YANNAI ON GENESIS

An Invitation to Piyyut

Laura S. Lieber

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Contents

Acknowledgments viii

Part One

An Introduction to the Poet and his Works and this Project 1

Issues of Text and Translation 21

1. "Anatomy of a *Qedushta*" 35
How Form Shapes Meaning and Meaning Shapes Form

2. "Inscribed by a Learned Tongue" 93
The Language of Aesthetics and Biblical Intertextuality

3. "New Wine—In New Bottles?" 132
Yannai in the Byzantine World

4. "Threads of the Tapestry" 226
Selected Topics from Yannai's *Qedushta'ot* for Genesis
- Poetry, Angels, and the Heavenly Hekhalot 227
- The Concept of "Holiness" 241
- The God of Yannai 247
- The Covenant of the Land: Exile and Restoration 258
- Esau and Apocalypse: Jews, Christians, and "the Good Other" 270
- Yannai's Women 285

Conclusion: Directions Forward 296

Part Two

Yannai's *Qedushta'ot* Embellishing Genesis
Texts, Translations, Annotations, and Commentaries

Genesis 1:1; "In the beginning God created" 303

Genesis 8:1; "Then God remembered Noah" 323

Genesis 8:15; “Go forth from the Ark” 331
Genesis 9:18; “The sons of Noah were” 351
Genesis 11:1; “All the earth was” 369
Genesis 12:1; “The Lord said to Abram, `Go forth'” 393
Genesis 14:1; “And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel” 415
Genesis 15:1; “After these Words: In a Vision” 425
Genesis 16:1; “Now Sarai, the wife of Abram” 445
Genesis 17:1; “When Abram was 90 years old” 465
Genesis 18:1; “Then the Lord appeared to him” 477
Genesis 19:1; “Then came two angels” 485
Genesis 24:1; “Now, Abraham was old” 497
Genesis 25:19; “And these are the descendents” 501
Genesis 27:28; “So may God give you” 517
Genesis 28:10; “Then Jacob went forth” 529
Genesis 29:31; “Then the Lord saw that she was hated” 541
Genesis 30:22: “Then God remembered Rachel” 553
Genesis 31:3; “Return to the Land of your fathers” 565
Genesis 32:4; “Then Jacob sent” 587
Genesis 33:18; “Then Jacob came to Shalem” 613
Genesis 35:9; “Then God appeared to Jacob” 637
Genesis 37:1; “Then Jacob settled” 655
Genesis 38:1; “And it came to pass at that time that Judah went down” 667
Genesis 39:1; “But Joseph was brought down to Egypt” 683
Genesis 41:1; “And it came to pass at the end of” 693
Genesis 41:38; “Can we find one such as this?” 705

Genesis 43:14; "And may God Almighty grant you mercy" 711

Genesis 44:18; "Then he approached him" 721

Genesis 48:1; "Then he said to Joseph, `Lo, your father is ill'" 749

Genesis 49:1; "Then Jacob summoned his sons" 769

Appendix I: Amidah for the Morning Service (Blessings 1-3) 781

Appendix II: Outline of the Generic *Qedushta* Form 783

Bibliography 785

Index 797

Acknowledgments

"Rabbah b. Ḥanah said: Why are the words of the Torah compared to fire?
This is to teach you that just as fire does not ignite of itself,
so, too, the words of the Torah do not endure with one who studies alone."
b. Taʿanit 7a

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An Introduction to the Poet and his Works and this Project

"This is the splendor of Yannai:
–he is extremely old yet entirely new."
Shalom Spiegel, *Fathers of Piyyut*, 386

Saadia Gaon, the leader of Babylonian Jewry in the tenth century, listed him among "the ancient poets."[1] The Karaite scholar Abu Yusuf al-Qirqisani, a contemporary of Saadia's, asserts that Anan ben David, the founder of the Karaite sect of Judaism, derived laws from his poetry.[2] And Gershom Me'or HaGolah, the great Ashkenazic rabbi of the eleventh century, reckoned him among "the early Sages," saying that "he wrote *qerovot*[3] for every single Torah portion (*seder*) of the year."[4] And yet, for all his reputation and productivity, this poet's works were lost to the world for almost a millennium. Only with the discovery of the treasures in the Cairo Genizah at the end of the nineteenth century did this once major Hebrew author emerge from the mists of legend into the world of Jewish literary history.

