

My talk will mainly focus on the early development of Jewish hymnography. I will start by explaining the place of hymns in the Jewish liturgy and then go on to discuss their historical origins. After that, I intend to outline the main types of hymns and their characteristics. I hope to end by pointing out some of the similarities between early Jewish hymns and Syriac and Byzantine Christian hymns.

Hebrew liturgical poetry is set in the synagogue. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the synagogue became established as the centre of Jewish religious and social life and the focal point of study and prayer. First of all, in order to understand the dynamics of Hebrew hymnography, it is important to be aware of the basic structure of synagogue liturgy which can be quite complex.

The period which we will consider today broadly ranges from the early Christian era to the seventh century AD. During this period, two main liturgical rites were dominant: the Palestinian liturgy - which ceased to exist after the Middle Ages - was based on a three year reading cycle of the Torah, and the Babylonian liturgy, which was based on a yearly reading cycle, is still followed today. Both liturgies contained three main prayer services: the morning (*shaharit*), the afternoon (*minhah*) and the evening (*ma'ariv*) as well as separate services for the Sabbath, Festivals and other occasions.

However, to understand how the hymns fit into the liturgy, we must look at the basic structure of Jewish prayer. The primary element was the benediction (*berakha*) with its fixed introductory formula '*Barukh Attah Adonai*' (Blessed art Thou, o God). The benedictions were composed around the 5th century BC. Their form and order were crystallized in the period from 70-200 AD and they were collected into a set of eighteen known as '*Shemoneh Esrei*' (the eighteen). Just to confuse you, it is also known as the '*amidah*' meaning 'stand' - as one must stand and silently repeat it and also by the Talmudic name *tefillah* which simply means 'prayer' referring specifically to this one. I shall henceforth refer to the eighteen benedictions as the '*amidah*..

Another basic element of Jewish prayer which had already been formulated and recited in the Second Temple period was the set of blessings known as the *shema* (you'll be relieved to hear that it only has one name!). The *shema* is a fundamental affirmation of Jewish faith and is so-called because of its opening words which proclaim '*shema Yisrael...*' (Hear, O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One) and it consists of three parts based on three biblical passages: Deut 6, 4-9, Deut 11, 13-21, and Num 15, 37-41 as well as three benedictions, two preceding and one concluding.

Early Jewish sages actively encouraged variations in prayer and even ordained that: 'one has to insert something new every day'. These two elements of prayer - the '*amidah*' and the *shema* - therefore formed a nucleus around which Hebrew hymnography developed.

Hebrew religious poems or hymns were termed 'piyyut'. The piyyut developed in the Palestine of Late Antiquity and was a specific type of hymnic composition which interrupted, linked into, and embellished the standard prayers. The hymns were recited by the poet or cantor who composed them. They were generally metred and/or contained rhyme as well as other poetic adornments and, in its classical period, due to their manipulation of the language, represented a high Hebrew culture.

The word piyyut comes from the Greek 'poietes' meaning 'poet' and is first recorded in early Jewish homiletical texts where a certain sage called El'azar bar Rabbi Shimon (a

second century Gallilean) is referred to as a *paytan* meaning one who composes 'piyyut'. Collections of early Jewish homiletical works were edited around the 5th-6th centuries AD but had been developing many centuries before. Thus it is not easy to arrive at a firm date for their actual composition and we cannot say with any certainty when the term 'piyyut' was first used.

Likewise, the origins of this type of poem or hymn are shrouded in obscurity. In the 19th century, Jewish scholars newly engaged in modern scientific research into Jewish history took a great interest in piyyut (partly because they were keen to emphasize the cultural achievements of Judaism). However, sources were scant and they were only able to suggest a tenth century date for one of the central composers of piyyut, Yannai. It was the presence of rhyme and other poetic devices that seemed to point to a more recent origin. The rhymes were even thought to have been something that the Jews borrowed from Islamic culture.

