Michael D. Swartz

Rhetorical indications of the poet’s craft in the ancient synagogue

The fourth to eighth centuries CE saw the emergence of a class of professional liturgical poets in the Palestinian synagogue. These poets, known as payetanim, composed a genre of intricate poetry known as piyyut and formed a religious class independent of the rabbinic movement. This study discusses indications of how synagogue poets saw themselves both in relation to the divine and to their communities, focusing on the rhetoric of early piyyut and attestations to its use in the early synagogue. Two methodological models are explored: the construction of a liturgical ‘self’ in the introductions to piyyutim; and the analysis of the use of ideal figures and construction of a past in these compositions.

It is argued that ritual practitioners in the Jewish communities of late antiquity sought to distinguish themselves as worthy of consideration as members of a vocation that claimed a pedigree, identity, and singular status.

1. Introduction

In the sixth century CE two poets, the Christian hymnologist Romanos the Melodist of Constantinople and a Jewish liturgical poet named Yannai, who lived in the Galilee, signed their names in their compositions in the form of an acrostic spelling out their names in the first letters of a series of lines of verse.¹ This form, a kind of watermark, allowed the author, among other things, to claim the work as his own. Name acrostics had appeared in classical and Hellenistic Greek and Latin poetry from at least the third century BCE (Courtney 1990). Among early Christian poets, Ephraem, the fourth-century Syriac preacher and hymnologist, also signed his name to his compositions in acrostics.² Beginning with the sixth century, this practice became popular in Byzantine and Hebrew liturgical

¹ I wish to thank the organisers of the conference on which this volume is based for allowing me this opportunity to consider these subjects. I especially wish to thank Richard Gordon, whose writing on the economic and interactive dimensions of magical texts has prompted some of these questions, and the editors for their invaluable suggestions. I am also indebted to Derek Krueger, who has shared his work and discussed these ideas with me since their inception, and Peter Lenhardt, who has made his forthcoming book, Yotser, Piyyut ve-Qahal, available to me in advance of publication.

² On the early history of Greek and Latin acrostics, see Courtney (1990) and Krueger (2004, 170 – 171).
poetry. The reason for this development has implications for both the culture and the microeconomics of the poet’s craft.

The phenomenon of the acrostic signature in liturgical Hebrew poetry is the culmination of a long process of evolution of genres, in which the poet presented himself not simply as a humble supplicant before God, but as a master of religious expertise representing a congregation. From approximately the second to sixth centuries CE, the liturgical poetry of the synagogue in Palestine evolved from a set of prosodic forms used by lay prayer leaders to a highly developed literary corpus known as piyyut, composed by professional poets (payetaim). These poets produced hundreds of compositions based on the weekly lectionary reading, employing recondite vocabulary and allusions, complex prosodic structures, and often signed their names in acrostics. They also formed a religious class independent of the rabbinic movement and may have represented the interests of a priestly sector of Jewish society after the destruction of the Temple. This study will discuss indications of how synagogue poets saw themselves both in relation to the divine and to their communities, focusing on the rhetoric of early piyyut and attestations to its use in the early synagogue.

We lack any sources of information, reliable or unreliable, about the lives of these poets from their contemporaries. The payetan was sometimes identified with the ḥazan, a term for synagogue functionary that may have included singing as a prayer leader, what was called shaliah tsibbur or “messenger of the community,” and even elementary education (Sky 1992). The terms payetan and piyyut are derived from the Greek ποιητής. Variations of the word payetan (such as poyetes or poyetan) appear a few times in rabbinic literature of the fourth to sixth centuries, but the term piyyut does not appear. One Rabbi, Eleazar bar Simon, is said to have been a “reader,” that is, one who could read scripture liturgically in the synagogue; a tanna, one who memorised and taught rabbinic traditions; and a qarov u-foyetes. The term poyetes most probably refers to one who composed liturgical compositions; the term qarov may refer to one who composed a particular genre, the qerovah, which embellishes the statutory prayers of petition, the Amidah.

Anecdotes about named poets whose work is known to us start appearing in Europe in the Middle Ages and they are singularly unhelpful. For example, Yose ben Yose, the first payetan known to us by name, was said to be an orphan. This notion seems to be based on the custom of naming a child after a deceased rel-

3 For introductions to early piyyut, see Fleischer and David (2007); Fleischer (2007); Yahalom (1987 and 1999); Swartz and Yahalom (2005); and Lieber (2012).
4 For a discussion of sources, see Schirmann (1951, 129–133) and Lieberman (1939); see also Sokoloff (1990) s.v. פיוט והפיוטים.
ative; that is, if his name was the same as his father’s, it must have been because his father died.⁵ According to the twelfth-century poet and commentator German Ephraim of Bonn, Yannai was the teacher of the great poet Eleazar Qillir, but he killed his student out of jealousy for his talent by putting a scorpion in his sandal.⁶ A few of the poets are said to have been priests, either according to tradition, or on account of their names. For example, the name Pinehas ha-Kohen, “Pinehas the Priest,” is probably an indication of priestly lineage (Yahalom 1999, 111–122). As we will see, this last detail may be socially significant. The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Since then, the sacrificial system was obliterated and the priesthood as a class apparently served virtually no professional or ritual function in the Jewish community.