His name was Yannai, and if his poetry represents a remarkable development in the history of Hebrew letters, its rediscovery has the potential to transform and tremendously enrich our understanding of the history of Hebrew literature and Jewish culture during a formative period. Menachem Schmelzer suggests that the recovery of Yannai's works from the Genizah was a "most revolutionary discovery," noting that they constitute a

1 *Sefer ha-Egron,* ed. N. Allony (Jerusalem: Ha-Akademyah La-Lashon Ha-ʿIvrit, 1969), 154.

2 See Israel Davidson, *Machzor Yannai: A Liturgical Work of the VIIth Century* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1919), xi–xlvi.

3 Liturgical poems embellishing the Amidah, the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy, are called, as a class, *qerovot.*

4 *Teshuvot rabbenu Gershom Me-or ha-Golah,* ed. S. Eidelberg (New York: Yeshiva University, 1955), vol. 1, 55–56.

key piece of evidence for recognizing the central importance of poetry in Byzantine and medieval Judaism.[5] In the early twentieth century, it seemed that the study of Yannai's poetry would transform our understandings of Jewish society in Late Antiquity, and even revolutionize the study of rabbinic literature.[6]

Yet, for all this testimony to his significance, Yannai's particular body of poetry—and even more surprisingly, the entire genre of his work (called "*piyyut*," the Hebrew term for Jewish liturgical poetry), has received relatively little attention from scholars outside of first German and then Israeli academia.[7] That neglect is surprising, given the prominence of Jewish poetry, sacred and secular, in the earliest period of Jewish Studies. Leopold Zunz, a founder of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the scientific study of Judaism), wrote multiple landmark volumes devoted to liturgical poetry;[8] Paul Kahle, the famed linguist, found piyyutim a rich resource for understanding the development of Masoretic Hebrew grammar;[9] Franz Delitzsch, a Protestant scholar, featured them prominently in his landmark literary study of Hebrew poetry.[10] Many other major *Wissenschaft* writers, including S. J. Rappoport and S. D. Luzzato, likewise emphasized Hebrew sacred poetry in their writings.

The students and heirs of these groundbreaking scholars, many of whom

5 M. Schmelzer, "The Contribution of the Genizah to the Study of Liturgy and Poetry," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 63 (1997–2001): 169.

6 See S. Lieberman, "Ḥazzanut Yannai," *Sinai* 4 (1938): 221–50 [Hebrew]. In this essay, Lieberman expressed a hope that someday Yannai's poetry would stand on the shelf next to the volumes of Talmud and midrash because "that is its proper place [כי שם הוא מקומו]" (250).

7 For a survey of the state of Piyyut Studies at present, see Wout Jac. van Bekkum, "The Hebrew Liturgical Poetry of Byzantine Palestine: Recent Research and New Perspectives," *Prooftexts* 28.2 (2008): 232–46. He notes at the very end of this article: "One of my conclusions is that since the days of Leopold Zunz the poetics of piyyut has not attracted sufficient attention in modern academic scholarship, although it may be noted that the situation has clearly improved in recent years" (246).

8 Including: *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie* (Berlin: L. Gerschel Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1865); *Der Ritus des synagogalen Gottesdienstes* (Berlin: J. Springer, 1859); and *Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters* (1 ed.; Frankfurt am Main: J. Kaufmann, 1920).

9 See P. E. Kahle, *The Cairo Genizah,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959) and "Kerobas aus dem Maḥzor des Jannai," in *Masoreten des Westens* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 1:87–89; see also A. Murtonen (with G. J. Ormann), *Materials for a Non-Masoretic Hebrew Grammar*, 2 vols (Helsinki, 1958).

10 Franz Delitzsch, *Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Poesie seit dem Abschluss der Schriften des Alten Bundes* (Leipzig: Karl Tauchnitz, 1836).

were affiliated with the Schocken Research Institute for the study of Hebrew Poetry—including Jefim (Hayyim) Schirmann, Hayyim Brody, A. M. Habermann, Menachem Zulay, Avraham Mirsky, and others—continued the efforts of their teachers. They devoted tremendous energy to cataloguing, publishing, and analyzing the literatures of the ancient and medieval synagogue, whether found in printed prayerbooks or discovered in manuscripts.[11] When, in the 1930s, many of the great scholars of piyyut fled Europe (the Schocken Institute relocated to Jerusalem in 1934), Piyyut Studies was transformed from a Germanic scholarly field to a largely Israeli—and therefore Hebraic—one. Even piyyut scholars residing in the U.S., such as Shalom Spiegel, published their scholarly articles and monographs primarily in Hebrew, as that was the language of their readership.[12]

