). And, indeed, *Sefer Josippon* recounts the war between Judah the Maccabee and Nicanor, in ways that are similar to the tale told in 1 Mc 7:27–50 and 2 Mc 15:1–36. The story concludes with the hanging of Nicanor’s head and arm “before the gate; therefore, the gate is named Nicanor’s Gate unto this very day” (*Josippon* 24, p. 106). Nicanor’s Gate is never mentioned by name in any of Josephus’ books, although he does describe it when he gives an account of all the Temple gates (*Wars* 5.204–05).[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, in this case as well, there is no doubt that Zacuto relied on *Josippon*’s testimony.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Nevertheless, while Zacuto certainly relied on *Josippon* in certain cases, other references to “Joseph ben Gorion” clearly do not refer to *Sefer Josippon* but to another source. In the Sixth *Ma’amar*, Zacuto summarizes the history of human kind and of Judaism based upon several compositions, including the Bible. In the course of this summary, he lists the names of the judges who reigned in Israel. It is fair to say that Elon the Zebulonite is the Israelite judge about whom the least is written: “After him, Elon the Zebulunite led Israel; he led Israel for ten years: Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Aijalon, in the territory of Zebulun” (Jud 12:11–12). And, indeed, Josephus is similarly uninformative: “And Elon, who was from the tribe of Zebulun and took the reins of government from him [Ibzan], and kept them for ten years, also did not do anything worth discussing.” Zacuto also devotes only a few words to Elon: “Elon the Zebulonite, the tenth judge of Israel, and Joseph ben Gorion referred to him as Akilon, and he judged Israel for ten years and the book’s author asserted that the Septuagint [literally, ‘the seventy elders, the transcribers’] omitted the letter ‘*lamed*’ [from the judge’s name]” (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6:236a). Zacuto summarizes what the Tanakh has to tell us but also adds two interesting details about Elon’s afterlife among later writers. First, he asserts that Joseph ben Gorion referred to Elon as Akilon. Second, and also related to the judge’s name, Zacuto tells us that Elon’s name was changed or corrupted in the Septuagint.

*Sefer Josippon* makes no reference to the period of the Judges, and, in any case, it has no allusion to Elon the Zebulonite. The only time Josephus mentions Elon the Zebulonite is in the passage from *Antiquities of the Jews* mentioned above. Thus, in this case, Zacuto could have read about the ancient judge only in Josephus’ *Antiquities*, not in *Sefer Josippon*. However, in the Greek original of *Antiquities of the Jews* Elon is referred to as Ἤλων, a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew, in which there is no “K”-like consonant to be found. Thus, Zacuto could not have read the name “Akilon” in the Greek version, even if he would have had access to one, which is unlikely, for medieval and Renaissance scholars read Josephus in Latin translation.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the Latin translation, the judge, Elon Hazevuloni, is called “chilon de tribu zabulon.” The Greek H has been replaced with a “ch,” and, indeed, it is not unreasonable to enunciate the first syllable as a “K.” Nevertheless, the Latin transcription dropped the first consonant – A. Zacuto, as we have noted, claimed that the name of the judge in Josephus was Akilon. From where was this name taken? It is different from the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions of the Septuagint that we have seen. Apparently, Zacuto had access to the Catalinian translation of *Antiquities of the Jews* in which the judge is referred to as, “Achilon del trib[u] de Effrays e de Zebulo.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Let us now address the question of how the tribe of Ephraim came to be attributed to Elon. Here, for the first and only time, the name of the biblical judge is rendered “Achilon,” a very close parallel to Zacuto’s “Akilon.”

In fact, this passage reveals even more about Zacuto’s sources. Immediately after mentioning the judge’s name, Zacuto claims that according to the book’s author, “the ‘seventy elders who transcribed’ omitted the letter ‘*lamed*’ [from the judge’s name].” Of course, Zacuto is referring to the Greek Septuagint. According to Zacuto, the judge’s name appears without the consonant “*lamed”* in the Septuagint. This notwithstanding, a quick review of all the different versions of the Septuagint reveals that the judge’s name is Αἰλὼμὁ Ζαβουλωνίτης.[[27]](#footnote-27) The letter λ, which parallels the letter “*lamed”* in Hebrew, appears in all the textual variants. The passage in *Sefer Yuḥsin* MS Oxford Heb. d. 16, however, presents a different version than that of the Septuagint: “And Joseph ben Gorion referred to him as Akilon and he judged for ten years. And the book’s author asserts that the seventy [members of the] High Court, the transcribers, did not write this.” The problem is that this formulation is also very surprising since the Septuagint is clearly aware of Elon the Zebulonite.[[28]](#footnote-28) Indeed, Zacuto predicates his claim to the veracity of this information upon the book’s author.

Once again, I would argue that Foresti’s book can provide insight into what Zacuto writes: “Abilon quem Iosephus Chilonem nominat decimus iudicum Hebraeu post Esebonem principatum suscipines, iudicauit Israelem annis 10. Quem tamen septuaginta intrerpretes inter iudices non annumerant” (Foresti, *Supplementum*, 63b). In this version, we find both of the components added in *Sefer Yuḥsin*: 1. The use of the name Elon in Josephus; and 2. Elon’s omission in the Septuagint version. Again, it seems as if Foresti’s chronology is Zacuto’s primary source. However, Zacuto clearly did not rely on Foresti blindly, for if that were the case, he would not have asserted that “Elon” is known as “Akilon,” but, rather, as “Chilon.” Zacuto seems to have examined Foresti’s assertion in light of the source from Josephus’ Catalan *Antiquities of the Jews*. After examining their differences, he chose the Catalan translation, presumably because it seemed more authentic to him.