Any evidence for the social location of these poets must therefore be internal and comparative. For comparative evidence, we may draw on the role of the liturgical poets and hymnologists in in the wider cultural context, above all Greek and Latin hymnologists, including the emergent Christian poetry from the fourth century onwards. For internal evidence the language of the *piyyutim* can be examined for signs of the role of the poet as he conceived it.

The significance of individual authorship of literary works for the history of Jewish culture of the Roman and Byzantine periods should not be underestimated. Rabbinic literature is almost exclusively a corporate enterprise. This vast corpus of texts encompasses legal compilations, from the Mishnah, redacted around 200 CE, to the Talmuds, completed in fifth-century Palestine and sixth-century Babylonia, as well as various texts of Midrash, dating from the third to the eighth centuries. A pervasive characteristic of rabbinic literature is its multivocality. Rabbinic texts represent themselves as collections of statements, opinions, and exegeses by individual authorities and debates among them. Even when an individual opinion held by a majority of Rabbis, it is marked by attribution to “the sages” collectively. *Piyut*, however, emerged as the products of individual poets and thus presents an unusual example of single voices. These works thus represent a sustained discourse marked with the style and ideological interests of those individual composers. In fact, the first extant literary works in Hebrew written by a single named author since the Book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) in the second century BCE are the *piyyutim* of Yose ben Yose in the fourth or fifth century.

In keeping with the theme of religious professionalism that forms the organisational principle of this volume, this study concerns how ritual practitioners in the Jewish communities of late antiquity sought to distinguish themselves as

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⁵ See Mirsky, (1991, 13 n.4) and the sources cited there.
⁶ For sources and bibliography see Lieber (2010, 14).
worthy of consideration as members of a vocation that claimed a pedigree, identity, and singular status. In pursuit of indicators of the lived environment of the poet, this study therefore will consist of methodological reflections on two models: (1) the construction of a liturgical “self” in the introductions to *piyyutim*; and (2) the analysis of the use of ideal figures and construction of a past in these compositions. These reflections are each inspired by pioneering work done recently in other fields, including analysis undertaken by Peter Lenhardt, following Ezra Fleischer and other earlier scholars, on the *reshut* form in classical *piyyut*, in which the poet asks “permission” or “authority” to commence his discourse (Lenhardt, forthcoming); and Derek Krueger’s explorations of the construction of the past and the development of a liturgical ‘I’ in Byzantine hymnography (2004: 2014). These reflections are meant to lead to further analysis of the vast corpus of Hebrew hymnology of the Roman and Byzantine eras.

2. The I of Aleph

Hebrew liturgical poetry introduces the first person due to a useful coincidence: Most *piyyutim* are alphabetical acrostics, and the first-person imperfect or cohortative begins with the first letter, Aleph. This means that the author often begins by expressing his relationship to the liturgical task at hand, often by declaring his intention to recite praise, thanks, or narration in the first stanzas. A simple survey of the titles of early *piyyutim*, taken from their first lines, shows the range of first-person expressions. The following are the titles of the extant the works of Yose ben Yose, the first payetan known to us by name, who lived in the fourth or fifth century CE. This list is based on Aaron Mirsky’s 1991 edition of his poems. The genres are explained below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>transliteration</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>יהלאהללהא</td>
<td>Ahalelah Elohai</td>
<td>“I shall praise my God”</td>
<td>Malkhuyot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אפשדהמעשי</td>
<td>Efḥad be-Ma’asay</td>
<td>“I fear because of my deeds”</td>
<td>Zikhrnot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אנסשעלחר</td>
<td>Anusah le-Ezra</td>
<td>“I flee for help”</td>
<td>Shofarot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אנסובשפמנ</td>
<td>Omnam Ashamenu</td>
<td>“Indeed, our sins”</td>
<td>Selihah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אוסרבנוהראלה</td>
<td>Azkir Gevurot Eloah</td>
<td>“I shall recount God’s deeds”</td>
<td>Avodah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אתנהתייהלה</td>
<td>Eten Tehillah</td>
<td>“I shall give praise”</td>
<td>Avodah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אתנהנוננה</td>
<td>Atah Konanta Olam</td>
<td>“You established the world”</td>
<td>Avodah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אספרגדולות</td>
<td>Asapper Gedulot</td>
<td>“I shall tell (God’s) deeds”</td>
<td>Avodah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אינלנהקנ Moodle</td>
<td>En Lanu Kohen Gadol</td>
<td>“We have no high priest”</td>
<td>confession’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The other compositions in Mirsky’s edition are fragmentary or doubtfully attributed to Yose...
In this table, the opening phrases are listed in Hebrew, transliteration, and translation. The right-hand column lists the liturgical genre to which they belong, based on superscriptions in the manuscripts, the conventions of the literature, and Mirsky’s designations. The first three of these compositions are recited at the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, specifically as introductions to three units of the Additional Service (musaf) in which biblical verses introduce the sounding of the shofar (ram’s horn), announcing God’s kingship (malakhuyot), remembrance (zikhronot), and the shofar (shofarot).\(^8\) The three prayers for Rosh Hashanah help initiate the ten Days of Repentance, and so the focus of the poems is on the individual’s deeds. The setihot genre is likewise a prayer for forgiveness from God, in this case recited on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.\(^9\) However the Avodah genre deals with another essential component of Yom Kippur. It is a narrative retelling of the Yom Kippur sacrifice of purification and atonement carried out by the High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem as described by Leviticus chapter 16 and the Mishnah tractate Yoma.\(^10\) This complex genre plays an important part in the study of the social and cultural history of Hebrew liturgical poetry, not the least because of the destruction of the temple and the sacrificial system centuries earlier.

