"The Final Battle" or "A Burnt Offering"?: Lamdan's *Masada* Revisited

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The career of the Masada myth in twentieth-century Hebrew imagination is well known. Recent scholarship has amply recorded its ups and downs from the heyday of the 1920s Zionist thirst for heroic ancestors; through the distraught 1940s, when it became the ambivalent emblem of both victimage and heroic yet desperate martyrdom; to the revisionist 1970s, when "The Masada Complex" came under fire, and the valence of its legacy was altogether questioned and often rejected.

Within this modern history two Hebrew texts seem to be linked, holding together a privileged position: Josephus's *Jewish Wars,* retranslated anew from the Greek (Simhoni 1923), and the epic-dramatic poem, *Masada* (Lamdan 1926), which catapulted its author to fame and reputation that lasted for several decades. Given the proximity of their publication dates, recent historiography has coupled these texts as major contributors to the creation of the Israeli "Myth of Metzada," more often than not assuming that Simhoni's Hebrew Josephus had inspired Lamdan's poem.

I beg to differ. First, Lamdan had been working on his poem prior to the appearance of the translation, publishing segments of it as early as 1924 (Lipsker 2001). Second, by naming his poem *Masada* rather than "Metzada," as established by Simhoni, Lamdan may have followed the "modern" Russian translation of *The Jewish Wars*, published by Ya. L. Chertok in 1900 (Lapidus). Third, by extricating Lamdan's *Masada* from the clutches of Simhoni/Josephus's "historical" Metzada we may undo a long-attested confusion about the poem's multifocal, paradoxical take on the knotty issue of national martyrdom.

Masada's ostensibly paradoxical vision has been noted for some time and has been described in detail in several recent studies. The general agreement is that the poem is torn between two contradictory moods or ideologies: desperate pessimism and optimistic activism. On the side of despondency we may count its detailed imagery of arid rocks and merciless sun, of doubt and fear, of tears, bereavement, gallows, and despair unto death. Yet the poem was mostly remembered, especially in 1943 Warsaw and its environs, for the bravado of its opening canto: "Against the hostile Fate of generations / A stubborn breast is there bared with a roar: / Enough! / You or I! / Here will the battle decide the final judgment!" (Yudkin 1971, trans.). If we add the sonorous cadences and trancelike rhythms of nightly dancing around the bonfires, straddling Hasidic and secular horas perfected by the pioneers, and the fervent invocation qua pledge, "Arise, the chain of dance / Never

Aerial View of the Masada Fortress above the Dead Sea. Photo by Mosher Milner, 1993. Courtesy of the State of Israel Government Press Office.

shall Masada fall again!," it is not difficult to imagine the uplifting role of *Masada* through the trials and tribulations of the 1930s and 1940s in both Palestine and Europe.

That this self-boosting retelling has, in fact, nothing to do with the story as told by Josephus seemed to have concerned nobody. Nor was anyone bothered by the fact that the poem is rife with sacrificial imagery that is also nowhere to be seen in Josephus. I therefore suggest that the long-accepted yoking together of Lamdan and Simhoni's Josephus is misleading and has not contributed to an understanding of the poem. To clear up this confusion I propose an additional source of inspiration: the tenth-century *Book of Yosippon*. This anonymous version of Josephus's history, translated and rewritten in beautiful Hebrew from early medieval Latin texts, may indeed be the source that taught Lamdan to fuse the imagery of ritual sacrifice (qua martyrdom) with Greco-Roman military noble death, a conflation that perfectly suited his ambivalent yet fully sympathetic vision. This vision is totally missing in Josephus but was fashioned with great dexterity by the author of *Yosippon*.

To begin with, writing in Italy in the tenth century, the author of *Yosippon* seems to have anticipated those contemporary readers who find the collective suicide described in *The Jewish Wars* hard to accept. So, instead of having the Jews of "Metzada" (NB: not the *Sicarii* of "Masada"!) fall on their swords (or worse, *kill* each other), as they do in both Josephus's history and in *Yosippon*'s Latin source, the Pseudo-Hegesippus, the anonymous Hebrew author has El'azar send them off "to fight the enemy and die like heroes" (*Sefer Yosippon*, ed. Flusser, 1978). *Yosippon*'s closing statement neatly summarizes this innovation, echoed in the idea of "the last stand" or "fighting to the last man" associated in the Israeli mind with "Metzada": "After these things, the men left the city and challenged the Romans to fight, killing too many of them to count. The Jews thus had fought until they all expired in the battle, dying for God and his Temple" (430). (A second, apparently later version according to David Flusser, intensifies the description of the heroic death, while erasing the religious overtones [431].)