The second point about the Septuagint helps us decide between Zacuto’s two manuscript versions. According to Foresti, the number of years Elon the Zebulonite reigned was not included in the total number of years that the judges ruled Israel which appears in the Septuagint. This might lead us to conclude that the judge’s name also went unmentioned. Indeed, *Sefer Yuḥsin*’s MS Oxford 16 version states: “that the seventy [members of the] High Court, the transcribers, did not write this.” The print version, I would argue, is based upon a misunderstanding of Zacuto’s words. The copyist of the manuscript (upon which the Filipowski edition is based) believed that Zacuto could not have possibly meant to say that Elon the Zebulonite’s name was entirely absent. Since it had already been established that Elon’s name was rendered in multiple ways (the biblical version and Josephus’ version), the copyist assumed that the Septuagint possessed yet another version of his name.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Thus, Elon the Zebulonite’s appearance in Tanakh is terribly brief, but for our purposes, his appearance is a vast treasure trove, shedding considerable light on our inquiry. Even though he is dealing with biblical history, and even though Zacuto’s book is written in Hebrew, and thus is presumably intended for an audience that knew the Bible well, Zacuto believes that external sources—whether from Josephus or from the Christian sphere—are necessary additions for presenting the complete picture. Zacuto did not accept the information his sources provided at face value, and he even checked his sources’ sources as thoroughly as he could, as we have seen in his handling of Elon’s appellation in Josephus. Finally, this brief enquiry even teaches us the importance of comparing the textual variations of *Sefer Yuḥsin*’s.

**Samuel, Saul, and King Alfonso the Wise**

Notwithstanding what we have seen when Zacuto mentions Joseph ben Gorion, he is not always referring to a citation from Josephus—neither one from Josephus’ own writings (*Antiquities of the Jews*) nor one from those attributed to him (*Sefer Josippon*). One of the fascinating chronological questions Zacuto deals with is related to the length of Saul’s reign. The Bible informs us that “Saul was one year old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel two years” (1 Sam 13:1). The traditional biblical commentators long ago noted the problem in the verse and biblical scholars have also addressed the matter.[[30]](#footnote-30) Zacuto introduces his readers to the relevant chronological information:

And King Saul reigned for two years after Samuel. But our Rabbis, of blessed memory, claimed that Samuel and Saul died in the same year … and this seems [to be correct] … and then Saul and Samuel died, [and this is] to disabuse us of Joseph ben Gorion [statement] that Saul reigned for twenty years, eighteen during the days of Samuel and two after him, and as we have noted, this is impossible. And, furthermore, since the number of years from Jeftah to King Solomon’s reign cannot add up to 200 years, so our Rabbis, of blessed memory, were right on all counts, and even more importantly this disabuses us of [the position adopted by] *Ma'aseh Yeshu ve-Talmidav* [The Story of Jesus and His Disciples] who claimed that Saul reigned for forty years (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 1:8a).

Zacuto summarizes four different ways of calculating the length of Saul’s reign. The first involves using the biblical dating, in which Saul is appointed king in chapter 12 and reigns for two years after this inauguration. This explanation makes no attempt to address the periods during which Samuel and Saul were active, respectively. The second applies the Sage’s approach, which has Samuel and Saul’s reigns overlapping (for two years, as the Bible indicates). The third draws on Joseph ben Gorion’s interpretation, which has Saul reigning for twenty years in total, eighteen of them during Samuel’s period, and two after Samuel’s demise. Finally, according to *Ma’aseh Yeshu ve-Talmidav*, which is, Acts of the Apostles 13.21, Saul reigned for forty years. In the Sixth *Ma’amar*, Zacuto proposes another approach to computing Samuel and Saul’s reigns.

Samuel the prophet, of blessed memory, commenced his rule in the year 98 and judged Israel for twenty-six years, until the year 124. There is a textual variant that claims Samuel reigned for one year before anointing Saul in chapter twelve so Saul judged for twenty-seven years during Samuel’s life. But this version is corrupt since the Bible later reports that David reigned from the year 124, and in the Book of Ben Gorion [it says] that Saul reigned twenty years, eighteen years during Samuel’s period, and the two years mentioned in Scriptures (1 Sam 13) were after Samuel’s death (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6:236b).

According to this version, Samuel became a leader in the year 98, and twelve years later he installed Saul, who reigned as king for twenty-six years. It is not clear from this version, as cited by Zacuto, how many years Saul reigned. Furthermore, Zacuto himself does not accept the account. Somewhat surprisingly, Zacuto refers to Josephus’ version, which is familiar to his readers from the beginning of the book, but does not at all address the biblical tradition or the Sages approach.

Zacuto cites the biblical tradition, the Sages’ explanation (to which he devotes several lines, which are not relevant to our current discussion), and the approach from the Acts of the Apostles with great certitude and accuracy. In contrast, there are some interesting gaps when we examine his citation of Josephus. First of all, we should note that *Sefer Josippon* makes no reference to King Saul and certainly not to the number of years he reigned; therefore, clearly Zacuto is referencing *Antiquities of the Jews.* In fact, the number of years Saul reigned is mentioned twice in Josephus. The first occurs in his running account of the biblical story. The sixth book of *Antiquities* depicts Samuel and Saul’s periods and concludes with the following chronological statement: “He reigned as king eighteen years during the lifetime of Samuel and twenty-two after his death. Thus Saul ended his life” (*Ant*.6.378). According to this tradition, Saul reigned for a total of forty years, the same number of years recorded in Acts of the Apostles! In contrast, when Josephus recounts the names of Israel’s kings and the years they reigned at the conclusion of his section on the First Temple period, he asserts, “For twenty years of this time, the first of them, King Saul, exercised the rule, though he was not of the same tribe” (*Ant*. 10.143). Here, Josephus asserts that Saul reigned for only twenty years (a figure that had not been mentioned before this), without making any mention of Samuel’s productive years.

It appears, then, that Zacuto integrated two different sources. He took the fact that Saul reigned for eighteen years during Samuel’s life from the sixth book, and he took only twenty years as the sum total of Saul’s entire reign from the tenth book (and not forty years, as *Antiquities* 6.378 indicates). The advantage of this explanation, which does not appear explicitly in Josephus, but is derived from his writings, is that it enables us to explain the biblical passage that places Saul on the throne for only two years. According to this explanation, Josephus believed that when the Bible asserted that Saul reigned for only two years, it meant that he ruled alone—without Samuel’s patronage—for only two years. Of course, Zacuto rejects this explanation in favor of the Sages’ tradition. Zacuto’s conclusion could be understood as a sophisticated reading of Josephus, which is based both on the ancient historian’s actual words and on the tradition of the “benign or compassionate commentator” who seeks to resolve problems in the biblical text.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, given that Zacuto turned to Josephus to elucidate the issue of Elon the Zebulonite just because of Foresti, examining Foresti may also help clarify Zacuto’s sources here.