These views had to be revised due to a discovery of a hoard of manuscripts in Egypt in the late 19th century. The manuscripts - numbering a quarter of a million items - had been stored in an attic room of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo. Well preserved by the dry climate they date from around the 8th to the 18th century. The collection was donated to Cambridge University Library and is commonly known as the Cairo Genizah.

Cairo Genizah manuscripts contain all manner of writings but around one third - probably over 50,000 pieces - was poetry material. Other material found there included the first Hebrew dictionary by a leading 9th century scholar, Saadiah Gaon. In the Arabic introduction to his second edition, Saadiah lists the earliest synagogue poets but his description relegates these poets to a very distant past.

Hundreds of poetic pieces by the same poets who appear on Saadiah's list were discovered in the genizah. The most significant discovery was a large stock of poems by the aforementioned Yannai who had been previously known by name only. It also became apparent that many of these newly resurrected piyyutim contained references to Christian oppression and yet no mention was made of the Muslims. This fact called for a revision of dates to before the Arab conquest of Palestine in the seventh century and would mean that the poet Yannai could now be placed in the sixth century rather than the tenth.

Current scholarship has determined five periods of piyyut development. Firstly, an anonymous period - possibly beginning in the third century but definitely traceable to the fifth century when the Talmud and statutory prayer were in their final stages of development. Secondly, a pre-classical period, epitomised by the religious poems of the poet Yose ben Yose in the 5th-6th century. Thirdly, the period of classical piyyut in the 6th--8th centuries characterised by the classical compositions of Yannai and terminating with the highly complex compositions by Eleazar ben Qallir.

The fourth and fifth periods, which won't concern us today, included the Late Eastern piyyut whose centre shifted to Babylonia and the Spanish period, often regarded as the most illustrious, from the 10-12th centuries, whose many well-loved compositions are central to the modern standard liturgy.

The anonymous and pre-classical periods are characterised by a plain use of language and lack of rhyme (although some manuscripts thought to be by Yose ben Yose do contain rhymes). The classical period witnesses the widespread use of rhyme, metre and creative

language and culminates in the difficult style of Ben Qallir. The Late Eastern piyyut is less complex and the Spanish period sees a return to a 'pure' biblical style as well as the adoption of Arabic prosody.

However, while there is general agreement on the overall development of piyyut, there still remain two schools of thought regarding its origins. One set of scholars prefer to assign its beginnings to the fifth century, another set believe the origins to be more ancient than that.

The first argument prefers not to push its origins back before the beginning of Syriac and Greek Christian hymnography, which may have influenced Jewish hymnography. In fact, one major scholar of Byzantine Jewry, Dr Nicholas De Lange, believes that there is an 'enigmatic' parallel between the classical piyyut and the Greek Christian genre *Kontakion*. Indeed, the greatest author of Greek Christian hymns, Romanos the Melode, is a contemporary of the classical paytan Yannai.

Other evidence for a fifth century dating comes in the form of Jewish testimony regarding the reasons for the introduction of piyyut. The first is found in an eighth century work by one Pirqoi ben Baboi, in which he states: "The [authorities in Byzantium] forced apostasy upon the settlers in the Land of Israel and decreed that they not recite the *shema* nor offer prayers. For the morning service, they permitted the recitation and chanting of the poetic embellishments of the '*amidah*.'"

A second 11th or 12th century document by one Judah ben Barzilly of Barcelona similarly states: "It is said that they [the piyyutim] were ordained only for the time of forced apostasy because they were unable to read from the Torah given that the enemy forbade the study of the Torah..." Both accounts are probably connected to anti-Jewish legislation of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527-565). Thus, both writers believed that hostile acts by the Byzantine rulers served as a catalyst for the introduction of piyyut into the synagogue.

Another reason for supposing that the origins of piyyut should be placed in the fifth century are internal factors. The statutory prayers were becoming standardized by this period. However, this standardization introduced rigidity into the service. The invention of piyyut, therefore, would have served to stimulate creative expression without altering fixed prayer traditions.

