THE POET AND THE TOWER-BUILDERS: 
A TRANSLATION AND ANALYSIS OF
YANNAI’S PIYYUT FOR GENESIS 11

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The following piyyut for the Torah portion beginning with Gen. 11:1, the story of the Tower of Babel, is a masterpiece of Byzantine Jewish literature: a finely-wrought blend of Scripture and interpretation, artistry and exegesis, tradition and innovation. For all its beauty, however, the text has been neglected, primarily because of its genre.

In terms of artistic value, the early poetry deemed more worthy of significant attention has been the lyrics of the Andalusian poets, sacred and secular. The earlier piyyutim were seen, in comparison, as too baroque, too long, and too artificial in idiom. In the realm of exegesis, those searching for ancient expositions of biblical texts typically turn first to the midrashic compendia and the two Talmuds; for many, this inspection of the Rabbinic canon suffices. The second line of inquiry may consider the ancient versions of texts, particularly the Aramaic Targumim, which are often rich in aggadic interpolations. But the piyyutim—the poems of the ancient and medieval synagogue—have rarely been examined by, or made readily available to, those interested in the history of Jewish biblical interpretation, let alone scholars in more distantly cognate fields such as the literature of the Byzantine Church (including Ephrem the Syrian and Romanos the Melode).

This is not to say that scholarly work in the field is lacking; significant work has certainly been done. But due to the sheer quantity of material and the geographic and spatial span it involves, scholars have necessarily had to limit themselves. Fine critical editions of texts and linguistic studies are becoming readily available. However, what scholarly work is done has taken place primarily in Israel and is published almost exclusively in modern Hebrew. Given the daunting language of the poems themselves and the challenge of working in the secondary literature, even those who may benefit from engagement with the piyyutim have often been turned off without being...
Yannai's liturgical poems have, in fact, proven critical in reconstructing the so-called Triennial cycle of Torah reading, particularly haftarot for the sederim. This has given the chance to explore their vast richness. By presenting a translation and commentary of a single poem, it is my hope to encourage scholars in fields in which the study of piyyutim may prove enriching to accept the challenge of these texts.

Furthermore, there remains a need for an integrated study of the piyyutim that takes into account their complicated nature and sophisticated achievements. The piyyutim exist at the intersection of prayer and exegesis, and in form can achieve heights of artistry. The language of the poems is Hebrew, a synthesis of biblical and Rabbinic idiom; the content of the expositions often resonates with motifs and interpretations known from other sources; the aesthetics of the poems, however, are unique and often dazzling. Because of their theological content and the fact that they were performed in the synagogue, these texts are also significant in understanding the cultural context in which they emerged and flourished. These works have contributed to our understanding of the development of Jewish liturgy, the Hebrew language, and Byzantine sacred poetry. However, in part because they are such rich texts, it can be difficult to appreciate them in their full complexity. Here we take on that difficult task, presenting a theological, exegetical, and rhetorical analyses of a single work as an exemplum. This introduction delineates major themes and trends within the poem, while the translation and commentary that follow explore the workings of the poem in greater detail.

Our author is Yannai, a payyetan who probably lived in the Galilee during the sixth or seventh century (certainly prior to the Muslim conquest). We know only his first name, which he “signed” by means of an acrostic into his works. He was the first Hebrew poet to assert his authorship in this way. Yannai was an innovator within his genre, as well—one of the first to write poems for the weekly portion, and among the earliest (in any language) to use regular end-rhyme. He wrote exclusively for the Shabbat and holiday liturgy of the old, so-called “triennial” cycle (common in the land of Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean area), in which the complete Pentateuch was read over the course of approximately three (or three and one-half) years, rather than the annual (“Babylonian”) cycle customary in Jewish congregations since the Middle Ages.1 The piyyut below, from the genre

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