In this case, the chronicle does not trouble itself with the various figures for Saul’s reign. Instead, Foresti proposes that in the year 4098 from Creation, Samuel became leader. In the twelfth year of his reign, Samuel anointed King Saul, and Saul subsequently reigned for twenty-six years during Samuel’s life. In the year 4124 from Creation, David became king (Foresti, *Supplementum*, 71a). This approach is actually identical to Zacuto’s in the Sixth *Ma’amar*, and, thus, we can be quite certain that Zacuto—who based his entire chronology in the Sixth *Ma’amar* on Foresti—also relied upon him here. Curiously, as an alternative to da Bergamo’s tradition, Zacuto did not cite the Bible or the Sages but rather his own interpretation of the chronology found in Josephus’ *Antiquities*.

As we have mentioned, Zacuto’s interpretation of Josephus’ chronology may very well be a product of his own acumen and native intelligence. However, before this can be established with any certainty, another source that Zacuto was certainly aware of should be examined. Approximately two centuries before Zacuto was born, Alfonso X (also known as the Wise), king of Castile (1248–1252), initiated a historiographical project of massive proportions. The *Estoria de España*, a work of Spanish history, comprised one part of the project, while the other part, entitled *General Estoria*, was a revised version of universal history from Creation to the present time. The latter part was never completed, reaching only its sixth section, which concludes with the Hasmonean period. Lacave, who delved into Zacuto’s possible sources, hypothesized that the chronicle from which Zacuto must have sourced his information had to have been based on the *General Estoria* (henceforth: GE) because of the work’s prestige and broad dissemination [[32]](#footnote-32) Indeed, this work provides the same chronology as Zacuto for Saul’s reign: “E reino Saul en la vida de Samuel diez e ocho anos, e despues d'el dos anos, e fizo la vida e el cabo que avedes oido.”[[33]](#footnote-33) [And Saul reigned in the life of Samuel eighteen years, and after him two years, and he lived as long as you heard]. While this passage does not indicate its source for the length of Saul’s reign, several sentences earlier, Josephus is mentioned in connection with another story about Saul. It is quite possible that in this case, Zacuto, who was familiar with Josephus in the original (or more correctly, in translation) and with the GE’s chronology, hypothesized, probably quite correctly, that the GE’s chronology could provide an excellent explanation for the contradiction in Josephus own writings, particularly with regard to Josephus’ biblical chronology.[[34]](#footnote-34)

**Chronology, Wasps, and Bees: Joseph ben Gorion and the Date of the Temple’s Destruction**

Even though Foresti clearly provides both the chronological and thematic structures for the Sixth *Ma’amar*, in certain places,Zacuto compares him with other sources. Naturally, the greater the weight and prestige of the opposing tradition, the more Zacuto will strive to resolve the gaps between the two traditions. An instructive example of this pattern that also relates to Joseph ben Gorion appears in Zacuto’s relatively long passage depicting the Temple’s destruction:

The Emperor Vespasian who suffered from wasps and from bees that had entered his nose began his reign in the year 72 and ruled for six years.[[35]](#footnote-35) As Nero’s general, he besieged Jerusalem and then was crowned in Rome while he was in Jerusalem, and he left his son Titus in charge of Jerusalem, and he destroyed it in 5274 on the eighth of September, 75 AD [counting from the death of “that man” (Jesus)]. However according to the tradition we have received in Joseph ben Gorion, this occurred on the Ninth of Av, on Sunday the twenty-eight of August. And it was in 3698 from the Creation, which is the ninth year in the two-hundred and second cycle and it is an intercalated year, and it was on the twenty-first day of August. Perhaps the destruction was completed on the eighth of September and this was the sixty-eighth year according to the Christians. Jerusalem had been conquered five times previously: for the first time, in the days of Nebuchadnezzar; the second, Ishibiu the King of Egypt conquered it during the Second Temple period; the third time—Antiochus; the fourth—Pompey; and the fifth—Herod the Great. And one who built this state was Canaan, and some say [it was] Malkitzedek. And he built one tower there and called it Suleiman. From the Canaanite period until King David’s time 75 [years] passed and David called it Jerusalem. And the beginning of the word *Yeru* means full of good things. The city had three walls and pools of water and trenches dug between the walls and iron chains and the trenches were 4000 deep and 203 feet wide.

This passage relates three distinct historical events or phenomena and discusses them. The first part describes Vespasian and Titus and elaborates upon Vespasian’s ailment. The second part discusses the different traditions concerning the dating of the Temple’s destruction, and the third part summarizes Jerusalem’s construction and destructions. The three parts are based on different sources, some explicitly mentioned in the text (“tradition we have received,” Joseph ben Gorion), some used earlier (Foresti, for example), and some which remain a subject of speculation. We should already note that the passage’s structure mirrors Foresti’s chronology. Foresti first describes Vespasian rise to power (b176), then recounts the Temple’s destruction by Titus (177a), and finally provides a history of the city (176b, 177a). As we will demonstrate below, Zacuto’s reliance on Foresti here too is obvious. However, not all of the particulars that Zacuto provides are found in Foresti, and those that he brings are not always unequivocally acceptable.

1. The Wasps and the Bees

Zacuto, almost offhandedly, notes that Vespasian suffered from wasps and from bees that had entered his head through his nostrils. Famously, the well-known Talmudic legend ascribes a similar punishment befalling Titus, who had a mosquito fly up his nostril.[[36]](#footnote-36) Neither the well-known Talmudic sources nor the medieval Jewish literature mention Vespasian’s affliction. In order to find a reference to it, we need to turn to non-Jewish medieval texts. An ill Vespasian appears in some of the medieval versions of the famous *Vndicta salvatoris*. The Roman emperor's name—Vespasianus—stirred the imagination of the authors of this legend, so they reported that wasps—*vespa—* had nested in Vespasian’s nose since his childhood.