All but one of these opening phrases begin with the first person, and two with the first person plural; Atah Konanta begins with the second person singular. In the two main genres represented here, the triad for the shofar ceremony and the Avodah, the first person singular is significant for different reasons. Although the first of the three compositions for Rosh Hashanah tells of God’s deliverance of Israel in the past, the second and third focus on the individual’s sins and deliverance by God. In Efhad be-Ma’asai, he fears that his deeds will condemn him; in Anusah la-Ezra, he flees to God for refuge. The focus on the indi-

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\(^8\) On this liturgical unit, see Elbogen (1993, 118–121).


\(^10\) For an introduction to the Avodah as well as texts and translations of the major early Avodah compositions, see Swartz and Yahalom (2005) and the bibliography there. All translations of Avodah piyyutim here are from this volume unless otherwise noted; other translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. A comprehensive study of the Avodah service and piyyutim from the perspective of the history of Hebrew literature is Malachi (1974). For further editions and discussions of Avodah piyyutim, see also Goldschmidt (1970, 2:18–25); Yahalom (1996); Mirsky (1991); Swartz (1997, 1999, and 2013), and Münz-Manor (2013).
vidual in this confessional mode should not be taken for granted. Traditional Jewish prayers for forgiveness are more often than not cast in the first person plural, especially the two acrostic litanies of transgressions (the *vidui*, confession, and ‘al het, “for the sin [...]” that form the core of the confession ceremony of Yom Kippur).11 Yet, these presumed expressions of individual contrition reflect the poet’s consciousness of his environment and vocation. An example can be found in the first stanzas of the second composition in the list, *Anusah le-‘Ezra* (Mirsky 1991, 109). The poem introduces the *shofarot* service in the liturgy, which recalls prophecies in which the shofar will be sounded to signify redemption. Therefore, the author uses a technique whereby each stanza ends with the word *qol*, “voice” or “sound”. In these translations, each pair of lines represents a hemistich of four feet, adding up to stanzas of two stiches apiece:

I flee for help  
I find it facing me,  
God is near to me,  
When I call him with my voice.12

In translation, this stanza looks like a simple declaration of the poet’s dependence on God and faith in His presence; but it is also, like all of piyyut, produced by a complex process of interweaving biblical and post-biblical allusions. The language of piyyut is famous for its use of dense, ornamental phraseology in which no person, thing, or action is allowed to stand for itself; instead, the predominant means of expression is metonymy, in which a substitute word or phrase (*kinnui*), usually based on a biblical verse, signifies the subject of the discourse. The first hemistich, “I flee for help,” is based on *Isaiah* 10:3:

What will you do on the day of punishment,  
When the calamity comes from afar,  
To whom will you flee for help [...]?

The *kinnui* form often involves taking a verse out of context, but sometimes the contrast can be instructive. In Isaiah the phrase is less an expression of assurance than a warning to the sinner of his future desperation. In the *piyyut*, the speaker is convinced of his deliverance. This is brought home by the use of the root, *qrb*, to be near. This conceit of the poem, whereby each line ends with the word *qol*, allows the author to establish a homology between the

12 All biblical quotations are based on the *NJPS* with occasional modifications.
sound of the shofar and the voice of the poet. That is, God will draw near if he raises his voice to call Him.

It is at this point that the poet acknowledges the liturgical setting explicitly:

The one who, in the divine assembly,
Stands close to me
And here, in the Smaller Sanctuary,
I open my mouth to Him with my voice.