However, the alternative school of thought prefers to trace a line of development beginning with sporadic similarities found in apocryphal poetry through to the occasional rhythmic and rhyming features found in early post-biblical literature. It also takes into account comparative evidence of hymn composition provided by the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as piyyutic traits found in the ecstatic hymns of the early Jewish mystical tradition (from the 3rd or 4th century).

In addition, there is limited evidence in couple of manuscripts whose antiquity cannot be doubted. The first was found in some third century papyri discovered in Egypt by Flinders Petrie in 1922. One undoubtedly contains a piyyut for the Feast of Pentecost and has some expressions which are highly characteristic of piyyut. Another fragment was found under the ruins of the Dura Europos synagogue destroyed in 253 AD. The text contains part of a blessing for meals and again has a piyyut-like character. Thus, in spite of the scant

evidence, there is little doubt that poetry *was* being written in the post-biblical period and had evolved away from the biblical model.

What then are the main features of the piyyut? Firstly, we shall deal with the different types of piyyut starting with the three most ancient. They are known as *selihah* (repentance), *'azharah* (warning) and *'avodah* (worship). The name of a piyyut is based on a meaningful word contained in the prayer in front of which or after which it is inserted. The *selihah* (repentance) hymn was the earliest addition to the fixed prayers. The theme is linked to the sixth benediction of the *'amidah* prayer which has the phrase 'Praised are You, Lord who welcomes repentance' and became chanted as part of a 'Rite of Forgiveness' during the Ten Days of Repentance from the Jewish New Year to the Day of Atonement.

The second and third types are components of a larger cycle which was fully developed in the classical period known as the *qerovah*. The term comes from the Aramaic root meaning 'lead in prayer'. There are three main components of the *qerovah*: the aforementioned *'avodah* (worship) and *'azharah* (warning) and another type called *hoshanah* (deliverance). All of these hymns link into the eighteen sections of the *'amidah*.

The first complete set of *qerivot* (plural for *qerovah*) were composed by the classical poet Yannai (the contemporary of Romanos) who was the greatest exponent of this type. Indeed, so popular were his compositions, that a slightly later source relates how he was expected at the synagogue every Sabbath with new material. Another source, incidentally, relates that Yannai killed his rival, Ben Qallir, by placing a scorpion in his shoe. However, the author cautiously adds: 'May God forgive all those who repeat this, if it's not true!'

The *'avodah* (worship) hymn contained an epic description of the High Priest's service in the Temple on the Day of Atonement. A famous *'avodah* by the pre-classical paytan Yose ben Yose starts with a description of Creation and relates history up to the point when God chose the Levites and descendants of Aaron as priests. The *'azharah* (warning) hymn, is a poetic listing of the 613 laws of the Torah to be recited silently during the precentor's repetition of the *'amidah*. The *hoshanah* (deliverance) hymns were to be recited on the Feast of Tabernacles during a procession with willows around the altar at the end of the *'amidah*. It comes from the word 'deliver' in Psalms 118:25 'O Lord, deliver us..'

These three components in turn were interwoven with new types of piyyutim. So, for example, the *'avodah* (worship) was supplemented in the classical period by two hymns one beginning *'mah nehdar* (how glorious) and another *'ashrey 'ayin* (fortunate to behold). Indeed, innovations in genre are typical of the Classical period. Two other types, the *qedushta* and the *yozer* were also expanded by the classical paytanim and became centrepieces in the service.

The *qedushta* belongs to the family of *qerivot* but was specifically designed to fit the benedictions of the morning service read on Sabbaths and Festivals. This hymn also consisted of three main parts, the *'magen* (shield), the *'mehaye* from 'who revives [*mehaye*] the dead' and the *'meshalesh* from the word *'shalosh* meaning three (which actually has four couplets). These three parts are followed by a further set of unnamed couplets and quatrains and ends with the *'silluq* (concluding) hymn leading to the *qedushah* or thrice repeated invocation of God as Holy (*qadosh, qadosh, qadosh*) from Issiah 6:3.