As a reward for his willingness to undertake a campaign to punish the Jews who had crucified Jesus, Vespasian was cured of his wasp problem.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, Zacuto claims that Vespasian had not only a wasp problem, but also a bee problem, in his nose. As far as I can tell, the double reference to wasps and bees in Vespasian’s nose appears for the first time in an English text dating to the end of the fourteenth century: *The Siege of Jerusalem*.[[38]](#footnote-38) This text contains an expanded narrative on Jerusalem’s destruction by Titus and Vespasian based on a variety of historical and legendary sources that abounded in the Middle Ages, and the anonymous author also incorporated many of his own literary additions. Vespasian’s nose is described as follows:

Also his fadere of flesche is ferly bytide:  
A bikere of waspen bees bredde in his nose,  
Hyved upon his hed; he hadde hem of youthe  
And Waspasian was caled the waspene bees after.[[39]](#footnote-39)

A further wonder befell his fleshly father:

A nuisance of wasp-bees bred in his nose.

They hived in his head. He had them since youth.

And he was called Vespasian, because of the wasp-bees.[[40]](#footnote-40)

However, it is difficult to assume that Zacuto would have been able to read a text in English and that this particular text would have even made its way to the Iberian Peninsula. The more likely scenario is that another source—that was also the English author’s source—told the tale of wasps and bees nesting in Vespasian’s nose, although I have not yet been able to locate it.

After describing Vespasian’s illness, Zacuto contrasts the two possible dates of the Temple’s destruction. According to the first dating, Titus destroyed Jerusalem in the year 5274 since Creation, on the eighth day of September, in the year 75 according to “the nations of the world,” that is, according to the Christian’s count since Jesus’ birth.[[41]](#footnote-41) This date is identical to the one in Foresti’s chronicle, and since we have already demonstrated that Zacuto used Foresti’s book and its chronology, it seems likely that here, too, Zacuto adopted Foresti’s dating.

Zacuto compares this Christian dating with Joseph ben Gorion’s:

However according to the tradition, we have received in Joseph ben Gorion, this occurred on the Ninth of Av, on Sunday the twenty-eight of August. It was in the year 3698 from Creation, which is the ninth year in the two-hundred and second cycle and it is an intercalated year, and it was on the twenty-first day of August. So perhaps the destruction was completed on the eighth of September and this was the sixty-eighth year according to the Christians” (*Sefer Yuḥsin* 6, 244b).

There is an internal contradiction in this version that attests to its problematic nature. At the beginning of the passage, the destruction is dated to August 28, but at its end, to August 21. This surprising contradiction may hint at a problem in the transmission of the text, and, indeed in MS Oxford Heb. d, 16, the formulation is slightly different:

However, according to our received tradition, and also in Joseph ben Gorion it was on the Tenth of Av, on a Sunday, the twenty-eighth day of August, and it was in the year 3828 from Creation, which is the ninth year of the 202nd cycle, and it was an intercalated year, and it was on the twenty-eighth day of August. So perhaps the destruction was completed on the eighth of September, year 68 according to the Christians.”

First, the internal contradiction regarding the date in August when the Temple was destroyed is resolved; however, there is now a contradiction with the Hebrew date. In MS 504, the Hebrew dating of the destruction is the ninth of Av. However, in MS 16, the date is the tenth of Av. It is arguable that the former date is more likely since it conforms to the Jewish custom of fasting on the ninth of Av. However, it is the very irregularity of the second version’s “tenth of Av” that suggests its authenticity.

Zacuto explicitly states that he adopted the tenth of Av (or the ninth of Av) from the book of Joseph ben Gorion. And, indeed, in an early version of *Sefer Josippon*, which Flusser denoted Version A, we find, “and he flung open the Holy of Holies on the tenth day of the fifth month, this was the day on which it was flung open in the days of the Chaldeans” (*Josippon* 411–12). In contrast, in Version B, which was widely disseminated and even printed in 1480, we find, “And the Holy of Holies was flung open on the ninth day of the fifth month, this was the day on which the Holy of Holies was opened in the days of the Chaldeans.” (J*osippon*, Manutua, 267, scanned by the National Library of Israel). This is also the version employed by Version C, the version most commonly employed by the extant standard print versions.[[42]](#footnote-42) Thus, it can be claimed that Zacuto possessed *Sefer Josippon*’s Version A. However, it is difficult to accept this conclusion given the relative scarcity of Version A, on the one hand, and the widespread dissemination of the other two versions—especially via the printed editions, on the other. Therefore, perhaps, in this case, Zacuto relied on Josephus’ *The Wars of the Jews*,which stresses that the destruction occurred on the tenth of Av: “God, indeed long before, had sentenced it to the flames. But now in the revolution of the years had arrived the fated day, the tenth of the month of Lous [sic], the day on which of old it had been burnt by the king of Babylon” (*J.W.* 6.250 [Thackeray, LCL, 447–49]).

