CARNIVALESQUE AMBIVALENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN OTHER IN ARAMAIC POEMS FROM BYZANTINE PALESTINE

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I. Introduction

During the three hundred years of Byzantine rule over Palestine, Jewish culture flourished. This was the age of rabbinic exegetical and homiletical works (Midrash), of the Aramaic translations of the Bible (Targum), of liturgical poetry (Piyut), and of the synagogue mosaic floors. However, while rabbinic literature and the art of the synagogue are often studied from a cross-cultural perspective, the rich poetic corpus of the period has not received a similar treatment. In the

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1 This is a modified and enhanced version of an article originally published in Hebrew as: “Other Voices: Haman, Jesus and the Representations of the Other in Purim Poems from Byzantine Palestine,” in Popular and Canonical: Literary Dialogues, eds., Y. Shapiro, O. Herzog and T. Hess (Tel Aviv, 2007), 69–79, 211–217 (Hebrew). Special thanks go to my dear friend Michael Rand, who not only contributed to the translations of the Aramaic poems but also shared several brilliant insights with me.


5 This lacuna certainly relates to the overall concentration on the production of critical editions, as well as to the emphasis given to the philological, structural, and liturgical aspects of these poems. It should be noted, though, that in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the interaction between the Jewish and Christian liturgical and poetic traditions, as shall become clear in the course of the essay. For an overview of this interaction see: O. Münz-Manor, “Reflections on the Nature of Jewish and Christian Poetry in Late Antiquity,” Pe’amim—Studies in Oriental Jewry 119 (2009): 131–72 (Hebrew). A version of this article also appeared in English as, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East—A Comparative Approach,” Journal of Ancient Judaism 1/3 (2010): 336–61.
present essay I wish to bolster, therefore, the cross-cultural study of this liturgical poetry by examining two poems for the feast of Purim that (re)present Christian figures in a surprising way; in the first text the figures of Haman and Jesus are juxtaposed and in the second those of Zeresh and, as I shall argue, the Virgin Mary.

My inquiry begins with an interesting article dedicated to the anti-Christian polemics in Hebrew liturgical poetry. At the outset of the article the author, Wout van Bekkum, notes that “specific allusions to the political and religious status of the Jews in Byzantium are sparse. As official representatives of the Jewish communities, the Payytanim are not primarily interested in direct religious polemics and no explicit support can be derived from their work.” Moreover, having spoken of the Payytanim (i.e. the Hebrew poets) van Bekkum notes, “their elitist poetry did not permit them to scorn and ridicule Christian beliefs as in contemporary Aramaic poetry.” Van Bekkum points here to the poem for the feast of Purim mentioned above, in which “the hanged Haman is compared to the hanged god of the Christians.” He distinguishes, therefore, between the stylized liturgical poetry written in Hebrew (Piyyut) and the poems written in the vernacular Galilean (or Jewish Palestinian) Aramaic that were performed outside of the synagogue or, at the very least, outside of the synagogal liturgy.

Furthermore, the poem that according to van Bekkum “scorn[s] and ridicule[s] Christian beliefs” is characterized by Joseph Yahalom and Michael Sokoloff in their recent edition of the text as a parody. Else-

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7 van Bekkum, Polemics, 310.


9 Yahalom and Sokoloff, Aramaic Poetry, 29–33.