The first line of this stanza, like the previous one, reflects a remarkable use of a biblical source. God is referred to as the one “in the divine assembly,” asher be-‘adat el. This phrase and the word nitsav, “stands,” in the next hemistich, are based on Psalm 82:1:

\[
\text{Elohim nitsav be-‘adat el}
\text{be-qerev elohim yishpot.}
\]

God stands in the divine assembly;
Among the gods he pronounces judgment.

In that Psalm, God stands among the assembly of gods. He accuses them of injustice and declares that he will demote them to mortals. But in Jewish exegetical tradition, the phrase ‘adat el is sometimes used to refer to the congregation of ten worshippers (minyan): Thus in the Palestinian Talmud (y. Berakhot 5:1 [8d-9a]), the following statement is quoted in the name of Rabbi Abahu:¹³

“How do we know (by biblical proof-text)? “God stands in the divine assembly” (Ps 82:1).

Likewise, in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Berakhot 6a), Ravin bar Rav Ada says in the name of Rabbi Isaac:

How do we know (by biblical proof-text) that the Holy One, blessed be He, is found in the synagogue? As it is said, “God stands in the divine assembly.” And how do we know that when ten pray, the divine presence (shekhinah) is among them? As it is said, “God stands in

¹³ The manuscript (MS Leiden) reads “Rabbi Abahu in the name of Rabbi Abahu”, an obvious scribal error.
₁⁴ So MS Rome.
the divine assembly.” And how do we know that when three sit in judgment,\(^{15}\) the divine presence is among them? Among the *elohim* he pronounces judgment.”

By rendering *elohim* as referring to the judicial system, one meaning implied by other biblical uses of the word,\(^{16}\) this exegesis strips the verse of its henotheistic implications. Likewise, ‘*adat el* can become the quorum for human prayer.\(^{17}\)

The second line of this stanza, *beqirbi nitsav*, echoes the word *qarav*, “near,” in the third line above. While it has been translated here as “stands close to me,” the word *be-qirbi* could also mean, literally, “among me” or “within me;” it can, therefore, also refer to God’s presence within the community, or perhaps the poet’s inspiration. The next line is more specific institutionally. The phrase *miqdash me’at*, “smaller sanctuary,” comes originally from Ezekiel 11:16: “Say then: Thus said the Lord God: I have indeed removed them far among the nations and have scattered them among the countries, and I have become to them a smaller sanctuary in the countries where they have gone.”\(^{18}\) In one source in the Babylonian Talmud (b. *Megillah* 29a), the verse is used to refer to the synagogue. The citation occurs in the course of a Talmudic discussion about whether God’s presence, the *Shekhinah*, is to be found in the diaspora:

> “And I will be to them a smaller sanctuary” (*Ezek* 6:11): Rabbi Isaac said: These are the synagogues and the houses of study in Babylonia. R. Eleazar said: This is the house of our master in Babylonia. Rava expounded: What is the meaning of the verse: “Lord, You have been our dwelling place (*ma’on*)” (*Ps* 90:1)? These are synagogues and houses of study.

This exegesis of Ezekiel 6:11 thus interprets the phrase “smaller sanctuary” to refer both to synagogues and houses of study in Babylonia. It reflects the idea that the synagogue is a miniature or lesser temple.\(^{19}\) The stanza therefore repre-

\(^{15}\) To constitute a rabbinical court.

\(^{16}\) See *BDB* p. 43a s.v. יָאָרָה and *Exod* 21:6; on three constituting a rabbinical court, see *Mishnah* *Sanhedrin* 1:1.

\(^{17}\) Cf. also Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael *Yitro Bahodesh* 11; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* Version B ch. 18; and Deuteronomy Rabba ed. Lieberman, *Ki Tavo* ch. 2, p. 108.

\(^{18}\) NJPS translates “diminished sanctity”.

\(^{19}\) Although Rabbi Isaac was a third-century Tanna who had traveled to Babylonia (Stemberger 1991), this passage appears in the Babylonian Talmud, which was redacted in the sixth century. This source is often cited in modern historiography to describe Palestinian Jewish concepts of the synagogue. Our piyyut, however, may be one of the earliest attestations to this interpretation of *Ezek*. 6:11 in a Palestinian Jewish source. Cf. also a midrashic fragment on Leviticus from the Cairo Genizah in Ginzberg (1969, 77).
sents the payetan as the one who raises his voice\textsuperscript{20} in the substitute temple, bringing forth the divine presence, an echo of the lost sanctuary.