The fact that Yannai's poems were composed in a difficult Hebrew idiom, combined with the tendency of the scholarship itself to be in languages other than English, has resulted in an American audience largely unaware of the richness, vastness, and importance of this literature or unable to access it in a substantial way. Furthermore, these poems were handicapped by a reputation for being inferior literature; the study of Andalusian Hebrew poetry—with a reputation as "good" literature—successfully became a field of study in the U.S., despite similar obstacles. For all the inherent relevance of piyyut to the study of more popular fields, particularly midrash (rabbinic interpretation of Scripture) and targum (Aramaic versions of the Bible), this tremendous body of literature has been undervalued in the English-speaking world, even after the Cairo Genizah was recognized as housing a vast quantity of liturgical poetry, works spanning centuries and continents, among its diverse treasures.[13]

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11 In the introduction to his *Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History* (London; Portland, OR: Littman Library, 1998), Leon Weinberger concisely summarizes the nineteenth and twentieth-century history of Piyyut Studies.

12 For example, Spiegel's brief but influential article, "On the Language of the Payyetanim" was published only in the Hebrew language periodical *HaDoar* 43 (23), 1962–63: 397–400. Similarly, Saul Lieberman's essay, *Ḥazzanut yannai*, was published only in Hebrew.

13 T. Carmi offers a dramatic description of the unlikely discovery of the Genizah and its significance: "The enormous jigsaw puzzle of the *piyut* began to reveal its contours only with the discovery of the Cairo Genizah (`hiding place'). This momentous event—momentous for almost every branch of Hebrew scholarship—has been aptly described as a cluster of miracles. It is a miracle that the community in Fostat (Old Cairo), which is known to have bought its synagogue in the ninth century, perpetuated the customs and liturgy of the Palestinian rite. It was a miracle that they, and subsequent generations,

This is not to say that all scholars in the U.S. have failed to consider these important works. Researchers in related fields—principally Liturgy, Semitics, and Rabbinics—have often noted their importance and included them in their studies. The field of Jewish Liturgy, in particular, has consistently acknowledged the centrality of liturgical poetry; the most important work in English remains Ismar Elbogen's classic study *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, which includes a full chapter on "The Period of the Piyyut" as well as sections on major poets and notes concerning poetic additions to the prayers.[14] As the field of Liturgical Studies developed, so did this element of Piyyut Studies, and in recent years, more and more attention has been paid to piyyutim in the context of understanding liturgical development.[15] Indeed, as Stefan Reif comments in his major work *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, "Liturgical poetry will hardly feature [in this study] at all for the simple reason that it has had more than its fair share of scholarly attention for a century and a half."[16] What Reif does not mention—it is not pertinent to his study—is *how* piyyut has been studied in the works he has in mind. Piyyutim have proven a useful tool for liturgical historians in reconstructing the development of liturgies, rites, and rituals, but rarely have scholars

held the written word in such esteem that any piece of writing in Hebrew could not simply be thrown away, but had to be stored in a special lumber-room. It was a miracle that hundreds of thousands of fragments were deposited in this windowless room in the synagogue's attic from the eleventh to nineteenth century. And it was nothing less than a miracle that they were preserved from decay and were not discovered prematurely" ("Introduction," *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* [New York: Penguin Books, 1981], 22).

14 I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: a Comprehensive History,* trans. R. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: JPS; New York: JTSA, 1993). Originally published in German as *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (1913), updated in 1972 by Joseph Heinemann and published as *Ha-Tefillah be-yisrael be-hitpaṯutah ha-historit* (Hebrew), and finally revised and translated into English by Raymond Scheindlin (1993). Scheindlin is, himself, a noted scholar of Hebrew poetry. Another important work in English that should be mentioned is A. Z. Idelsohn's *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932). This work, while less exhaustive and systematic than Elbogen's study, catalogues an impressive number of piyyutim from various medieval rites.

15 See J. Heinemann's landmark volume *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns,* trans. R. Sarason (Berlin/New York: DeGruyter, 1977); and more recently, see especially Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), which considers extensively the development of piyyutim, Gaonic opposition to the genre, and its eventual normalization. Finally, the works of R. Sarason have been of tremendous value; see especially his entry "Midrash in Liturgy," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash* 1:463–92.

16 S. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 15–16.

addressed these texts seriously as *prayers*. Indeed, the field of Liturgical Studies itself has changed in recent decades, moving in more phenomenological directions; in the context of such research, piyyutim—with their experiential, even theatrical elements, as well as their implicit form of constructive theology—promise to play a prominent role once again.

