The Shema and Its Rhetoric: the Case for the Shema Being More than Creation, Revelation, and Redemption

Reuven Kimelman

Brandeis University, USA

1. Prologue

Most studies of the liturgy are characterized by a historical or literary orientation. Focusing on responses to internal needs as well as on reactions to external events, historical studies tend to see the liturgy as a document of its time from which information external to its intention can be derived. Such studies are inclined to decompose texts and analyse them diachronically. Literary studies, seeking out the synthetic meaning of the text, prefer to see the meaning of the liturgy within a significating framework internal to its intention. Although ostensibly adopting a literary approach, many of the classical commentaries have too often limited their purview to issues of philology, semantics, and the uncovering of allusions to biblical and Rabbinic literature. There is precious little work that presents the synthetic meaning of liturgical units as a whole and even less as complete pieces of literature. An even greater omission is literary treatment of the liturgical framework based upon both the findings of the historical school and that of the classical commentaries.  

1 I am indebted to Professor Edward Kaplan and Dr. Alfred Tauber for comments on the structure of this study that now supersedes my article, “The Shema and Its Blessings: The Realization of God’s Kingship.”

2 For a critical analysis of the historical-philological and form-critical approaches; see Sarason, “On the Use of Method in the Modern Study of Jewish Liturgy.” For a survey of recent literature with emphasis on the Qumran connections; see Maier, “Zu Kult und Liturgie der Qumrangemeinde.”

3 Noticeable exceptions are Kadushin, Worship and Ethics, who moved in his own way in this direction; and Hoffman, Beyond the Text, who also integrated previous modes of
By interweaving the disciplines of history and literature in order to grasp the whole as an ideational unit in a historical context, this study shows how liturgy functions as a window on history as well as on worship. The conclusion witnesses to how historical studies inform judgments about literary structure and how literary structures contribute to theological agenda.

The literary approach is that of rhetorical criticism. Through its prism, the study aims to show how the liturgy makes its case. By focusing on the rhetoric of the liturgy, the analysis highlights the persuasive strategies of rhetorical techniques deployed by the liturgical narrative to enhance the worshiper's receptivity to its position. In addition to explicit remarks about modes of argumentation, attention is focused on how language is textured, how themes are concatenated, and how images are contextualized. All these converge to orchestrate the subtle interplay between statement and subtext in order to induce in the worshiper a new perspective. It is precisely this tracing of the transformation of the worshiper's outlook that allows the text to be grasped for what it is — liturgy.

The inquiry follows the order of asking what the worshiper is apprised of, how is he or she apprised, and finally why. This what, how, and why, follows what Meir Sternberg refers to as the historiographic function, the aesthetic principle, and the ideological principle respectively. Although ideology in the form of theology is the focus, new historical information also emerges, for when literary studies precede historical inquiry, the historical inquiry itself is affected. Nonetheless, since it is rare that the two can be conducted effectively in isolation, there needs to be a constant study in his own approach; and Levy, Torat Ha-Tefillah, in contrast to his earlier Yesodot Ha-Tefillah.

4 For a survey of the literature and the implications of rhetorical criticism, see Wüllner, “Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us.” Although Wüllner is quick to point out the significant overlap between rhetorical and literary criticism, I still prefer the term “rhetorical” because of the emphasis on the art of persuasive discourse and not just on the analysis of discourse. For the difference in emphasis, see Koelb, Inventions of Reading, p. 254. For Rabbinic knowledge of Greco-Roman rhetoric, see the studies by Saul Lieberman, David Daube, and Henry Fischel cited in Schürer, The History of the Jewish People, 2:79, n. 265; and Kimelman, “Rabbi Yoḥanan and the Professionalization of the Rabbinate,” pp. 336–339. Rabbinic knowledge of rhetoric seems to have gone hand in hand with a legal education as was the case in Rome; see Bonner, Education in Ancient Rome, pp. 290–327. The arguments for rhetorical techniques informing the religious assertions of both Jewish and Christian literature in the first centuries are assembled by Kinneavy, Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith, pp. 26–100.