The dating of the Temple’s destruction to the creation of the world or to August 28 in the Gregorian calendar does not, of course, indicate its having been taken from any possible version of *Sefer Josippon* or from the print versions of Josephus.[[43]](#footnote-43) According to Zacuto, the destruction occurred in the year 3828 from the creation of the world—according to the Jewish calendar—which is 68 AD by the Christian count. This date was already alluded in BT *Avodah Zarah* 9b.[[44]](#footnote-44) It is explicitly mentioned later in *Seder Olam Zuta*.[[45]](#footnote-45) Of course, in these works, no mention is made of the parallel Christian count. The first work in which the Christian and the Hebrew dates were placed side-by-side was Abraham bar Hiyya’s *Sefer ha-Ibbur*. Bar Hiyya was a twelfth-century renaissance man, who dealt extensively with the relationship between different counting systems. In *Sefer ha-Ibbur*’s Eighth Gate, Bar Hiyya notes that the Temple’s destruction transpired in the year 3828 from the creation of the world and calculated the year of the destruction according to *minyan ha-shetarot*.[[46]](#footnote-46) In the Tenth Gate, Bar Hiyya addresses the date of Jesus’ birth by converting the Western-Christian calendar into the Hebrew one. According to Bar Hiyya, Jesus was born in the year 3760 from the creation of the world; thus, the Temple was destroyed in the year 68 of the Christian calendar, as Zacuto writes.[[47]](#footnote-47) Zacuto also addresses the contradiction between the tenth of Av which occurs on August twenty-eighth and that which occurs on September eighth (Foresti’s date). His assertion that the tenth of Av was August twenty-eighth is based on the conversion of the Hebrew date to the Julian calendar’s Tyrian version.[[48]](#footnote-48) Zacuto takes the rest of the passage, which chronicles Jerusalem’s conquests, directly from Foresti (177a). This is easy to prove, since the order of the conquerors in Josephus runs as follows: Asobios king of Egypt, Antiochus, Pompeius, Sosius, and Herod. Following the fifth conquest, Josephus returns to the First Temple period: “even before these, the king of Babylon overcame [Jerusalem] and destroyed it,” (*Wars* @.6). In contrast, in Foresti, the order of the conquerors runs as follows: the king of Babylon, Asobio king of Egypt, Antiochus, Pompeius, Herod the Great, Magnus, and Sosius. Zacuto adopts the latter order and refers to Herod as Herod the Great. The enigmatic news concerning the erection of a tower named for Suleiman also comes directly from Foresti who writes, “qui cum ibidem Phanum aedificasset, illud Solyman appellauit” (Foresti, *Supplementum*, 177a).

Our analysis of this brief passage teaches us not only about Zacuto’s diverse sources but also about his conceptualization of history. The most surprising thing we have learned is that when Zacuto delves into the calendrical date of the Temple’s destruction, he does not turn to the Jewish tradition found in the Mishnah and observed in his time by Jews who fasted on the Ninth of Av to commemorate the two destructions of the Temples (m*Ta’anit* 4:6). Instead, when Zacuto seeks to clarify the accuracy of various chronological traditions, apparently he believes that the correct thing to do is to compare and contrast the traditions based on the writings of historians (Joseph ben Gorion), scientists (Abram bar Hiyya), and professional Christian chroniclers. This quest for the historical truth is not necessarily meant to corroborate Talmudic traditions, or even those traditions that have Jewish legal consequences, but rather to rescue historical truth from the fog of ignorance and decide which of the various sources is most credible.

**Instead of a Summary: Josippon, Josephus, and Their Audiences**

Zacuto’s sources are diverse, including, of course, both Jewish and non-Jewish ones. However, he clearly grants Joseph ben Gorion special pride of place. He explicitly mentions Joseph ben Gorion about twenty-five times over the course of his work. More importantly, Joseph ben Gorion is the only author whom Zacuto mentions in his introduction to the Sixth *Ma’amar*. Joseph ben Gorion is also the only historian whose lineage Zacuto actually endeavors to verify. Admittedly, Zacuto’s relationship with Joseph ben Gorion’s writings sometimes seems somewhat naive. Not only does Zacuto fail to distinguish between Josippon and the *Antiquities of the Jews*, but in many cases, he cites Joseph ben Gorion from other sources, chief among them, Giacomo Foresti. This notwithstanding, through careful analysis, we have demonstrated that when necessary, Zacuto does compare Josephus’ original writings (albeit, in translation) with the citations or assertions made in his name in Christian sources. By revealing Zacuto’s sources and the ways in which he verifies their truthfulness or engages with them in argument, we have also learned how he perceived his book’s target audience.

Undoubtedly, the Jewish public was his exclusive target audience. Reading between the lines, we have determined that Zacuto wrote for educated Jews, ones who were highly knowledgeable in the historiographical and scientific literature of their time. When Zacuto notes that Josephus refers to Elon the judge as “Akilon” and that he claims that the prophet’s name when the kingdom was divided was Yaden, he assumes that some of his readers are familiar with *Antiquities of the Jews* and that they might even give more credence to Joesphus’ writings than to the biblical tradition. This is true not only of the tension between Josephus’ writings and the biblical tradition, but also of the tension between the accepted Christian historiography and chronology and the Jewish tradition. With respect to the day on which the Temple was destroyed, Zacuto ignores the time-honored Talmudic tradition, according to which the destruction took place on the Ninth of Av, preferring Josephus’ tradition (which he obtained from either *Sefer Josippon* Version A or *Antiquities of the Jews*) that asserts the destruction date to be the tenth of Av, that is to say, August 28th. He deems it necessary to explain Foresti’s tradition that dates the destruction to September 8.

In summation, Zacuto’s audience is familiar with and respects contemporary Christian historiography. Even though, in his introduction to the Sixth *Ma’amar*, Zacuto declares that the Jewish tradition is to be preferred over the Christian one and mentions Josippon’s exaggerations, in practice, he is well aware of his audience’s familiarity with these traditions and the credibility they attribute to them. It is possible to gain insight into how Zacuto perceived his mission through his tolerance and sometimes preference for Christian historiography. In his introduction to the Sixth *Ma’amar*, Zacuto explains that historical knowledge strengthens one’s faith in reward and punishment, aids in the polemic against Christianity, and, in general, brings “us increased strength and belief in the ability of the Lord, may he be praised and may he be uplifted” (231a). However, Zacuto later states, almost offhandedly, that his book’s purpose is “to fulfill the desire of our people who wish to know all the things that are written about them” (*Yuḥsin* 6, 231b) and this may also be a crucial motivating factor for him. Zacuto is working in a cultural environment that supports historical knowledge and curiosity in and of itself, in any form, wherever and whenever the history under discussion may have transpired.[[49]](#footnote-49) Given this reality, he cannot disparage, annul, and certainly not ignore, the contemporary historical literature read with great enthusiasm by his co-religionists. His need to engage with many Christian authors is not merely an attempt on his part to diversify his sources; rather, it is the only way that he can provide his readers with the universal history, as was understood in his time, and that his potential readers were expecting to find. From this perspective, one can say that Zacuto seems to have had no competition. The chain of transmission books, chief among them R. Abraham ibn Dauod’s *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, dealt with a very specific historical field. Zacuto’s work, especially his Sixth *Ma’amar*, went far beyond the question of “the intergenerational transmission of the Torah.” A Jewish reader who wished to delve into universal history in Hebrew could read it only in Josephus.