As Yael Zerubavel has already observed, "Jossipon's [*sic*] later modified version of Masada fits the activist conception of heroism in secular national Hebrew culture much better than Josephus's original version." Zerubavel further suggests that it is "most curious" that "the activist commemorative narrative derives its legitimation from Josephus's historical account," while "Jossipon's version has been largely ignored in the modern Hebrew commemoration of Masada." I could not agree more. Yet this "curious" act of omission was not limited to the Israeli commemoration of Masada. As Steven Bowman has suggested, the ascendancy of Josephus's history at the expense of *Yosippon* may attest to biases, conscious or not, running deep in modern Hebrew and Jewish historiography. Here however I would like to focus only on the curious persistence of *Yosippon*'s "Metzada" in the Israeli mind, despite the almost unanimous "suppression" of the book itself in twentieth-century scholarship.

The unacknowledged source responsible for this feat of memory, was, I suggest, precisely Lamdan's poetic creation, *Masada*. Could not his celebrated line, "Here will the battle decide the final judgment!" have been inspired by the Jewish "noble death" in a "final battle" invented by the author of *Yosippon* for his Metzada heroes? Certainly much more than Masada à la Josephus! But there is more. *Yosippon* begins the closure of the dramatic event with the words "After these things . . . ." So what is the famed opening of Genesis 22, the *aqedah*, doing here?

I suggest that by referring to the events of the day before with this phrase, the author cleverly links the slaughter of the families with the offering demanded of Abraham "after these things." This is in fact *Yosippon*'s second innovation in this episode. El'azar has to negotiate with his men the dreadful act of putting their loved ones to death so that they would not suffer at the hands of the Romans. To do so he

THERE IS NO DOUBT THEN THAT THE RITUAL-SACRAL TONE OF *MASADA* IS MUCH CLOSER TO THE MOOD OF *YOSIPPON*'S METZADA THAN TO THE MASADA SCENE IN *THE JEWISH WARS*. LIKE THE FORMER, IT MELDS "NATIONAL AND SACRAL ELEMENTS" (FLUSSER, *YOSIPPON* II, 180), THUS SETTING THE TONE AND PERHAPS THE NORM FOR THE NATIONAL MARTYROLOGICAL DISCOURSES THAT WERE TO FOLLOW.

not only presents this deed, just like El'azar in Josephus's version, as an act of compassion; he also promises the men that this "mercy killing" "will be considered as a sacrificial burnt offering that will please God (*qorban olah leratzon la'adonay;* p. 429). This addition, which helps turn the objects of murder into "sacrificial victims" and hence sanctified martyrs, is also absent in either Josephus or *Yosippon*'s Latin source. It follows logically however from the opening of El'azar's speech, where a list of historical precedence begins with "Do remember your Father Abraham *who took his only son to offer him to God* . . ." (emphasis is mine).

This is not the place to engage *Yosippon*'s difficult negotiation with the prefigural Christian overtones of Isaac in his Latin source. I propose however that his rhetorical move was borrowed by Lamdan to great effect. See for instance the section named "A Tender Offering" (*Olah rakkah*; *Masada,* 28), where an "only son" ascends Masada "*joyously*, his head full of dew drops," confident that his gift (of life? of death?) "will be pleasing [accepted]" (*teratzeh*, derived from the same root and meaning as the verb used in *Yosippon*, "*leratzon*"). Lamdan comes even closer to the language of the medieval text when he describes the despair of being abandoned by an absent God as the lack of authority that would approve or accept as pleasing (*yeratzeh*) "the offering of our life and the sacrifice of our youth and love . . ." ("Weeping," 63).

Finally, replacing Josephus with *Yosippon* may explain still another general feature of *Masada,* its overall religious vocabulary. As the poetry of an ostensibly secular pioneer, Lamdan's work is surprisingly preoccupied with the presence or absence of God. His images of "national martyrdom" are rooted much more than those of his peers in the language of *sacral* ritual. In a section named "The First-Fruit Caravan" (*Orhat bikkurim*, 32), for instance, he puts in the mouth of the climbers to the unyielding rock of Masada startling images of gift-bearing. The first-person-plural subjects of this canto carry the "grain of our lives" and "our joyous blood" as a sacred (!) offering (*minhah veqodesh*!) for the impending final battle; they moreover offer a selfless donation of "the springs of our youth" and the "first fruit of our lives," not to mention "handful of hearts," "gold of dreams," and "baskets of love."

There is no doubt then that the ritual-sacral tone of *Masada* is much closer to the mood of *Yosippon*'s Metzada than to the Masada scene in *The Jewish Wars.* Like the former, it melds "national and sacral elements" (Flusser, *Yosippon* II, 180), thus setting the tone and perhaps the norm for the national martyrological discourses that were to follow. Should we then be surprised that the distinctive sacrificial image of *bikkurim,* rather than the more common *aqedah* ("first fruit offering, a spring carnival climaxing in human sacrifice") resurfaced recently in David Grossman's much celebrated novel *Isha borahat mibesora* (A Woman Fleeing from Tidings, 2008), the latest link in Israel's fierce contest over its national martyrology?

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