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Joseph Yahalom’s latest book builds on his earlier monumental contributions to the study of Jewish liturgical poetry (*piyyut*) of late antiquity. The dominant macroform in late antique *piyyut*, the *qedushta*, stands at the center of the book, but Yahalom’s ultimate interest lies not in the *qedushta* itself but, more broadly, in the “aesthetic and poetic roots” of *piyyut*. Yahalom denies “any pretension to a comprehensive and definitive study,” and, in fact, most of the book’s chapters are lightly reworked versions of previously (and in general recently) published articles or book chapters that analyze and in some cases present first editions of remarkable yet illustrative poems (p. xi). Like the poetics of late antique *piyyut* itself, which, as Yahalom himself pioneeringly recognized, adopted the “jeweled style” favored by contemporaneous writers and artists around the Mediterranean, *Sources of the Sacred Song* impresses by its accumulation of observational gems. These observations are in general firmly grounded and consistently persuasive, if occasionally impressionistic.

Chapter 1 begins at the end, with the final section of the * qedushta*, the * silluq*, which is the poem that bridges to the recitation of the angelic liturgy, the * qedushah*. The chapter concerns the angelic- al dimensions of the * silluq* and offers a new edition of (parts of) Yannai’s *qedushta* for the New Year, whose * silluq, unetaneh toqef*, is among the most famous of the *piyyutim* still recited today. In chapter 2, Yahalom takes up the third and especially fourth poems of the * qedushta* macroform. He advances the interesting suggestion that Yannai’s incorporation of a name acrostic in the third poem indicates that the *paytan* conceived of this poem as the true beginning of the *qedushta*. One especially rewarding element of the book is its episodic attentiveness to the insights into late antique *piyyut* afforded implicitly by medieval *piyyut* terminology and explicitly in medieval observations on *piyyut*. Here Yahalom shows that the term *dillug* (skipping) found in some manuscripts indicates a distinct part of the fourth poem: a series of short, rapid concluding lines that follows after longer initial lines. Yahalom identifies terminology in the fourth poem of Yannai and of others that marks this transition.

The third chapter concerns the emergence of the tetrameter line in the preclassical period and of rhyme in the classical period. Yahalom comes to a subtle and important conclusion about Yannai, a pivotal figure in the emergence of rhyme. Building on the work of others, such as Menahem Zulay and Aharon Mirsky, Yahalom demonstrates the flexibility of Yannai’s rhyming, which allows him sometimes to link lines into strophes and sometimes, where rhetorical considerations demand, to
ultimately, in fact, it is rhetoric as much as music that drives the emergence of rhyme in Yannai: “The uniqueness of Yannai lies,” in Yahalom’s formulation, “in the fact that he impressed on the tetrameter line ... the principles of rhetorical balance” (p. 78).

The title of chapter 4 ("Alphabetical Compositional Methods") indicates a concern with compositions governed by alphabetical acrostics, but most of the discussion focuses on one particular instance of this kind, namely, the fifth poem of the qedushta. Yahalom’s observations address the structural problem of completing an alphabetical acrostic for a short composition that does not span the alphabet. In its interest in structure, this chapter, along with chapter 2, should be put into conversation with Shulamit Elizur’s book on the origins and development of the qedushta, Sod Meshašlei Qodesh, which appeared in the same year as Yahalom’s. Chapter 5 is also concerned with the fifth poem of the qedushta, but from the perspective of rhyme and strophic structure, and as such, it develops some of the claims introduced in chapter 3.

In chapter 6, Yahalom surveys the seder ‘olam (order of the world) genre. Seder ‘olam poems offer a thematically focused retrospective on the creation and history of the world leading up to the moment of immediate liturgical relevance (Aaron’s service in the Tabernacle, for the Day of Atonement; the giving of the Torah at Sinai, for Shavuot, etc.). The discussion focuses on a seder ‘olam for Shavuot, ‘az terem, that was previously ascribed to the poet Yohanan ha-kohen from the end of the classical period but that should in fact, according to Yahalom, be dated considerably earlier. Like other seder ‘olam poems for Shavuot, this one centers on a conversation between God, the father, and the Torah, the daughter. The Torah has come of age, and God wishes to make a suitable match. He offers various suitors—Adam, Noah, Abraham, and so forth—but the Torah rejects each

in turn, as sinners undeserving of her, until the poem arrives at Moses, whom the Torah accepts. The metaphor is bold, but ‘az terem, more than other poems of the type, fully commits to it, and presents the relationship between God and the Torah in surprising intimacy.