The *yozer* hymn - so-called because of the verse 'who creates [yozer] light and forms darkness' - also emerged in the classical period and eventually superseded the *qerovah*. Its popularity is attested to by the thousands of *yozer* fragments found in the Cairo Genizah. Some scholars suggest that its eventual predominance was due to the fact that the Babylonian Jews did not tolerate interruptions to the '*amidah*'. The name *yozer* is the general term for a sequence of hymns which are interwoven between the blessings of the *shema*.

Like the *qerovah* and the *qedushta*, the *yozer* has three main components. The first is the *yozer* in its narrow sense which is recited after the first blessing and takes the subject of creation. The second, the *ophan* (wheel) - from Ezekiel's vision of the chariot - usually consists of a description of the angels and seraphim recited before a prayer beginning '*ha ofanim*' (the wheels...). The third component is known as *zulat* from the verse: 'there is no God besides [zulat] You'. *Zulat* hymns express a hope and trust in days to come but sometimes dealt with present troubles.

This structure was also expanded. Two types of hymn were fitted in after the second *ophan* component, again according to their point of insertion. They are known as the '*me'orah*' (light) and '*ahava*' (love). And after the *zulat* another two types: the '*mi kamokhah*' (who is like you, O God) and the '*ge'ullah*' (redemption). All four hymns deal with the theme of God's love and hope for redemption. The full number of hymns in the *yozer* cycle are usually only found in the later Spanish poetry.

A third type of cycle is known under the general title '*ma'arabbah*'. However, the links in this chain are not known as separate components. They are usually six short pieces that fit into the evening prayers (perhaps the congregation did not have the patience for such long cycles in the evening!). The six were presented in alphabetical order and had a running refrain called a '*pizmon*'. Other types of religious song were also composed for specific occasions. These included *qinot* (laments) mourning the loss of nationhood, and individual *zemirot* (songs) for use in the home, specifically at mealtimes.

How would we identify the form of a Jewish hymn? Biblical poetry is easily recognisable by its use of two versets displaying traits of equivalence in stress and lexical meaning. So for example, Deut 32.1-4: 'Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth' has three stresses in each verset as well as clear parallels between the words ear and hear/heavens and earth/speak and mouth.

Early Jewish hymns, however, did not conform to any one established system. The overall tendency was a set 4-stress pattern. The '*avodah*' by Yose ben Yose, however, contained a number of major stresses which sometimes subordinated two words. Another adaptation was the use of two stresses on one long word which created regularity in the number of syllables - a device found in Syriac poetry but here it was not rigidly observed.

Some rhyme schemes have been discerned in ancient poetry. The scholars who support an early origin of piyyut find traces of rhyme in the '*amidah*' whose benedictions display many suffix rhymes. They also discern rhymes in early rabbinic prayers as well in the hymns of the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the anonymous poetry of the pre-classical period. Yet all of these rhymes were very simple and were not used consistently.

The classical piyyut, on the other hand, had a strictly observed strophic structure and a permanent rhythm based on a fixed number of words in each line as well as obligatory

rhyme. At first rhyme appears all over, at the beginning, middle and end of lines. There were rhymes based on the repetition of words of the same root or on pairs of oppositions such as 'oyev' (enemy) with 'ohev' (beloved).

The main innovation of this period, however, was the end-rhyme based on sound parallelism. This complex rhyme was based on the rule that two out of the three consonants of the Hebrew root had to rhyme and the last syllable of each rhyming word had to be identical. So, for example, SHiRaTI and SHeRiRuTI - the consonants *shin* (SH) and *resh* (R) are the two rhyming consonants and the TI is the rhyming last syllable.

In short, the classical system demanded a metre based on a strict number of words in a line carrying a rhyming scheme based on the sound patterns of each word. This, structure, as you can imagine, placed quite a demand on the poet's skills and was only fully realised in the extremely obscure but wonderfully creative style of Eleazar b. Qallir in the seventh century (presumably before he was done in by a scorpion!).

