No Angels before the World? A Preexistence Tradition and Its Transformations from Second Temple Literature to Early Piyyuṭ

Yehoshua Granat

1 Introductory Notes

Early Piyyuṭ is undoubtedly one of the greatest textual monuments that evolved in the Jewish culture of late antiquity. Yet, though it has aroused considerable scholarly interest from the Wissenschaft des Judentums era onwards, this strikingly rich corpus is relatively seldom discussed from a thematic perspective. This state of affairs is probably influenced, to a significant extent, by the assumption that in regard to subject matter, early Piyyuṭ constantly follows authoritative rabbinic sources and merely paraphrases them, rendering their wording so as to fit specific stylistic preferences, poetic structures, and liturgical circumstances. If that were indeed the case, there would not be much sense, then, in directing scholarly attention to the thematic arena of early Piyyuṭ; one would naturally focus on these themes' original formulations in rabbinic literature, rather than on their mere secondary derivatives in early Piyyuṭ. Yet such a portrayal is misleadingly simplistic rather than precise. Even though early Piyyuṭ typically does rely on rabbinic sources, these poems tend to render and reshape the "borrowed" elements in distinctly creative and sometimes transformative ways. Furthermore, themes and motifs occurring in these poems cannot in every instance be traced back to the rabbinic texts available to us. At times it is possible to reconstruct lost rabbinic traditions or homilies on which they were based. In some instances of themes found in early Piyyuṭ, but not in line with rabbinic sources, a possible link to a tradition

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1 The term "early Piyyuṭ" designates here Hebrew liturgical poetry composed in Palestine (Eretz Israel) and the periphery, from approximately the fourth century to the eighth century CE. This label is preferable to the more general designation, "Piyyuṭ," as the latter may also encompass Hebrew liturgical poetry through the Middle Ages and beyond; these later works substantially differ from the earlier corpus of poems, which belongs to the world of late antiquity. "Early Piyyuṭ" is also preferable to terms such as "Byzantine-era Piyyuṭ," since a significant part of the corpus may be dated to the first two centuries after the Arab conquest.

recorded in extrarabbinic, “noncanonical,” sources may be suggested. Such occurrences, though not very frequent, are of particular interest from a Traditionsgeschichte point of view; sometimes a few passages or even a single, unique text may strike an unexpectedly resonant chord, echoing an ancient, rarely recorded tradition.3

The present article illustrates this latter phenomenon through the discussion of one noteworthy thematic example. According to some early piyyuṭim, to be discussed below, the angels were created well before the world itself, a view that clearly contradicts unequivocal rabbinic statements on the matter. However, these references to the preexistence of angels can be paralleled to several texts of varied provenance (Jewish as well as Christian) from late antiquity, and their origins may arguably be traced back, as we shall see, to Second Temple sources. Indeed the standard rabbinic view regarding the time of the angels’ creation (which denies angelic preexistence) should be regarded as a polemical response to potentially challenging theological implications that could be drawn from this ancient “preexistence tradition”;4 the specific version of this tradition presented in the piyyuṭim discussed here may actually reflect comparable theological concerns, though it differs in its strategy of addressing them. This case study may thus contribute to our recognition of the dynamic and sometimes surprising afterlife of early Second Temple traditions in the Judaism of late antiquity within diverse contexts, including the sphere of early Piyyuṭ.

2 Dating the Creation of Angels: Diverse Views

The account of the creation of the world that opens the book of Genesis keeps silent about the angels. “Although all sorts of other biblical texts…make

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