



Joseph Yahalom

Sources of the Sacred Song: Crossroads in Jewish Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew]

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Joseph Yahalom is one of the foremost scholars of *piyyut*, the intricate, allusive poetry of the ancient and medieval synagogue. His research has ranged from the linguistic study of the earliest forms of *piyyut* in the first centuries of the Common Era, to publication (with Michael Sokoloff) of Aramaic poetry in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic from late antiquity, to studies and publications of the work of medieval poets such as Yehudah Halevi and Yehudah Al-Ḥarizi. In particular, he has been a pioneer in placing early *piyyut* in the social and cultural context of late antiquity, especially in his magisterial *Piyyut u-Metsi'ut ba-Shilhe ha-Zeman he-'Atiq* (Poetry and society in Jewish Galilee of late antiquity [Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999]). (By way of full disclosure, I should mention that I collaborated with Joseph Yahalom on an anthology, with translation, introduction, and commentary, of the early Avodah *piyyutim*, *Avodah: Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005]).

Early *piyyut* has only recently received attention beyond specialists in Hebrew poetry for its relevance to the history of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. While rooted in the Jewish culture that was largely forged by the ancient rabbis, it is a separate literary genre, reflecting the concerns of the ancient synagogue, and written mostly by individuals, known as *payetanim*, several of whom “signed” their names in acrostics inside the poetry. In fact, the earliest extant Hebrew literary texts by a named author since the book of Ben Sira (second century BCE) are the *piyyutim* of Yose ben Yose in the fifth century CE. This distinctiveness is also reflected in how earlier *piyyut* emphasizes a priestly form of piety, direct engagement with Christianity, and awareness of

noncanonical Jewish literature. The study of *piyyut*, combined with the study of early Jewish mysticism and magic and archaeology and art in Roman Palestine, raises questions about the relationship of the central circles of the rabbinic movement to other producers of culture in their environment. Yahalom's research has inspired much of this attention.

The book under review can be seen as a followup to *Piyyut u-Metsi'ut*. Like that volume, it is an effort to place the Hebrew synagogue poetry in cultural and historical context. The volume under review, *Shoreshe Shirat ha-Qodesh*, extends and deepens the focus of study by setting the formal and prosodic properties of classical *piyyut* into cultural context. Yahalom traces the main formal components of early *piyyut* from its preclassical stage (roughly third–fifth centuries CE), which featured unrhymed stanzas arranged in alphabetical acrostics, to classical *piyyut* (sixth–eighth centuries CE), which evolved into more complex, formulized structures employing rhyme and more intricate allusion and wordplay. He also looks beyond Byzantine Palestine to the inheritors of that genre in early medieval Palestine and southern Europe. Each chapter of the book relates a set of those forms and prosodic methods to the history of Jewish Palestine from the dominance of the Byzantine Empire to the dawn of Islam.

One of the most important contributions of this volume is how Yahalom relates each of these literary forms to the content they express. As he states in the preface, the book is not intended to be a comprehensive history of *piyyut*. Rather, his method is to follow central principles of composition as they find expression in form and content—meter, rhyme and stanza, sound and structures—in relationship to ideas distinctive to *piyyut* in the context of adjacent genres such as statutory liturgy and midrash. Thus, chapter 1 discusses the relationship between the Qedushah, the pivotal unit of the Amidah in which the congregation recites the angelic liturgy of Isa 6 and Ezek 3, and the literature of early Jewish mysticism known as *hekhhalot*. While it is not clear whether most of the *payetamim* were acquainted with the *hekhhalot* texts as they were eventually written down, Yahalom shows how the poets framed their compositions so as to evoke a sense of the terrestrial congregation as an ecstatic echo of the celestial choir. By the sixth century, the classical poet Yannai and his contemporaries had developed more complex genres such as the Qedushta, in which the first three blessings of the Sabbath morning Amidah were embellished in nine discrete poetic units. Chapter 2 describes how the structure of the first three units of the Qedushta were composed to correspond to those first three blessings of the Amidah. Chapter 3 traces the sources of rhyme in *piyyut* from rhetorical patterns in midrashic literature and assonance in preclassical *piyyut* to the work of Yannai, the first known *payetan* to use rhyme formally in Hebrew poetry. Chapter 4 explores the varieties of acrostic, a technique that goes back to biblical poetry. In *piyyut*, alphabetical acrostics were employed at the beginning of lines, internally, partially, and backward and forward; beginning with Yannai, authors also used acrostics to embed their names in their compositions. Building on the history of rhyme in *piyyut* in chapter 3, chapter 5 extends that history to the more intricate forms of internal rhyme after Yannai, especially in the work of great *payetan* Eleazar Qallir in the late sixth to early seventh centuries.

In chapters 6–8, Yahalom turns to narrative forms that express major themes more directly. Chapter 6 discusses one of the most consistent patterns in the history of *piyyut*, the procession of ancestors (*avot ha-‘olam*, or “fathers of the world”). Students of Ben Sira and other ancient sources will be familiar with this theme, which also undergirds the structure of the *Avodah piyyutim*, in which the history of the world is narrated up to the institution of the sacrificial system, and many other genres. Chapter 7 explores the affective and cultural properties of lists in *piyyut*, relating them both to narrative sequence, as in chapter 6, and to the use of repetition and lists in magical texts. Chapter 8 shows how those forms function in the cultural, religious, and political environment of Byzantine Palestine. This chapter highlights one of the prominent themes of the book: how the *payetanim* adapted to the needs of what Yahalom calls “a persecuted community” by expressing its confrontation with Christianity through the framework of the Jewish liturgy.

The final two chapters trace the trajectory of these individual compositions to their reception in liturgical collections and other genres of rabbinic literature. Chapter 9 discusses the written media in which *piyyut* was preserved, including fragments of papyrus, collections preserved in the Cairo Genizah, and European liturgical codices. This chapter is of particular interest for those of us who pay attention to the material context of literature in the history of religions. In the final chapter, Yahalom argues that, though the *payetanim* drew on existing rabbinic midrash, they were innovators of biblical exegesis in their own right, forging interpretations and mythic narrative that could only have emerged from the formal necessities of their poetic genres. Moreover, many of those innovations were taken up by compilers of literary midrash and integrated into compositions such as the eighth-century *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

All in all, this volume, the product of decades of pioneering research, should be of interest not only to specialists in liturgical studies and Hebrew literature but to students of religion in late antiquity. There is still much to learn by integrating the study of *piyyut* and cognate genres into a more complete picture of the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean during the rise of Christianity. In this rich volume, Joseph Yahalom has given us a great deal to work with.