Zacuto was well aware of the vast dissemination that ancient historian’s works had received: “For all rely on Joseph ben Gorion” (231b). Zacuto made many explicit references to Joseph ben Gorion ha-Kohen because he assumed that the educated Jewish reader would want to test the veracity of Zacuto’s writings by comparing them to *Sefer Josippon* and Josephus’ writings, which had been widely disseminated, first in Latin translation and later in modern European languages. Thus, it seems that Zacuto did not approach Josephus merely, or not even primarily, as a source for obtaining knowledge about ancient history but rather as an author who was in competition with him for the educated, Jewish reading public.

1. All references to Zacuto follow Zacuto, Abraham. *Sefer Yuḥsin ha-Shalem* [Hebrew]. ed. Zvi Herschel Filipowski, introd. Abraham Haim Freimann (Frankfurt am Main: M.A. Vahrmann, 1924). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zacuto’s target audience was almost certainly the Jews of Spain and Portugal as he notes in his introduction: “And it will also prove very useful for the Israelites living in Christian lands when they engage in religious disputes” (*Yuḥsin 6, 231a*). On the interreligious, polemical culture that was especially pervasive in Christian Spain, see Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, “Introduction,” *Polemical Encounters: Christians, Jews and Muslims in Iberia and Beyond* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 1–21, 4–7. This may indicate that Zacuto began work on *Sefer Yuḥsin* while still in Spain. Other passages in this work indicate that he was still writing the book after the expulsions from Spain and Portugal. See note seven below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zacuto’s life story is shrouded in mystery; his dates of birth and death and the particulars of some of his life events were discovered only over the course of considerable time. On Zacuto’s year of birth, see Azriel Shochat, “Rabbi Abraham Zacuto in the Talmudical College of Rabbi Isaac Shulal in Jerusalem,” *Zion* 13–14 (1948–1949), 43–46, 43–44. On his date of birth, see José Chabás and Bernard R. Goldstein, *Astronomy in the Iberian Peninsula: Abraham Zacut and the Transition from Manuscript to Print* (Philadelphia, 2000), 6. On his stay in Damascus and his date of death in Jerusalem, see Meir Benayahu, “The Sermons of R. Yosef b. Meir Garson as a Source for the History of the Expulsion from Spain and Sephardi Diaspora*,” Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* 7 (1981), 42–205, 89–92. For a thorough rendering of his life, with an emphasis on his accomplishments in the field of astronomy, see J. Chabas and B. R. Goldstein, *Abraham Zacut (1452–1515) y la astronomia en la peninsula Iberia* (Salamanca, 2007), 19–28, and, more recently, Nadia Zeldes, *Reading Jewish History in the Renaissance : Christians, Jews, and the Hebrew Sefer Josippon* (London, 2020), 65–66, and 75, n. 66; Abraham David, “Between Sefer Yuhasin and Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah on Seder ha-Hakhamim (Jewish Sages Chronicle) in the Middle Ages,” (Hebrew) *Alei Sefer* 29 (2020): 29–41, 29–31, and the bibliography mentioned in notes 1–5. It is worth noting the enormous changes Zacuto’s image has undergone over the years. In Friemann’s introduction to *Sefer Yuḥsin* (Zacuto, *Sefer Yuḥsin*,I–VI), Zacuto is described as a Salamancan professor of astronomy, a man possessing a senior position in the Spanish court involving all that concerned astronomy and navigation, and even as the inventor and perfector of nautical navigational instruments. This narrative continues to influence more than a few of Freimann’s successors in academia until this very day, although the meticulous studies of Chabas and Goldstein, *Astronomy*, 5–16cast grave doubts on most of these depictions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On Zacuto’s work in the field of astronomy, see Chabas and Goldstein, *Astronomy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Sixth *Ma’amar*’s uniqueness was addressed by Abraham A. Neuman, “Abraham Zacuto: Historiographer,” in *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Saul Lieberman (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965), 2.597–629, 603–04. In contrast, some scholars deemed the Sixth *Ma’amar* to be merely an apologetic appendix. See, for example, Freimann’s introduction to Zacuto, *Sefer Yuḥsin*, ix, and similarly Reuven Michael, *Jewish Historiography: From the Renaissance to the Modern Time* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1993), 19–20. And, indeed, brief appendices addressing “the history of the nations” had already appeared in medieval Jewish histories. For example, Ibn Daoud added a brief appendix entitled “*Zikhron Divrei* Romi” (The Chronicle of Rome) to his *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, even though that appendix makes almost no mention of events in Jewish history (aside from the destruction of the Second Temple and Bar Kokhva’s Revolt). So what are we to make of its purpose? Within the ongoing encounter with Christianity in Spain, its purpose seems to have been apologetic. See Ram Ben-Shalom, *Facing Christian Culture. Historical Consciousness and Images of the Past among the Jews of Spain and Southern France during the Middle Ages* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2006), 157–62; Katja Vehlow, *Abraham Ibn Daud's Dorot 'Olam* (*Generations of the Ages)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In my opinion, this aspect has not been sufficiently emphasized in research. Neuman, “Abraham,” 602–61, notes two innovations of Zacuto: 1. Incorporating events from world history into his narrative, thus creating a broad and unified picture of human and Jewish history; and 2. The willingness—in the light of Christian and Pagan literary works or other difficulties—to criticize traditions transmitted or historical conclusions arrived at by the Sages. Ben Shalom, *Facing*, 60–84, also addressed this point and even demonstrated that Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel agreed with this approach.