To furnish a sense of the whole, I translate two strophes, and add some reflections on their literary character. In the first strophe, God proposes Noah as a husband, and in the second, the Torah gives her reply. (The Hebrew is on page 147.) “Out of ten generations Noah was selected and tested, / And walked in his innocence before the Heart-tester. / And He said to the Torah: See, in My eyes he has found grace; / He is called Noah (n-h), and backwards he is dubbed Grace (h-n). / And you too, like him, are dubbed ‘Wreath of Grace.’ / It is right to join ‘Wreath of Grace’ to ‘Found Grace.’ // Said the Torah before her master, replying: / If I have found grace in Your eyes, don’t speak thus. / Muddled by wine, he undertook to curse his own stock, / And outcast him to slavery and said ‘cursed is Canaan.’ / Let me not be his, nor he be a support for me.” The exchange has an almost natural feel. God suggests to his daughter that she ought to like Noah because God does too (“in My eyes he has found grace”). And moreover, suggests God, Noah is a good match because he (per Genesis 6:8, quoted in lines 3 and 6), like she (per Proverbs 1:9, quoted in line 5), is a figure of grace. The Torah’s reply cheekily employs God’s own expression of finding grace to oppose her father’s argument (“If I have found grace in your eyes”), and her response highlights the conversational setting (“don’t speak thus”). She really is seeking a husband (“a support for me”), and she sensibly points out that Noah is questionable parenting material.

Chapter 7 concerns lists, particularly the list-like or incantatory character of the seventh poem of the qedushta, the rahit. Yahalom is interested especially in links between the rahit and incantatory texts beyond the orbit of the liturgy: blessings
and curses, excommunications and magical spells. This chapter might be supplemented by a study of the semantics of classical piyyut: the formal constraints of piyyut contribute to the blurring of the meaning of words, and thus to the reduction of meaning to valence, so that, rather than conveying more specific semantic content, a word will come to signify either good (blessing) or bad (cursing).

The bulk of chapter 8 is devoted to a qedushta from the classical period composed by an otherwise unknown poet named Yaakov. (The chapter prints the first five poems only. The remnants of the sixth poem, included in the 2016 article on which this chapter is based, are missing from the book.) The qedushta is the work of a fine craftsman, the equal of and probably from the same sphere as Bar Megas. I note in this connection that, in addition to the points of contact with Bar Megas in the rhyme scheme of the fifth poem and in the quotation of verses at the end of strophes in the sixth poem, as Yahalom points out, Yaakov also begins the fifth poem, as Bar Megas tends to do, with an aphoristic statement. And yet, in contrast with what one ordinarily finds in the case of Bar Megas, here the biblical story violates rather than substantiates the aphorism. The qedushta offers a tantalizing glimpse into an oeuvre that is evidently, in the main, lost forever.

One of the great virtues of Yahalom’s book is that it offers a sense of the piyyut corpus as the product of a coherent tradition of composition, performance, and anthologization. This tradition was by no means closed off from intellectual and aesthetic currents in the broader Jewish world and beyond, but it had its own integrity and inertia. This theme comes to a head in chapter 9, which surveys the evidence for early mahzorim (liturgical anthologies covering the festivals and special Sabbaths), from the last quarter of the first millennium. Yahalom describes the anthologizing work of these mahzorim as the scene of a struggle for survival wherein the work of earlier paytanim faced the threat of displacement by late-coming paytanim, newly arrived. This struggle finds its most violent (fictional) expression in the legend, attested in the medieval period, and retold by Yahalom, according to which the paytan Yannai, portrayed as the teacher of Qillir, became jealous of his student and murdered him by means of a scorpion. The world of piyyut scholarship has devoted less attention to the opposite side of the struggle, namely, the later paytan’s effort (with a nod to Harold Bloom) to receive and overcome the influence of his predecessor.

The book closes with a tenth substantive chapter, on the relationship between piyyut and midrash and, to a lesser extent, between piyyut and targum (the translation of the Torah into Aramaic). Like some other contemporary scholars of piyyut, Yahalom revises the automatic assumption that exegetical material in piyyut must have been borrowed from a midrashic source. Sometimes paytanim innovate exegesis, and indeed, given the distinctive formal and substantive features of paytanic exegesis, it is possible to identify cases where a piyyut has influenced a late midrashic collection. Yahalom demonstrates the indebtedness of late midrashic texts associated with the figure of R. Moshe ha-Darshan to the work of classical piyyut. The chapter also identifies a case in which a targumic expansion represents something close to a translation of a poem by Yannai.

Yahalom’s book can profitably be read by scholars of piyyut and by relative newcomers to the field alike, but each will confront challenges. The conversational tone of the book and its relatively thin footnote apparatus show it to have in mind the general reader, but the book does not always explain technical terms, and can expand at length on such abstruse issues as the representation of the Palestinian vocalization system with Babylonian signs. The book is a must-read for scholars of piyyut, but the dearth of footnotes and the occasional absence of clear indications of where Yahalom is innovating beyond his own earlier work, and of how his claims relate to the
work of other scholars, make it more difficult to use.

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