Another external feature of piyyut was the widespread use of acrostics. The alphabetical acrostics - where each line starts with a letter of the alphabet - are first found in the biblical Psalms but they are also used widely in the hymns, as well as a device called '*atbash*' which takes the first and last letters, the second and second to last letters etc. in turn. Later on, poets' names were also incorporated into the acrostics and occasionally some biographical information such as a father's name and the name of a town. Some acrostics contain words of self-encouragement or praise, such as *hazaq* (strong) or *ha-qatan* (the meek). Some even used biblical verses and the 11th century Spanish poet Judah haLevi ingeniously composed a poem of 73 verses, the first letters of which constituted a poem in themselves.

One of the main recognizable traits of piyyut is its language. So linguistically creative was this period, that scholars now refer to a distinct form of the language called paytanic Hebrew. This form of the language contains a mixture of biblical and rabbinic elements, with biblical Hebrew predominating in vocabulary and morphology and drawing on rare forms and hapax legomena. The Rabbinic Hebrew elements are found in verbal forms and orthographic tendencies, they lend the poetry a homiletic quality and indeed allusions from the contemporary Jewish homiletic tradition abound in this poetry. In addition, many Aramaisms are found there too.

Yet unique to paytanic Hebrew are entirely new Hebrew forms created out of analogy with other forms in an effort to fit the requirements of rhyme and metre. The Hebrew root was used very creatively to form all possible manner of verbs and their conjugations. So for example, we find a new form *ho'atzerah* ('she was restrained') from '*azer* (to restrain). Some verbs were even formed out of nouns such as *hamasunu* (they have put us to tribute) from the noun *mas* meaning 'tribute' or 'forced service'. Masculine nouns were created out of feminine ones by dropping suffixes and vice versa.

Another outstanding feature was the use of emblematic language. This became a very popular device towards the end of the classical period and it is what makes Qallir's poetry so difficult to understand. Emblematic words take the place of the thing itself and, again, are useful when it comes to fulfilling prosodic needs. Examples of these emblems (which I will quote from just one piyyut) include the word '*makor*' (the sold one) to refer to Joseph. Issac is sometimes called '*tzadiq*' (righteous one) sometimes '*akud*' (the bound one) and

sometimes '*yehid*' (the only one). David is the '*ish meshorer*' (the man of song), and God is '*tamim dey'im*' (He who is perfect in knowledge).

This use of language was heavily criticised by the later Spanish poets, foremost amongst them Abraham Ibn Ezra who particularly railed against the creation of new forms. He nicknamed these piyyutim '*atz qotzetz*' ('the wicked') after a particularly difficult stanza in a hymn by Eleazar ben Qallir. Yet, in spite of its complexities, the poem does have a lovely lyrical quality which is probably what endeared such compositions to the congregation.

Of course, I haven't yet mentioned the use of music in my outline. The requirement of a melodic rendition first arose in connection with the reading of Scripture. Rabbinic law states that: 'Whoever reads Scripture without melody and recites traditions without song, of him Scripture says "And I have given him laws that are not good"'. An actual appreciation for beautiful singing voices, however, is found towards the end of the Talmudic era, in the fifth century, where beautiful singing called '*na'ima*' is prescribed for times in the service when the Torah is removed from the ark. Again, the stimulus was probably provided by the wider Christian culture.

In the Late Middle Ages, hymnic compositions and particularly their tunes (now borrowed from secular Arabic songs) became immensely popular. Yet, so popular were the hymns and their music that it seemed they could threaten the rest of the service. As a result, we find warnings from the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides against them. Yet, even he could not altar popular tastes and during that period the act of copying poems intensified as attested by thousands of Genizah manuscripts headed 'and here is another one' and 'sing this to the tune of...'.

