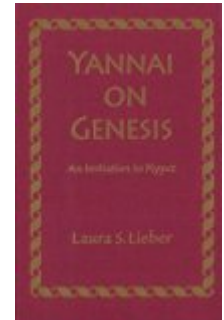


Laura S. Lieber. *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010. 500 pp. \$59.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87820-464-9.



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Once in a while, not often enough, a book comes out that represents a tectonic shift in its field as well as others. This volume is such a book, and after six months of perusing it, I remain impressed by the author's erudition, creativity, and contribution not only to piyyut studies, but also to Jewish, Hebrew, and Byzantine studies in general.

The study of piyyut is enjoying a boom, thanks mostly to the increasing accessibility of Genizah material. This has in turn vastly deepened our understanding of liturgical history, synagogue life, and the wider Byzantine Jewish culture. However, familiarity with piyyut has not spread much beyond a niche of cognoscenti, because the secondary literature has been mostly written in Hebrew and the poems are usually regarded as impenetrable. Popular association of piyyutim with lengthy, boring synagogue services probably exacerbates the disinterest. Thus undergraduate and MA Jewish studies students and their instructors (in the North American world at least), not to mention clergy and laity, remain largely ignorant

of this literary and liturgical phenomenon and its implications.

The fact that piyyutim tend toward the abstruse is no defense for this ignorance, because mystical texts are no less so, and that field is enjoying great popularity, aided by a large English-language library. In fact, once past the hurdles of Hebrew language and formulaic allusions, many piyyutim are readily accessible for the learned layperson or student. People just need to be shown how these poems work.

In only one example of its refreshing quality, Laura S. Lieber's book forthrightly acknowledges and explains the ignorance of piyyut. Then she argues for its relevance to a broad swath of other fields, including literature, Byzantine worship (not just Jewish), and ritual studies—to name only a few. As such, this book is a long-needed English-language introduction to piyyut and should be required reading for introductory courses in Jewish studies, graduate students, Jewish clergy and edu-

cators, and Judaica academics, as well as the cognoscenti.

In sum, Lieber breaks with previous piyyut studies by focusing on the larger cultural context. (Previous studies do not always ignore that, but they do not have it as the primary focus.) So remarkable is this volume that several colleagues have expressed disappointment for not having been the one to write it. You might suspect jealousy, but in fact everyone I surveyed harbors only great admiration for her command of and fresh approach to the material.

The volume's *raison d'être* is the *k'dushta'ot* (poetic versions of the Amidah's first three sections) that Yannai, one of the greatest early medieval Palestinian paytanim, wrote for Genesis. Given his time and place, one can begin to grasp why a study of his poetic and exegetical elaborations on that biblical book would have rich potential for scholars of Byzantine culture and religion, as well as for areas like midrash, biblical commentary, liturgical history, and theology. Lieber describes Byzantine Judaism as an "exegetical culture" and situates Yannai within its vitality, using these piyyutim as an example of that world's cultural richness (e.g., pp. 39, 145). Because she focuses on context, the dense integration of non-Jewish symbols (zodiac), priestly concerns, and aggadic material that one finds in these poems finally makes sense, no longer an over-stylized hodgepodge.

Lieber uses Yannai's poetry to illustrate the arguments of her several chapters that address such topics as rhetoric, holiness, theology, divine imagery, and piyyut's relationship to hekhalot. She modestly intends these to "whet appetites" (p. 19), which indeed they do, but what they suggest about we can learn from piyyut extends far beyond this modest claim. These chapters really are the point of this volume, and viewing them as peripheral discussions detracts from Lieber's twist on piyyut, which is to make it serve broader fields of knowledge.

While deferential in her thorough review of preceding Yannai studies, she correctly describes those as "small scale"—close text analysis—in contrast to hers, which is "large scale" with its interest in the broader culture (p. 16). She intends no criticism of the earlier work; she refers to it often, showing how it enabled her perspective. Hers is a novel approach, moving beyond the already heavily researched area of piyyut language and thus balancing the inquiry.

But what about the other part of the book, the piyyutim? Lieber gives the same careful attention to each poem's content as she does to the cultural implications. Here again she breaks with usual piyyut studies, revealing her didactic program. She wants the reader to understand how piyyutim are constructed, how they relate to the "standard" synagogue liturgy, and how meaning extends from form—a piece of communication that most piyyut scholars overlook. (Ezra Fleischer's superlative *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* [Hebrew, 1975] is a rare exception, and Lieber has clearly studied him closely.) She illustrates how the initial three standard *b'rakhot* of the Amidah compare to Yannai's Amidah cycles, and helpfully offers a generic outline of this poetic form. This pedagogical material alone is worth the cost of this book for anyone who has ever tried to explain to students, laypeople, or clergy what a piyyut is. Certainly I cannot be the only person who has scribbled out a similar chart on a chalkboard: I will now hand out copies of hers. During one public lecture a rabbi, who was certain that this revolutionary, innovative liturgical form that I was describing was in my imagination, got up and challenged me. His evidence? He had not learned about it in rabbinical school. Henceforth I will refer such doubters to Lieber's book.

