Ritual about Myth about Ritual: Towards an Understanding of the 
Avodah in the Rabbinic Period

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If we wish to understand the place of myth and ritual in the history of Judaism, then we must appreciate the importance myth and ritual had for the ancient Rabbis and their contemporaries. This has not always been recognised. In a recent article, Michael Fishbane argues against a common tendency to deny the mythic aspects of ancient Judaism.1 Rabbinic Judaism, he shows, preserves and fashions striking examples of mythopoesis. Among the sources he cites as evidence are talmudic legends regarding divine sorrow and a liturgical poem (piyyut) by the sixth-century poet Eleazar Kallir, who stands in a particularly ancient mythic tradition in his elaborate poetic depiction of the battle of Behemoth and Leviathan.2

This essay concerns another case of mythic persistence, taken as well from the literature of piyyut, and one that can serve as an example of the interaction of myth and ritual that is the subject of this volume: The Avodah piyyutim, the liturgical compositions for the Day of Atonement that recount, in poetic language, the ritual of the purification sacrifice and scapegoat ceremony performed by the priest in the ancient Temple according to Leviticus 16.3 These compositions provide important evidence for the

2 Ibid., 1–2.
3 This essay is a prolegomenon to a broader study of the ideas of sacrifice in Judaism of late antiquity, which will focus on the depiction of the Yom Kippur sacrifice in Rabbinic and liturgical literatures. I would like to thank
history of ideas of sacrifice in post-biblical Judaism, and are thus relevant to the study of ritual discourse in late antiquity. At the same time, they touch on the mythic roots of Israelite religion while enshrining the ancient ritual in a narrative liturgical form.\(^4\)

I. Myth and Ritual

In her book *Other People’s Myths*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty leads the reader through a labyrinth of mythography: she tells us myths about myths, myths about rituals, and myths about myths about rituals.\(^5\) Several of them, for example the eucharist and the myth of Daksha and Shiva, concern sacrifice.\(^6\) At first glance, we might think that the Avodah piyyutim of the late Rabbinic period would

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\(^6\) Ibid., 75–118.