A growing number of researchers in other fields have also come to recognize the importance of piyyutim. In recent decades, more and more scholarly works have taken these poems into account, understanding them to be important cultural artifacts of the Byzantine era and Middle Ages. Eric Werner's comparative study of early Jewish and Christian liturgical practices (particularly music) made extensive use of piyyutim.[17] Similarly, in recent years, historians attempting to understand the development of Jewish culture have begun to recognize the importance of liturgical poetry as a way of gaining access to the interior life and ritual practices of the Byzantine and medieval synagogue.[18] In the field of Hebrew linguistics, Michael Rand has argued convincingly that the idiosyncratic grammar of the early liturgical poets possesses integrity and merits study in its own right.[19] Scholars of rabbinic literature have begun to treat liturgical poetry as part of the history of Jewish biblical interpretation, on par with midrash and targum.[20] Finally, a few English language monographs have put piyyutim at center stage: Jakob Petuchowski's *Theology and Poetry* and, more recently, Leon Weinberger's *Jewish Hymnography* offer English-language readers general introductions to Piyyut Studies, while Joseph Yahalom and Michael Swartz's volume of Yom Kippur piyyutim, *Avodah: An Anthology of Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur*, is the first major collection of complete

17 Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: The Interdependence of Liturgy and Music in Synagogue and Church during the First Millenium*, vol 1. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); vol. 2 (New York: Ktav, 1984).

18 For example: Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 200 B.C.E. *to* 640 C.E. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2d ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Towards a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

19 Michael Rand, *Introduction to the Grammar of Hebrew Poetry in Byzantine Palestine* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006). Despite its broad title, this work focuses on the grammar of Qillir.

20 See, for example, Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

piyyutim to be translated into English.[21] Hebrew liturgical poems are beginning to get their due.

Whereas Yahalom and Swartz's *Avodah* introduces readers to a specific genre of piyyut, the present work presents a specific poet and his innovative style of poetry, indicating along the way the range of new fields and questions where piyyut may be of particular interest as well as new ways of studying piyyut in its own right. Piyyutim are poised to become an important and fruitful resource for scholars working in the history of Western religions and comparative literature, as well as more commonly studied disciplines within Jewish studies; at the same time, scholars primarily interested in this body of poetry are drawing on the tools of these related disciplines in order to understand their own texts more fully.

This volume highlights new ways of looking at piyyutim in order to bring them to the attention of an audience able to appreciate these rich texts from a diversity of heretofore overlooked vantage points. It explores these works not just from the various perspectives of rabbinics, biblical interpretation, and liturgy, but as texts to be read in the context of Byzantine art, synagogue archaeology, and early Christian hymnography; not only as evidence of rites and rituals, but as poetry to be studied in the context of comparative literature and from the perspectives of aesthetics and phenomenology. In particular, it seeks to understand the piyyutim as rich and beautiful poetic texts that were not only heard but also experienced—not just listened to, but prayed. As such, these poems must be approached "thickly," as literature, theology, and art in their own right. To achieve this goal, this volume includes introductory material useful for the novice as well as analysis and explication of the piyyutim for those who choose to delve more deeply into a broad range of related topics—literary technique, poetics, theology, comparative ancient poetry—and realize the substantial intellectual potential of this field. Annotated translations, meanwhile, add depth and substance to the more overarching observations in the essays. The task of rescuing and resurrecting these poems began a century ago with the discoveries of the Cairo Genizah, but the study of these works is, in many ways, only now beginning.

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21 J. Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography*; M. Swartz and J. Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology of Ancient Poetry for Yom Kippur* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005).

Poetry Lost and Found

What is piyyut? Why does this literature matter and for whom was it written? Who was Yannai, and why does he merit his own monograph? The name "piyyut" derives from the Greek ποιητής ("something made or created"), the same word that gives English the word "poetry"; from this root, the composers of piyyutim are called in Hebrew *payyetanim*, or "poets." This new vocabulary, which first appears in rabbinic writings, immediately distinguishes this genre of late ancient poetry from biblical forms of composition (*shir*, *tehillah*, *mizmor*, etc.) and biblicizing works (such as the Qumranic *Hodayot*) that imitate the biblical style of composition. Even more significantly, this terminology indicates that the rabbinic sources recognized piyyut as something new. As the Greek etymology implies, it arose in the context of Hellenism, although its precise origins are unknown.[22] Indeed, these are the great mysteries of the field: Did piyyut arise as a kind of borrowing from early Christian hymnography? Or are its roots deep within Judaism and its ingrained ("native"?) methods of biblical interpretation, now distilled to its barest poetic essence? This style of writing appears on the scene fully developed and already complex in roughly the fourth or fifth century—a tumultuous period in Near Eastern history—but any clear understanding of its relationship to earlier forms of poetry from the Second Temple period, from the Jewish mystical traditions, from Qumran, and from outside Judaism remains shrouded in mystery. Odds are that the answer is far from simple.