   Abraham Farissol’s (~1451~–1526) *Iggeret Orḥot Olam* (Epistle of the Paths of the World) also demonstrates an awareness of Spanish Jewry’s intellectual needs. However, this epistle is a work of geography, not history. Farissol manifested historical knowledge only in the context of his apologetic work *Magen Avot Avraham?* (Shield of Abraham). See David B. Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Neuman, “Abraham,” 599–603, argues that Zacuto began writing *Sefer Yuḥsin* in 1478 and completed his work in 1504. He contends that it is possible to determine which parts were written before and after the Expulsion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A comprehensive study has yet to be written about Samuel Shalom; for now, see Steven Fine’s article dedicated to a Samaritan legend that was printed by Shalom: Steven Fine, “‘They Remembered that They Had Seen It in a Jewish Midrash’: How a Samaritan Tale Became a Legend of the Jews,” *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021). See, in particular, the bibliography in notes 7–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In 1924, Friemann republished Filipowski’s edition. He added a comprehensive introduction and the section published by Neubauer. For more on the manuscript and print versions, see Freimann’s introduction Zacuto, *Sefer Yuḥsin*, xxi-xxiv; David, “Between,” 30–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On this process, see Zeldes, *Reading,* 4–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Yuḥsin* 1:13a, 17b, 28a, 83a, 202b; 6:236b, 241a. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Yuḥsin* 1:15b, 74b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See note 10 above, and see too Daniel Stein Kokin, “The Josephan Renaissance: Flavius Josephus and His Writings in Italian Humanist Discourse,” *Viator* 47 (2016): 205–48, 218, n. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The author of *Sefer Zikhron Yeraḥme’el* (*The Chronicles of Jeraḥme’el*) appears to have been the first to address this matter in the twelfth century (or, perhaps, the first to address this matter was Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi, who edited Yera*ḥ*me’el’s book in the fourteenth century). See Yassif, Eli. *The Book of Memory: That is the Chronicles of Jerahme'el: A Critical Edition*, *Tel Aviv* (2001) in *Sefer Josippon*. The passage under discussion also appears in *The Josippon (Josephus Gorionides): Edited with an Introduction, Commentary and Notes by David Flusser*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1981) 1:435–37. In this passage, Josephus own works are also mentioned. The description of the books’ contents indicates that Yera*ḥ*me’el (or the book’s editor, Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi) was acquainted with or had heard of all Josephus’ books, except for *The Life of Flavius Josephus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Michael Avioz. “The Place of Josephus in Abravanel’s Writings,” *Hebrew Studies* 60 (2019): 357–74 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Abrabanel’s acquaintance with *Antiquities* and lack of knowledge of *The Wars of the Jews* may be responsible for this lapse as, in the former, Josephus makes no mention of his father’s name, Mattathias. Avioz, “Josephus,” 363, notes that there is only one passage that might indicate Abrabanel’s use of *The Wars of the Jews* and even he admits that this attribution is uncertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. While *The Chronicles of Yeraḥme’el* mentions ‘Joseph ben Mattya,’ he is not associated with the high priesthood. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. José Luis Lacave, “Las fuentes cristianas del Séfer Yuḥasin,” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 5, 2 (1969):92–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, *Supplementum Chronicarum*, Venezia 1483. Since it is difficult to gain access to the first edition, I have provided references to a subsequent edition: Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, *Supplementum Chronicarum*, Paris 1535. Relatively little research has been devoted to Foresti and his book. See, in particular, Krümmel, Achim. 1992. *Das “Supplementum chronicarum” des Augustinermönches Jacobus Philippus Foresti von Bergamo: Eine der ältesten Bilderchroniken und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte*, Herzberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Check the year in MS Oxford 26. In the first printed edition we find: “And then Kintino the philosopher, in whose time the “wreath upon the head of the priests” began to blossom, Joseph son of Mattathias ha-Kohen [the Priest] ibn Gorion” (First printed edition 153b, pagination follows the facsimile at the National Library of Israel) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. While the spelling of the name “Kintairu” is quite unlike that of “Quintillianus,” this is probably due to a copyist’s error. In the first printed edition, the philosopher is referred to as “Kintino” (see note 20 above), a spelling that is much closer to that of the familiar Quintillianus. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A different version of Jeremiah’s concealment of the altar fire appears in 2 Mc 1.18–2.8. According to Maccabees, the fire went into exile with the Babylonian exiles and returned from Persia with Nehemiah. According to Josippon, Jeremiah hid the fire under Jerusalem’ wall. On the differences between these versions, see David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (State University of New York Press, 1987), 19–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, the fact that Josephus never names the gate led to a scholarly dispute over where Josephus believed the gate was located. See Joshua Schwartz, “Once More on the Nicanor Gate,” HUCA 62 (1991): 245–83, 252–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Schwartz, “Nicanor,” even argued that *Sefer Josippon*’s narrative reflects the original, authentic tradition concerning the naming of Nicanor’s Gate, while the Talmudic tradition dates from later and intentionally included the narrative about the Greek general’s death. Testimony from medieval commentators even indicates that the Josippon tradition made its way into an anonymous/unattributed? version of the Jerusalem Talmud. See Moshe Asis, “On the Version of Yerushalmi Tractate Shekalim of R. Shlomo Sirilyo,” in *Studies in Memory of the Rishon le-Zion R. Yitzhak Nissim*, 2, ed. Meir Benayahu (Jerusalem, 1985), 119–59, 136–37. For a rebuttal of Schwartz’s theory, see Noam, *Megillat Ta’anit*, 299, n. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Manuscripts containing Josephus’ writings in Latin were, of course, ubiquitous in Europe for centuries. (David B. Levenson and Thomas R. Martin, “The Ancient Latin Translations of Josephus,” in *A Companion to Josephus*, ed. Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 322–55. *Antiquities of the Jews* was first printed in 1475 in Rome. The first edition of Josephus’ works in Greek only appeared in 1544. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitats judàiques*. ed. Nicholas Spindeler (Barcelona, 1482), 112a [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In several of the versions his name is Αἰλὼν, which is far closer to the biblical tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The same is true for the Vulgate, where he is called Ahialon Zabulonites. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In fact, Foresti's assertion is based on Petrus Comestor’s writings in the *Historia Scholastica*: “Post Abessan Ahialon Zabulonites judicavit Israel annis decem. Hic cum decem annis suis in LXX Interpretibus non habetur.” As mentioned above, Elon’s name appears where one would expect it to in all the extant versions of the Septuagint. Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to establish the source for Petrus Comestor’s assertion. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the different approaches taken by biblical scholars, see Rachelle Gilmour and Ian Young. “Saul’s Two Year Reign in 1 Samuel 13:1,” *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013): 150–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Indeed, Neuman, “Abraham,” 616, maintains that Zacuto’s source was Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jew*s. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lacave, “Las Fuente,” 97–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Alfonso X el Sabio, *General Estoria*, Parte 2, t. 2 Jueces (continuación), eds. Reyes, Pedro Sánchez-Prieto Borja (Madrid, 2003), 647. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Presumably, the GE’s methodology was based on Petrus Comestor who wrote “Et regnavit Saul, vivente Samuele, octodecim annis, et, eo mortuo, duobus annis. Hos annos sacra tamen Scriptura non adnotavit.” It is also possible that Zacuto was familiar with Petrus Comestor. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The accepted dating system indicates that Vespasian ruled for 9 years. Check the textual variants! And if there is a problem search @ [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This legend first appears in the Land of Israel’s Amoraic literature (Gen. R. 10:7, p. 82; Lev. R. 22:3, pp. 499–500. The most familiar version, of course, appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b. On the legend’s various incarnations, see Meir Ben Shahar, “The Entrance of Titus into the Holy of Holies,” in eds. Tal Ilan and Vered Noam in collaboration with Meir Ben Shahar, Daphne Baratz, and Yael Fisch, *Josephus and the Rabbis*, 2 vols, (Jerusalem, 2017) 2.741–70; Galit Hasan-Rokem, “A Narrative Triumph: The Rabbis Write Back to the Empire,” in ed. Steven Fine, *The Arch of Titus: From Jerusalem to Rome—and Back* (Leiden, 2021), 56–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The plot is complex and there are many different extant versions of the text. According to Israel Jacob Yuval, the wasp motif first appears in the twelfth century in two songs found in *der Wilde mann*, the German version of the legend of *vindicta salvatoris*. (Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. B. Harshaw & J. Chipman, (Berkeley, 2006) 41. However, these songs mention only wasps, not bees and wasps. In Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, the wasps become worms (*genus vermium*) and the linguistic connection to Vespasian’s name is pointed out. Therefore, this version is clearly based on a play of words between *Vespa* (wasps) and the name of the Roman emperor—Vespasianus. Jacobi a Voragine, 1846. *Legenda aurea: Vulgo historia Lombardica dicta*, ed. J. G. Théodor Graesse (Dresdae & Lipsiae, 1846), 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The text was produced in England toward the end of the fourteenth century. See Michael Livingston, *Siege of Jerusalem* (Kalamazoo, Mic., 2004), 5–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Adrienne Williams Boyarin (ed. and trans.), *The Siege of Jerusalem* (A Broadview anthology of British literature edition) (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2014), p. 32, ll. 33–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Indeed, most scholars accept 70 CE as the date of the destruction, although this dating is based on later facts. Foresti’s chronology was widely accepted in contemporary Europe, with nearly no dispute regarding it. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Version C is the basis for many editions. See, for example, *Sefer Josippon* (Jerusalem: Hominer, 1956), 385. On the relationship between *Sefer Josippon*’s various versions, see Flusser, *Sefer Josippon*, 2:@@. While Saskia Dönitz proposed a slightly different chronological system for the diverse versions (Saskia Dönitz, *Überlieferung und Rezeption des Sefer Yosippon* (Tübingen, 2013), 91–92, this does not affect what I have written herein. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In Josephus’ first, print editions, which were published in Latin, the names of the months were converted into the Julian months (*Loos*–August, *Gorpiaios*–September); however, the days of the month remain unaltered. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. On BT *Avodah Zarah*’s calculation, see Edgar Frank, *Talmudic and Rabbinical Chronology: The Systems of Counting Years in Jewish Literature* (New York, 1956), 13–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Seder Olam Zuta* in Adolf Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1887) 2.71. While in the Neubauer edition the year given is 3558, other versions provide the standard 3828. This work is dated to the ninth century. See Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen, 2012), 269–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer ha-Ibbur*, ed. Herschel Filipowski (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer ha-Ibbur*, 109. The year 68 was adopted by many authors, and this error was discovered and recognized only at the beginning of the last century. See Abraham A. Akavia, *The Calendar and its Chronological Use: A Reference Book for Technical and Historical Chronology* (Jerusalem, 1953), 59–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. According to Josephus the destruction occurred in the month of Loos. The name of the month is taken from the Macedonian monthly calendar which Josephus used. However, as scholars have already concluded, Josephus only used the Macedonian names in translation for the Hebrew ones, and, therefore, he is referring to the month of Av. However, Zacuto used a different methodology to convert the date. According to the Tyrian version of the Julian calendar, the first day of the month of Loos corresponds to August 19 in the Julian calendar. (E. J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (London, 1968), 50. Cf. Alan E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology: Calendars and Years in Classical Antiquity* (Munich, 1972), 176.) And if this is the case, the ninth of Av occurred on the 28th of August as Zacuto wrote. (See, too, the comparison chart in Barbara Levick, *Vespasian*, [London 1999], 41.) It is very difficult to reconstruct Zacuto’s calculations, since he states that the destruction began on the tenth of Av (according to MS Oxford 16), and when we convert the Tyrian date into the Julian one, this becomes August 29. In the Middle Ages, people knew about converting dates from the Tyrian to the Julian calendar due to the hemerelogia tables. See Ilaria Bultrighini, “Calendars of the Greek East under Rome,” in ed. Sacha Stern, *Calendars in the Making: The Origins of Calendars from the Roman Empire to the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 80–128. However, even if we assume that Zacuto was familiar with these tables, we still cannot determine why he would have assumed that Josephus’ dates corresponded with the Tyrian version of the Julian calendar. It seems more likely that Zacuto’s position is somehow based on an early Christian composition that converted Josephus’ dates into Julian calendar ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ben Shalom, *Facing,* 88, addressed this briefly. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)