Unfortunately, we do not know most of the early tunes as they were not written down. Later Arabic tunes were preserved to a small extent by the North African Jewish communities but modern Jewry revolutionized its music in nineteenth century Germany and revised ancient melodies according to modern notation techniques and European tastes.

I would, however, like to mention one unrelated tenth century manuscript from the Cairo Genizah as it is quite unique. It is written by a convert to Judaism called Obadiah, formerly known as Johannes, a Catholic priest. He used the earliest known musical notes to add a Gregorian chant to a piyyut text. I think it is a very interesting example of how cultures can merge.

Finally, I did want to make a few observations about the similarities between Christian and Jewish hymnology. My notes here are quite simplistic, as I do not have an in-depth knowledge of the Christian genres. However, I hope that during the course of the day, more parallels will become apparent.

One of the most comprehensive comparative studies undertaken to date was by Eric Werner in 1959. He determined that it was Syriac poetry which was the primary influencing force behind the early Hebrew piyyut, the Babylonian piyyut and the early Greek Kontakion.

Both Syriac and Hebrew share the term for stanza: in Syriac it is *beitha* meaning 'house' and in Hebrew it is *bayit* which means the same. Yet, it cannot be determined who used it first. As far as metre is concerned the terms *mitqalo* in Syriac and *mishqol* in Hebrew are

also alike. We know that Syriac poetry reached its peak with the compositions of the fourth century poet St Ephrem who employed an equal number of syllables for each verse which we see happening simultaneously, but not rigidly, in the pre-classical piyyut. St Ephrem's use of acrostics also concurs with what was happening in contemporary Hebrew poetry. With regard to form, the Syrian *enyana* is of particular interest to our comparative study. This small poetic insertion into the biblical text of the psalms created a mosaic of style highly reminiscent of the piyyutim described above.

For one particular scholar, Haim Schirmann, the argument for an early development of piyyut was confirmed by the existence of rhyme. The sheer predominance of this highly technical poetic feature throughout piyyut compositions, unlike the Eastern Christian poetry which does not use much rhyme, must have originated in Jewish circles. Schirmann felt sure that the direction of influence was therefore the other way around - from a mature Hebrew poetry to Syriac poetry. He even suggested that St Ephrem may have adopted the tools of his adversaries all the more to vanquish them!

We can also discern parallels in the Greek Christian poetry from Byzantium. As I mentioned above, the greatest Byzantine Greek composer, Romanos the Melode, was a contemporary of the greatest Paytan, Yannai. It is also interesting to note that in one source, Romanos is said to be of Jewish origin which, if this were true, may lead one to wonder if he subconsciously retained aspects of his heritage.

The name of Romanos is primarily linked to the Greek genre known as kontakion. Scholars have shown that the kontakion represents a synthesis of three Syriac forms. The first is poetical homily, the second a hymn and the third a dialogue. In the same way, the *qerovah* championed by Yannai could link up with a biblical text as a lesson, paraphrase it and interpret it, as well as contain hymns and occasional dialogues.

Further parallels between the kontakion and *qerovot* of Romanos and Yannai can be found in their use of poetic language. Both heavily relied on rhyme assonance, biblical allusion, word-play and the use of emblematic words as well as turning to the homily for their thematic inspiration.

Yet the kontakion and *qerovah* differ in regard to the fact that the *qerovah* is based on a definite text: the *'amidah*. But one other type of hymn from the Byzantine period does fit into that category and that is the Kanon which was always built up from the same text. Like the *qerovah*, the earliest types of Kanon are thought to have first been written in Palestine in the fifth century.

Thus, in the period in which we believe piyyut was developing (at least the fourth century) Christianity and Judaism, once religiously and socially close, were now firmly separated. Indeed, there was a sudden increase in hostility towards the Jews. The Jewish response manifested itself in pent up hatred and resentment and is acutely apparent in a number of piyyutim, particularly those composed by Yannai. Nevertheless, the high culture represented by piyyut with its links to contemporaneous Christian hymns testify that positive interactions between Christian and Jew must have continued to occur.

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