The presence of the first person singular in the Avodah \textit{piyyutim} is worthy of note as well. While the other genres in this list represent the individual’s intimate relationship with God, the recounting of the Yom Kippur sacrifice represents the High Holidays at their most collective. In \textit{Leviticus} 16, the High Priest slaughters two bulls and a goat, uses their blood to cleanse the sanctuary of ritual impurity, and sends another goat out to the wilderness bearing the people’s sins. In the course of the sacrificial procedure, he also brings incense into the Holy of Holies, where he encounters the Potent Presence of God, the only time in the year when he does so. The Avodah genre relates this procedure step by step, following the Mishnah tractate Yoma’s extensive narrative of the ritual and adorning it with elaborate poetic figures, excurses on the glorious appearance of the High Priest and his garments, the drama of his encounter with the divine presence in the Holy of Holies, and the exultation of the nation at the news that she has been forgiven. But preceding this narration, the Avodah \textit{piyyutim} attach an extensive prologue that narrates the history of the world from its creation, through the pre-history of humankind to the lives of the patriarchs, to the selection of Aaron and his clan as priests, culminating in the sacrificial service in the Temple.\textsuperscript{21} The Avodah is thus an epic genre, which seeks to produce an almost Aristotelian empathy between the congregation and the High Priest. But more than this, the High Priest is identified mimetically with the payetan himself, whose mission it is to take the community verbally into the vanished Temple.\textsuperscript{22}

The early Avodah \textit{piyyutim} sometimes open with a first-person declaration, as we have seen in other genres. For example, the most influential Avodah, Yose ben Yose’s \textit{Azkir Gevurot Elohah}, begins:

\begin{quote}
I shall recount the wonders
Of the magnificent God,
Who is unique, there is no other,
Self-sufficient and none second to Him.

There is none beyond Him in the universe,
None prior to Him in heaven;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} The phrase “open my mouth” is based on \textit{Isa} 10:14, where the silence of birds is used as a metaphor for the silence of the nations while Assyria gathers wealth; for a magical use of this verse see Schiffman and Swartz (1992, 140).

\textsuperscript{21} Other related \textit{piyyutim} such as anonymous fourth century \textit{Az be-En Kol} and the fifth-century preamble \textit{Seder Beriyot}, go further, describing the divine world before mundane creation; see Rand (2005) and Swartz (2011).

\textsuperscript{22} For this argument, see Swartz and Yahalom (2005) and Swartz (2012).
None preceded Him,  
And none can supplant Him.

So too in his *Eten Tehillah* (Mirsky 1991, 173):  23

> I shall give praise  
> To God, who is to be praised;  
> I shall tell, in awe,  
> A few of His works.  
> God was from eternity  
> Before there was a world,  
> Neither before or after Him  
> Was any god created.

In these examples Yose signifies seeks permission before God to recount how He created the universe, chose a succession of patriarchs and priests, and instructed them to present sacrifices to Him. However, after the first stanza he switches to a third-person account of primordial cosmology. Other examples of the Avodah begin with the second person, such as the phrase *atah konanta olam*, “You established the world,” which begins one of the earliest, anonymous Avodah compositions as well as one of Yose ben Yose’s poems.  26 Yet the Avodah is not bereft of the kind of self-consciousness we found in the passages described above. By these introductions the poet signals that he is to begin a saga – not quite imploring “O muse, sing to me,” but indeed the other way around. By the use of the jussive or cohortative the poet seeks permission from God to sing to Him in front to the congregation.  27

This idea, that the poet must ask permission to commence his discourse, is therefore built into the structure of this literature. The term for this rhetorical turn is *reshut*, which means “permission,” “authority”, or “dominion.” According to Uri Ehrlich (2004), it has its roots in scholastic protocol, in which the student or servant must ask permission from his master to speak, to approach him, or take leave of him. In a version of the liturgical unit known as the * quedushah*, or sanctification, which introduces the recitation of the *trishagion* of Isaiah 6:3, angels are said to “give one another permission (*reshut*) to sanctify their crea-

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23 My translation.  
24 Hebrew *me-olam*.  
25 Hebrew ‘*ad lo ‘olam*.  
26 See Swartz and Yahalom, (2005, 70 and 292); cf. *Az be-En Kol*, which begins with a third-person passage on cosmology (Swartz and Yahalom 2005, 97ff.).  
27 See Lenhardt (forthcoming).
The passage presupposes an angelic chorus that sings antiphonally, answering Isaiah 6:3 with Ezekiel 3:12. It also presupposes a celestial world ruled by intricate protocol. The “permission” each grants to the other seems to be the pronunciation of the potent divine name.

As Ezra Fleischer shows (1977), the poetic and rhetorical pattern in which the prayer leader asks permission from God to sing His praise goes back to some of the earliest *piyyutim* in the third or fourth centuries. It then developed into a distinctive formal component of the more complex compositions of the fifth and sixth centuries, and eventually into a separable unit called the *reshut*. One of the earliest examples is a brief anonymous quatrain that appears in several liturgies as a separable introduction to the Avodah (Goldschmidt 1970, 2:430); its antiquity can be seen from the style and lack of rhyme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ogilah la-El ahalah fanav} \\
\text{Esh’alah mimmenu ma’aneh lashon;} \\
\text{Asher bi-qehal’am ashirah ‘uzo;} \\
\text{Abi’ah renanot be’ad mif’alav}
\end{align*}
\]

I hope for God, I implore His presence;  
I ask of Him the response of the tongue,  
So that in the assembly of the people I may sing of His power.  
I shall express songs of praise regarding His deeds.