I have long known that Yannai occupies an important spot in the history of piyyut, representing the transition from the simpler style of Yosi ben Yosi to Kalirian acrobatics. But Lieber has deepened my picture of him, arguing him to be a

“shaper” of beliefs and culture (e.g., pp. 35, 132, 242). I now do not regard him as “just” a paytan, but as a theologian who had impact, both reflecting and contributing to the culture of exegesis in which he lived and worked. She likens the paytan to a religious mediator, like a prophet or priest. As a result, I have had to rethink the ritual place and influence of all the paytanim, not just Yannai and those of his time and place.

But I digress from her text study. We have long had the benefit of critical editions and commentaries that cite the biblical and rabbinic passages that are woven into piyyutim. With this volume, we now have an English-language treatment of these literary creations. Her explanations of how Yannai uses biblical language and aggadic material are applicable to all piyyutim. But not limited to this close textual examination, she reminds the reader that there are broader implications: the Bible shaped the worldview of Byzantine Judaism, not only its literary creativity. As for the aggadic material, she argues that it was often the paytanic creations that gave shape to that material, not the other way around, which is how it is too often presented.

A likely criticism will be aimed at her eclectic edition (as well as her idiosyncratic translations), but Lieber explains this decision in her discussion of how text work has evolved since the previous generations. She acknowledges that some will question this decision. The proof is in her pedagogical and interpretive pudding; no one can fault the readability of this difficult literature achieved through her choice of best readings and translations.

One of my pet peeves is a book that dumps all its notes at the end. So I praise the Hebrew Union College Press for printing footnotes, extensive passages that are worthwhile reading. Together with the text, these smaller and sometimes dissenting voices at the bottom enable the reader to pursue the discussion in its various digressions. In both text and notes, Lieber displays an outstanding

ability to address simultaneously the neophyte and the veteran.

I would not be doing my job were I not to identify shortcomings, an effort that risks looking like nitpicking when considered against the total accomplishment. Detracting from her intelligent treatment, Lieber occasionally gets bogged down in trendy language one sees these days in ritual studies, both Jewish and Christian: “embody,” “performative,” and “enacted” (e.g., pp. 69, 72, 18, 190, 193, 226, 241, 247). Linguistics and anthropology have contributed immensely to our understanding of ritual, but when I spot the clichés that have resulted from what was once radically new, I suspect we have gotten stuck in a rut of nomenclature and have left precise meaning behind.

I also occasionally become wary about the “large-scale” treatment, which necessarily requires some generalizing. Although Lieber draws on a vast literature and uses it well, there is some excessive dependence on a couple summary studies for her presentation of liturgical history and development (e.g., Lee Levine’s *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [2000]), which makes me wonder if nuance is overlooked at the cost of broad treatment.

Smaller bones for picking relate to physical or technical matters. One is the woefully inadequate index, not befitting such a large and important volume. But we all know what kinds of budgets exist for indexers these days. Coordination of pagination and notes is occasionally in error (e.g., p. 140n11 refers to a text on p. 391, but in fact it is p. 393). Small errors are unavoidable in large and detailed books, but when I catch them, I start to fear how many others are hiding. None of these are likely the fault of the author; but neither is close copyediting the job of a reader. Similarly I was bothered by imprecise language like “several centuries” when precision seemed in order (e.g., 47n13, 134n3).

On a practical level, the volume is simply too heavy—more than 798 pages. I do not exaggerate

when I say this book is recreational reading and should be digested horizontally on the sofa, but its bulk makes that frustratingly impossible. I realize that the heft happened both because of the material--Genesis is a big book itself--and the author's commitment to contextualization. Since we can hope for more volumes of this sort from Lieber (as well as from future scholars, for her approach is worthy of imitation), I recommend that publisher and author alike apply the sofa test. In this case, the piyyutim and their commentary could have been gracefully presented in a companion volume. Lieber intends one to dip in at any point and begin reading--an advantage for such a large and multi-sectioned book. But the downside is a resulting repetitiveness in both the text as well as the notes, which becomes apparent if you have read more than a couple sections.

Her boldly opinionated treatment of the worshiper's role should stimulate exciting discussion. She argues for active exegetical process on the part of the listeners, which would require facility with Hebrew language, biblical text, and the exegetical style. Frankly I think she overestimates that ability when she claims that quotation and allusion were the responsibility of the audience to interpret--despite the inarguable orality of the culture.

Lack of audience comprehension does not mean lack of appreciation. Long before supertitles, opera had avid fans who did not know a word of Italian or German; a worshiper in an Orthodox synagogue who cannot possibly know what a *nafka mina* is (a technical term used in halakhic discussions that defies easy translation) will manage to follow a sermon littered with such phraseology; multilayered theatrical performances, such as a Pilobolus dance I once saw set to Orff's *Carmina Burana*, an orchestral rendering of medieval parodies of church hymns, was enthusiastically received by a companion oblivious to all the inter-textuality. So, too (I would assert), piyyut in the medieval synagogue.

Lieber often comments that what she writes is not exhaustive. Indeed, a large part of her contribution resides in her review and synthesis of the scholarship--no small feat, by the way. But the reality is this: she has gone far beyond review and synthesis. This book is a masterful accomplishment; a prime example of what piyyut scholarship can and should be, one that propels the study of Jewish liturgy forward, and one that should be read--at the very least--by everyone in Jewish studies. Go get the book and read it now.

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