CONGREGATIONAL PARTICIPATION
WITHIN THE BIBLICAL STORY
IN THE YOTSER POEMS OF SHLOMO SULIMAN

Avi Shmidman
Bar-Ilan University

Many of the Palestinian poets of the 9th–10th centuries composed sets of yotser compositions for the Sabbath lectionary. These poetic compositions served as replacements for the statutory text of the benedictions of the Shema. Because the texts changed from week to week with the changing lection, the congregation did not generally participate in their recital; rather, the poems were recited by the precentor of the congregation, often with the assistance of a choir, while the rest of the congregation passively

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1 It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to the honor of my teacher Professor Yosef Yahalom. The very first time I approached Professor Yahalom, in the Jewish and National University Library in Jerusalem, I presented him with a question regarding the Suliman’s yotser for parashat Va-yigash. Hence I find it appropriate to offer him this study, in which I present an analysis of Suliman’s yotser poems for the lectionary, including the aforementioned yotser regarding which Professor Yahalom generously shared with me his insightful wisdom in the National Library nearly a decade ago (the yotser in question is cited at length below in the section entitled “Weeping Angels”). All citations of Suliman’s poems within this paper follow the transcriptions of the Historical Dictionary of the Academy of the Hebrew Language (henceforth termed the “Historical Dictionary”). In the present context it is worth noting that the these transcriptions themselves were collated on the basis of a preliminary edition prepared by the late Moshe Sar-Shalom, who compiled his edition as part of his doctoral studies under the mentorship of Professor Yahalom. A critical edition of the poems is forthcoming by Dr. Eden HaCohen; I wish to thank Dr. HaCohen for allowing me to peruse his preliminary edition of Suliman’s yotser poems for the books of Genesis and Exodus. In the citations below I have normalized the spelling (regarding the matres lectionis), expanded abbreviations, and filled in the congregational refrains omitted by the Genizah scribes. Biblical translations follow the King James Version. I am indebted to Dr. Tzvi Novick (University of Notre Dame) and Gavriel Wasserman (Yeshiva University) for their helpful suggestions regarding the translations of the poems cited herein. Dr. Novick also reviewed a draft of the present paper and offered many insightful comments, for which I wish to express my appreciation.

2 For a comprehensive study of the nature and development of the yotser composition see E. Fleischer, The Yotser, Jerusalem 1984 (hereinafter: Fleischer, Yotser). Regarding the flourishing of the genre during the 9th and 10th centuries, and for a survey of the poets who composed yotser compositions during this time period, see ibid., pp.186–198.

listened along. Nevertheless, a number of biblical verses remained constant from week to week, forming the very skeleton of the liturgy around which the poets composed their poetry. These verses were declaimed in unison by the congregation as a whole. In this paper I will be focusing upon the two such verses found within the first benediction of the *shema*: Isaiah 6:3 ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory," known as the “trisagion”) and Ezekiel 3:12 ("Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place," henceforth termed “the Ezekiel verse”). Each of these verses describes the speech of the heavenly angels as they praise the Lord, and together the verses comprise the section of the liturgy known as the *Kedushah de-Yotser*.6

These two verses were recited after the first two poems of the Yotser composition, respectively. The precentor would begin the service by reciting the first of these two poems, termed the “*yotser core*”; at the conclusion of the *yotser core*, the congregation would declaim the trisagion.7 The precentor would then recite the second poem of the composition, termed the “*ofan*,” and at its conclusion the congregation joined in with the Ezekiel verse.8 These two poems differed with regard to their content. The poets would generally devote the *yotser core* to a discussion of the

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4 Ibid; regarding the integration of the choir in the recital of the *yotser* compositions see ibid., pp. 220–223.
5 Regarding these verses (termed “liturgical verses”) see E. Fleischer, Shirat ha-godesh ha-ivrit bi-me ha-benayim, Jerusalem 2007, pp. 55–56.
6 According to the Palestinian prayer custom, the *Kedushah de-Yotser* was included in the benedictions of the Shema only on the Sabbath and Holidays; see E. Fleischer, “The Diffusion of the Qedushot of the *Amidah and the Yotser in the Palestinian Jewish Ritual*,” Tarbiz 38 (1969), pp. 255–284.
7 Fleischer, *Yozer*, p. 152. To be sure, the prayer books found in the Cairo Genizah indicate that a short transitional paragraph would often be recited by the precentor between the *yotser core* and the trisagion (ibid. pp. 152–154); as an example one such paragraph reads as follows: "And they responsively declare"). The function of the paragraph was purely procedural; it served to signal the congregation that the time had arrived for the recital of the refrain. However, as Fleischer notes, these transitional pieces do not appear to occupy an organic role within the poetry, and their use may well have been adopted at a later stage, after the composition of the poetry. Indeed, Suliman’s poems generally anticipate the congregational refrain itself, rather than the transitional paragraph; thus it would seem that Suliman’s intent was for the congregation to continue with the refrain immediately after the end of the poem, and that is therefore how I have presented his poetry in this paper. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the ideas presented in this paper do not depend upon this assumption, and their application remains valid even if the transitional insertions are taken into account.
8 Here, too, in the prayer practice reflected by the Cairo Genizah documents we tend to find transitional insertions between the poem and the Ezekiel verse, such as the following: "And responsively they praise and say"); see Fleischer, *Yozer*, pp. 156–157.