In the second line, the poet requests *ma’aneh lashon*, literally, “the response of the tongue.” This phrase, from Micah 7:7, may mean that the petitioner seeks an answer to his prayer. But it can also be read as a prayer for eloquence—the tongue in question not being the Deity’s but the poet’s. Once again, the poet places himself in the midst of the congregation, here taking language from Judges 20:2, in which the “people of God”, the tribes of Israel, gather under very different circumstances, to go to war against the Benjaminites.

By the eighth or ninth century, one payetan had structured his *reshut* as a remarkable portrait of his synagogue. This *reshut*, first published by Ezra Fleischer (1974), precedes an Avodah *piyyut*, *Eqrab e-Garon* ("I Shall Call out Loudly with My Throat"), by Pinehas Ha-Kohen, an eighth-century poet from Palestine. Here he lists the classes that make up the congregation:

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28 For a text and translation see Birnbaum (1949, 73–74).
29 On this unit as a pre-classical example of *reshut* see Fleischer (1977, 359).
30 So Goldschmidt’s note ad loc.
31 So the translation in Silverman (1978, 367): “I will ask Him the gift of speech”.
32 For this passage in the context of the history of the synagogue, see further Swartz and Yahalom (2005, 7–10).
I implore the Rock of eternity,
Who has knowledge of the life\(^{33}\) of the innocent;
As I cast my eyes to the heavens,
I ask permission from the Merciful One.

And so too when I stand before the wise,
Who hear words from the truthful,
Who understand words of law;
I ask permission from the wise.

I look out at the congregation of the noble;
And am fearful of the One who humbles and raises;
And of those standing behind me and before me as a fence:
I ask permission from the righteous.

The seed of the faithful,
Believers, sons of believers,
Who explore the law and understand:
I ask permission from priests.

Those who [...] goodness on my behalf;
Who are satiated with good teaching and instruction,
For they attend grace and favor:
I open my mouth with the permission of Levites.

Those who honor this day and fast,
and respond “holy, holy, holy;”
And teach scripture and Mishnah diligently:
I open my mouth with permission of \(\hat{h}azanim\).

Those who are skilled in the subtleties of books;
Abiding in the shade of the One who dwells in mystery;\(^{34}\)
Who sing sweet, pleasant words:
I open my mouth with permission of scribes.

Those who eternally elevate the Living One
Who say prayer before Him;
Who stand before the One who makes mountains:
I open my mouth with permission of those who recite liturgy.

Those who recite the specific and general;\(^{35}\)
Who sweep behind like water;
Who recite righteousness and justice:
I open my mouth with permission of singers.

\(^{33}\) Lit., “days”.

\(^{34}\) Based on Ps. 91:1, interpreted here perhaps as “the Most High dwells in mysteries”; cf. Swartz (1992, 150).

\(^{35}\) Referring to the principles by which the Torah is interpreted according to tradition and thus, perhaps, to the Midrash embedded in \(piyyutim\).
Those who lend strong voices in melody;  
Let their cry before you be pleasing;  
May You consider the melody of my tongue.  
I open my mouth with permission of the whole people.  

O Almighty, as You forgive treachery;  
Listen to my entreaties from above;  
Grant me a pure heart that I may speak without fear or treachery:  
I open my mouth with permission of the entire congregation.³⁶

Each two stanzas represent a different category or pair of social categories in the synagogue; the first three lines of each describe that category, and the last identifies it explicitly. This poem is also built on a religiously and socially hierarchical structure, with God at the top in the first stanza and the congregation and entire nation in the last two. At the top of the social hierarchy, closest to God, are the sages – the “wise” and “righteous,” who surround the poet like a fence and before whom he trembles. Next come the priests and the Levites – the former being the “believers, sons of believers” in that their office is hereditary. Scribes and ḥazanim come next. The ḥazan is associated with the scribes and described as one who “teach[es] scripture and Mishnah,” two subjects that were taught primarily to children. This is an indication that when this hymn was composed a significant function of the ḥazan was elementary education.³⁷ Next in the social order comes the payetan himself, who “arrange[s] prayers” and possibly an accompanying choir of “singers” (Fleischer, 1974).³⁸ The poet, therefore, ostensibly places himself in a humble position, close to the people for whom he is a spokesman. At the same time, this entire composition is a declaration of his intention to take on the role of messenger of the community before God.

