ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMICS IN HEBREW
LITURGICAL POETRY (PIYYUT) OF THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH CENTURIES

by

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1. SYNAGOGUE AND WORSHIP

Hebrew liturgical poetry has its setting in the synagogue, the most important institute of Diaspora Judaism for the religious and social life of the Jews. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the synagogue appears as a fully developed communal centre with a variety of activities like prayer services and the reading and studying of the Torah and Prophets (Haftarot) for which specific congregations were held on the Sabbath and on feast-days. Synagogal liturgy gradually adopted fixed patterns in the structure of prayer complexes. The basic element in prayer was the benediction, the *berakha*, with its fixed introductory formula *barukh Attah Adonay* ("Blessed art Thou, o God"). The liturgical benedictions are in their turn basic conclusions in two prayer compositions of great importance, namely, the 'Amidah and the recitation of the *Shema*. The 'Amidah or *Shemoneh Esreh* became crystallized in the Tannaitic period into a statutory public prayer in its own right by the fixation of number and order of the benedictions, but it did not have any authoritative text. Nuances and variations in its diction were allowed, and it is even ordained by the Sages that “one has to insert something new every day”\(^2\) as an adhortation to improvise new formulations, even further ensured by a sustained oral transmission as it was explicitly stated: “they who write down benedictions are as though they burn the

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1 *HJP* II (1979) 425-7; S. Safrai, “The Synagogue”, in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (CRINT I 2; Assen 1976) 908-44.
2 Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 29b.
Prayer was apparently considered as a dynamic element in worship, and the Sages were eager to keep flexibility in prayers as much as possible.

In addition to the ‘Amidah there was another basic liturgical segment, namely the recitation of the Shema‘, consisting of three biblical parts, Deut. 6,4-9, Deut. 11,13-21 and Num. 15,37-41, and three benedictions: two precede the Shema‘, and one concludes it. Both ‘Amidah and Shema‘ are the nucleus of Jewish prayer and always remained customary in the liturgy of the synagogue. Their standardisation was already in an advanced stage at the end of the Amoraic period (500 C.E.). Although the synagogue was in fact a democratic institution, asking for everybody’s participation in worship, the task of reading and explaining the Torah and of reciting the prayers was entrusted to specific persons, the darshan, the meturgeman, and especially the ḥazzan, the cantor. Ultimately it was the ḥazzan who became the leading figure in the congregation, attaining a position of general authority in the liturgical tradition of the synagogue. The recitation of prayers became for him more and more an automatism and he could not avoid the use of stereotyped expressions and the repetition of standard phrases. In the end there was no escape from stricter wording and fixed patterns. There may have been slight differences between one community and another, but the internal situation in Palestinian Judaism in the days of the completion of the Talmud was such that Jewish liturgy was generally no longer sufficiently stimulating. Additions were needed for the preservation of spontaneity and creativity in the services. This evoked new tension between, on the one hand, the wish to standardise prayer texts for the sake of the universality of Jewish tradition and, on the other hand, the desire for expressiveness and improvisation in prayer.

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3 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 115b; also in Menahot 43b: “R. Meir used to say: a man is bound to say one hundred blessings daily, as it is written: and now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? (Deut. 10,12).”