

Developments and Changes in Jewish Hymnology (5th-8th centuries)

Wien, 9 April 2013

Ten Preliminary Comments

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1. *What do you want to know about Jewish hymnography?* We will deal with an intriguing subject commonly defined as *Piyyut*, a term taken from the manuscripts and fashioned by one of the standard Hebrew nominal patterns. Significantly, the word *piyyut* has been derived from Greek *poiētes*. So *Piyyut*, with an initial capital letter, functions as an overall concept for Jewish hymnography, whereas *piyyut* with a small first letter (plural: *piyyutim*), indicates a single religious composition for the sake of synagogue liturgy and service.
2. *Late Antiquity:* Cultural creativity in the Christian-Byzantine realm also included the development of a liturgical system in the main centers of religious authority, such as Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The major elements of these Christian liturgies show affinity with what can be defined as standard parts of Jewish prayer in contemporary synagogues.
3. *Synagogue liturgy* underwent processes of adaptation en route to a certain level of unification within and alongside statutory prayer texts, albeit in the setting of a very different religious authority. One evident aspect is the key role of a specific officer whose title was *hazzan*. Earlier sources emphasize the *hazzan*'s function of reading Scripture, whereas later sources stress his involvement in the liturgical components of prayer and *Piyyut*.
4. *Sources:* As to our source material, we do not have complete codices or full written texts of the liturgical and poetic rubrics before or during the early Islamic period. Our knowledge of what was the significance of *Piyyut* for the religious life of the Jewish people is based on studies of the ever amazing collection of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts known as the *Genizah*.
5. *Melodoi and Paytanim:* The original Byzantine hymn composers and singers – known as *Melodoi* or Melodists – represent distinct schools of Greek hymnology, from the fifth to the seventh century. The foremost contribution of the early Melodists, in particular of Romanos, was the introduction of a new and intricate form of hymn, the *kontakion*. The Jewish hymnology at the Byzantine synagogue at the time is at best represented by a hymnist (Hebrew: *paytan*) known by the name Yannai (Greek: Yannaïos), who can justifiably be viewed as a 'Jewish Melodist'. We will discuss one outstanding example from Yannai's oeuvre from his composition for Deut. 6:4 (the *Shema*).

6. *Piyyut and Apocalypitics*: In the work of the great composer Eleazar birabbi Qilir (= Cyrillos, early 7th century) we encounter commemoration alongside expectation. The arrival of the Arabian kingdom of Ishmael will lead to deliverance from the wicked kingdom of Edom or Rome/Rum or Byzantium. What is Jewish apocalyptic in Piyyut?
7. *Jewish Hymnography in the Early Islamic Period*: The so-called post-Qiliri period, the seventh and eighth centuries, is a time of liturgical transformation and innovation, although many facets of what exactly occurred in Jewish religious history remain obscure. External factors like the spread of Islam and the increasing use of Arabic as the official language led to a new positioning of Hebrew vis-à-vis other languages in the Jewish religious domain. Prayer texts appear to have been standardized to a large extent, leading to major adaptations in synagogue hymnology, to some extent suppressing the level of richness and beauty of post-Qiliri Hebrew poetry.
8. *Language and Verse*: Dunash Ibn Labrat was one of the first composers to introduce Arabic poetics into Hebrew verse, both secular and religious. Shmuel bar Hosha'na ha-Shelishi is one of the very few hymnists about whom we have biographical details. A full cycle of his hymns has been recently reconstructed, and will soon be published. Samuel the Third and other hymnists accepted Greek words and integrated them into their Hebrew, even in the absence of a Hellenophone environment.
9. *The man from Kafra who doubles the number of empires*: Most interesting in this respect is the mid-eighth-century hymnist Pinhas the Priest, who probably came from the town of Kafra in Galilee. For the sake of adapting the sequence of empires he doubled the number of four to eight, and thus presented four pairs of kingdoms: Babylon and Chaldea ("You, God, have torn them apart by strife"), Persia and Media ("Fifty-two years were assigned to the Medians ... when the Persian kingdom was coupled to Media"), Greece and Macedonia ("One hundred and eighty years Greece ruled ... Israel was closed in by the Macedonian kingdom"), Edom and Ishmael ("Nine hundred and eighty years was Israel dispersed in the kingdom of Edom ... Its respect was gone in doubling the empire of the Ishmaelites" – Umayyads and Abbasids?). Why did he make this double division?
10. *Relevance*: What then, in general, is the function of the Jewish hymnist in the fifth to the eighth centuries and beyond? The liturgical poet has the responsibility for transmitting the inherited religious tradition of Israel, and he is considered as one of the guardians of Jewish doctrines of faith and practice. *Piyyut* should be viewed as literary and religious art, because the creativeness of the individual hymnist is neither vitiated nor suppressed by the fact that in the period under discussion the hymnist never speaks for himself, but always for a specific community as the embodiment of a people transcending history and time. Synagogue poetry was not exclusively didactic or elitist, but served a wider audience or readership; in a real sense, this was poetry for the people.