3. The I of the Ancestors

This brings us to our second model, that of ideal figures. Rabbinic tradition is distinguished by a constant attention to the process of transmission of its wis-

³⁶ This translation is from Swartz and Yahalom (2005, 8–9). The text appears in facsimile in Yahalom (1987, 71–72) and is edited in Fleisher (1974, 46–47). See also Yahalom (1999, 41–42).
³⁷ On this function of the ḥazan see Sky (1992, 30–31).
³⁸ However, according to Yahalom (1999, 41–42), the parallelistic structure of the stanzas, each two standing for one category, makes it less likely that these two stanzas represent separate classes of payetan and chorus.
dom from its mythic origins to contemporary teachers, the rabbis. The Mishnah tractate Avot, or Sayings of the Fathers, edited around 200 CE, famously begins with a chain of tradition, tracing the reception of Torah from the initial revelation of Moses, to his biblical and post-biblical successors.

Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly.

The chain of tradition continues, enumerating the teachings of second-temple sages and eventually to the present-day rabbis themselves. But while Moses, biblical prophets and legislators, and Pharisaic leaders of the Second Temple are included in the chain, Aaron, Moses’ brother, and the priesthood are omitted. The Mishnah, thus, emphasizes that divine revelation was transmitted through scribes and sages to the Rabbis as a class.

The Avodah piyyutim, in contrast, narrate Israel’s mythic history so as to privilege the priestly line (Swartz 2013). This tendency goes back to the earliest two Avodah piyyutim, Atah Barata, “You Created the Entire World” (Swartz and Yahalom 2005, 43–50), and Atah Konanta ‘Olam me-Rosh, “You Established the World from Eternity” (Swartz and Yahalom 2005, 69–92). In Atah Konanta, the poet’s concern for selecting the priestly lineage is especially apparent from his description of the sons of Jacob (Swartz and Yahalom 2005, 48–51):

You distinguished a treasure
From among his children:
This is Levi,
The third from the womb.

You looked favourably
On those who came forth from his loins:
This is Aaron,
The first holy man.

You specified to him with what⁴⁰
He should enter the shrine
And informed him of what he should do
Before you on the Day of Pardoning.

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40 Heb. be-ezeh: cf. Lev. 16:3.
You clothed him in righteousness
In garments white as snow
And added four
More than his brothers’. 41

You sanctified him
Like the sanctity of your Seraphim
For he appeased (you for)
The sins of your people.

You made him a chief
For the descendants of the father of a multitude 42
And an officer
For the third seed. 43

The names of your tribes
You placed on his two shoulders
So that when he entered before you
They could be remembered for good.

As a substitute for atonement
You informed his sons
So that they serve before you
Following his example.

The poet lists a succession of heroes from Jacob to Levi (the “third seed”) to Aaron, and then to Aaron’s sons. They are thus traced from the patriarchs to the priest who would later preside in the Jerusalem Temple over the sacrifice that is the subject of the poem. In a very similar passage, Atah Konanta ‘Olam me-Rosh arranges its history of Israel so that Abraham leads directly to Aaron: 44

You gave him
Twelve tribes,
Lovers of the Most High,
They were called from the womb.

You placed a fair garland
Of favor upon Levi,
And of all his brothers
You placed a crown on him. 45

41 Referring to the High Priest, who wears eight garments to the ordinary priest’s four.
42 Abraham.
43 Levi (the third son); Heb. le-shalesh; alternatively, one might emend to le-shamesh (“to serve”).
44 Swartz and Yahalom (2005, 72–74).
45 Referring to the priesthood.
Amram was chosen
From the seed of Levi
Aaron, holy to the Lord,
You sanctified from his stock.

You adorned him
In woven garments,
And by his sacrifices
He annulled your anger.

In both cases Aaron’s brother Moses is notable for his absence.

Later on in the Avodah, the High Priest is described as a virtuous, physically strong human being who carries Israel and its deeds heroically with him into the sanctuary, and expiates its impurities by his methodical performance of the sacrificial ritual. This valorisation of the priest stands in contrast with the rabbinic texts that served as sources for the poet, which routinely belittle the priesthood and cast suspicion on the priestly class of the second-temple period.⁴⁶ This and other structural and stylistic features of the genre are indications that the payetanim identified themselves with the priesthood, at least for the duration of the Avodah liturgy.

Recently, Derek Krueger (2010) has shown how the extensive use of the history of Israel in early anaphora, from the Liturgy of St. Basil to the Apostolic Constitutions, served ideological and social purposes. He argues that “the liturgical repetition of Old Testament narrative asserted its relevance to the formation of Christian community” in Western Syria, where there were significant populations of both Jews and Marcionites.⁴⁷ So too, the Avodah’s rendering of sacred history constituted an alternative to the rabbinic narrative in which the priesthood was belittled and its importance was minimized. This counter-narrative may have strengthened the prestige of the payetan in the cultural environment in Palestine in late antiquity. It has been argued (Yahalom 1999, 107–36; Irshai 2003) that the synagogue was led in late antiquity by priestly circles that had retained their identity.⁴⁸ It is not certain whether the payetanim were indeed part of an organised priestly class. However, it has been shown here that the Avodah constructs a priestly pedigree for the poem that is spiritual and cultural, if not genealogical. This poetic strategy would therefore have the positioned synagogue poet in a centre of cultural production.

