TRANSLATION AND THE COMPREHENSIBILITY OF EARLY PIYYUT

Michael D. Swartz
The Ohio State University

It is an honor to present this essay to Joseph Yahalom, who more than any single scholar has been instrumental in opening up the rich world of the poetry of the ancient synagogue to historians of religion and culture in late antiquity and in integrating it into our picture of the ancient Mediterranean. At the same time, he has been an invaluable colleague and co-author. What follows are some observations on the art and science of translating piyyut, occasioned by our 2005 anthology of Avodah piyyutim, *Avodah: Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur*.1

I. Kissing through a Veil

One of many famous quotes applied to the enterprise of translation of literature was spoken by Hayim Nahman Bialik, whose remark on translation is usually cited as likening it to “kissing through a veil.” The saying rests on a long-held understanding about translating poetry, the idea that true translation is an impossible enterprise. The exact quote, which is rarely cited, is from his essay “‘Al ’Umah ve-Lashon:” “He who knows Judaism in translation is like one who kisses his mother through a veil” (Mi shemakir et ha-Yahadut be-tirgumah—hare hu ilu menasheq et imo derekh ha-mitpahat).2

If we examine the quote, we can see that it is also a comment on the longstanding notion of the incommensurability of two languages. Bialik was expressing the Romantic idea that a person can only fully partake in one’s national culture in the original language; his formulation has served generations of Hebraists and poets as a metaphor for the inadequacy of translation to convey the original. This notion can also be expressed as a matter of linguistic fact. For example, Walter Benjamin asserts that

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1 M. D. Swartz and J. Yahalom, *Avodah: Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur*, University Park, PA 2005. All translations and line numbers of Avodah piyyutim here are from this volume.
the word *Brot* and the word *pain* not only mean something different to a German and French speaker; but, as he puts it, “these words are not interchangeable for them…in fact, they seek to exclude each other.” The idea can also be applied to the literary and aural overlays that result in such poetic techniques as paronomasia, as when Roman Jakobson observes, “If we were to translate into English the traditional formula *traduttore traditore* as ‘the translator is a betrayer,’ we would deprive the Italian rhyming epigram of all its paranomastic value”; Jakobson goes on to say that we do the same thing if we explain the pun more explicitly.

The problem is more acute when translating poetry. In most cases, poems work not only by adding the “music” of meter, assonance, and paronomasia, but by loading excess connotation. This is especially true in Hebrew, which employs a fairly limited vocabulary and, as a Semitic language, relies on variations of a circumscribed set of trilateral roots. Given the role of tradition in Jewish culture, it is natural to find in Hebrew poetry a predisposition to allusion, double meanings, and intertextual discourse. Because a word or phrase in a traditional Hebrew poem is likely to call forth a biblical verse, Talmudic term, or daily prayer, the translator’s task is a difficult one. For Hebraists, the epitome of this quality in Hebrew poetry has been piyyut. This genre has endured a reputation as a particularly recondite form of Hebrew literature because of its learned allusions, its creative use of Hebrew grammar, and its practice of weaving motifs from Midrash, Jewish biblical interpretation, into its narrative and rhetoric. Yet it is precisely the seeming strangeness of piyyut that makes this literature interesting. The subject matter of the Avodah genre, the ancient Jewish sacrificial system, compounds that strangeness and makes it worthy of study.

### II. Avodah and Piyyut

The earliest examples of pre-classical piyyut, dating back to around the third century CE and culminating in the fourth or fifth century with Yose ben Yose, stayed relatively close to the themes and language prescribed

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