⁴⁶ See Yahalom (1999); and Swartz (1999).
⁴⁷ On textual affinities between the Avodah and the Apostolic Constitutions, see Münz-Manor (2013).
4. From Poetry to Society

The purpose of the close readings of generic markers offered above has been to prepare the way for understanding the process of professionalism of the synagogue poet from the fourth to sixth centuries. The evidence for such a process increases with the development of the genres that express the poet’s conception of his vocation and place in the community. However, it has its roots in the early piyyutim in which the poets place themselves in a central position, as representative of the nation, as the successor to the hereditary priesthood, and even as the agent by whom the divine presence hovers over the congregation.

It could be argued that these patterns might be understood more as signs of vocation than professionalisation. However, the trajectory of the history of piyyut seems to lead to a society in which the poet was seen as an individual author providing a service to the community, who probably compensated him in some way. The payetan was usually the performer of his works, and would have been recognized as such by the congregation. One consequence of signing one’s name in an acrostic is that it protects the author’s work. In the Rabbinic milieu at this time and place, in which most literature was collective and transmitted orally, this was not a trivial matter if one’s livelihood was at stake. Regarding Greek and Latin poetry, Edward Courtney observes (1990, 8), “In a time of predominantly oral transmission, a poet who wished to retain the title to his poetry needed to stamp it with some mark of ownership.”⁴⁹ An acrostic signature could prevent another performer from representing another’s work as his own.

Two other features of the early literary history of piyyut are the increasing proliferation of sources between the fourth and seventh centuries and the increasing intricacy of its language. The only extant compositions by Yose ben Yose are for the High Holidays, the days of repentance between the New Year and the Day of Atonement. The liturgy of those days was the most extensive and dramatic of the year. We do not know whether Yose would have been paid for his efforts but it has been argued here that the poet thought of himself as fulfilling a vocation. In the next century, Yannai wrote detailed exegetical compositions for the entire weekly lectionary cycle. Eleazar Qillir’s work is

⁴⁹ See also Kreuger (2010, 170). For an account of the problem of individual authorship in early Islam see Kilto (2001), especially, the case of the writer al-Jahiz (pp. 67–77), who forged several books and attributed them to ancient authors, and was then faced with the prospect of proving his own authorship of those works. On authorship in medieval Spanish Hebrew poetry, see Pagis (1970, 101–106).
even more voluminous; in addition, his use of novel linguistic forms, recondite allusions, and expanding use of sources gained him both fame and notoriety in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{50} Hence the legends in which his expertise causes his teacher Yannai to fly into a jealous rage. This development could also be an indication of the transmission of techniques and sources in small groups or guilds of verbal craftsmen. That is, the intricacy of Qillir’s language, the poetic and linguistic innovations he instituted, and the overall virtuosity of his compositions could also serve to exclude amateurs and dilettantes who did not have access to them.

We know from Talmudic sources and fragmentary literary compositions that it was possible to hire professional poets to perform at funerals and weddings.\textsuperscript{51} The Babylonian Talmud (b. Moed Katan 25b), contains several anecdotes about funeral poets, including examples of their craft. In one story, Rav Ashi asks two poets, Bar Kipok and Bar Abin, what they would say for his funeral. They each recite several lines. Rav Ashi does not like their work and resolves not to hire them.

With the rise of Christianity after Constantine, according to the most recent archaeological evidence, synagogues in Palestine grew from modest structures to monumental buildings, featuring dazzling mosaics, sculptural architectural ornamentation, and prominent dedicatory inscriptions (Levine 2000 and 2012, Fine 2005). These buildings could compete with neighbouring churches in the new Christian empire. The inscriptions also allowed patrons to display their devotion in the form of the narrative themes and symbols of liturgical graphic arts. The evidence presented here suggests that in their poetry, the payetanim hoped to present themselves as ritual experts trained to be messengers of the community, and that enlisting them was a way for their patrons to display their devotion.\textsuperscript{52}

References


\textsuperscript{50} On the reception of Eleazar and other payetanim on the part of medieval Spanish Hebrew poets and early modern Hebraists See Yahalom (1985, 11–19).

\textsuperscript{51} See Yahalom (2006).

\textsuperscript{52} It is interesting to note that unlike those inscriptions, the \textit{piyyutim} under study do not seem to thematise such an economic relationship explicitly. For an example of a modern Mediterranean funeral poet’s allusion to her compensation see Alexiou (2002, 40.)