Regardless of their origin, piyyutim are, in essence, poems composed for use in the Jewish liturgical context, either in place of or as adornments to the statutory prayers. The term "piyyut" generally applies to Hebrew compositions, although liturgical poems in other languages (especially Aramaic) may also be called "piyyutim." The earliest examples (works from the so-called "pre-Classical" or "Anonymous" period) are generally dated to the fourth or fifth century in the Land of Israel, and they are typified by the works of Yose ben Yose. The "Classical period," which began with Yannai and was dominated by Qillir, lasted from the fifth to eighth

22 See my entry, "Piyyut" in *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* 3: 2000–2019, for a discussion of the possible origins of this form of poetry.

centuries—overlapping with the Muslim conquest of the Land of Israel, and established the aesthetic trends for centuries after.[23]

Piyyut soon diffused throughout the Jewish world. The inclusion of piyyutim typified the early Palestinian-Jewish rite, and the abundance of liturgical poetry from this early period indicates the same diversity of liturgical practice that the *targumim* (Aramaic renderings of the biblical text) of the Land of Israel also suggest.[24] Babylonian Jewish authorities—favoring uniformity (in the content of prayers as well as in Aramaic translation)—initially resisted the inclusion of piyyutim in the worship service, but as these poems became increasingly popular throughout the Jewish world, the Babylonian leadership eventually discovered ways of accommodating popular tastes. Although the Geonim initially rejected piyyut quite vigorously, by the eighth and ninth centuries they grudgingly permitted their recitation, and by the tenth century, Saadia Gaon—the head of Babylonian Jewry—himself composed numerous piyyutim.[25] The poetic trends first manifested in the Land of Israel prior to the Muslim conquest were preserved, transmitted, and developed during the Middle Ages, first in Italy and then in Ashkenaz (Western, Central, and ultimately Eastern Europe), where the distinctive payyetanic style of poetry flourished well into the medieval period. In the Sephardic world, however, shortly after Saadia's lifetime, the history of Hebrew poetry took a different turn, overtly rejecting many of the stylistic features of classical piyyut in favor of a shorter, more lyrical, more biblicizing style of composition, influenced by the aesthetics and ideals of Arabic poetry.

As the above sketch suggests, the history of piyyut is one of literary and liturgical transformation; in many ways, piyyutim embody and enact Rabbi Eliezer's dictum "Whoever makes his prayer a fixed thing (*qeva*), his prayer is not a true supplication" (*m. Berakhot* 4:4). Piyyutim, which diversified and enlivened the services in the ancient and medieval world (and, to a

23 This periodization, now standard, derives from the magisterial volume by E. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975).

24 For the Eastern-Western divide in terms of regulation of *targumim*, see W. F. Smelik, "Orality, the Targums, and Manuscript Reproduction," in *Paratext and Megatext in Jewish and Christian* Traditions*: The Textual Markers of Contextualization* (ed. A. den Hollander, U. Schmidt and W.F. Smelik; Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), 49–81.

25 The most nuanced and comprehensive study of the Geonic opposition to and then accommodation of the Palestinian-Jewish poetic embellishment of the liturgy can be found in Langer, *To Worship God Properly*, especially her chapter "The Language of Prayer: The Challenge of Piyyut," 110–87.

lesser extent, in modern prayerbooks), engaged in a dynamic tension with liturgical fixity. Whether they supplemented or replaced the statutory liturgy, piyyutim built upon a set framework (exactly how "set" varied over time) while simultaneously personalizing and customizing the service to the content and language of the Torah portion and themes of the Sabbath or festival.

Piyyutim also reflected the aesthetic tastes of the community. Despite the ambivalence of the Geonic authorities, the piyyutim were tremendously popular, both in the West and, later, in the East. By the Middle Ages, most of the major liturgical opportunities—particularly the Shema and its blessings, the Amidah, and the various penitential rites, but also the Grace after Meals, the Sanctification of the New Moon, the *nishmat kol ḥai*, and others—were embellished with piyyutim, to the extent that those they chose often serve as the primary distinction of one regional rite from another. The evidence of the Cairo Genizah confirms the tremendous desire for new piyyutim throughout the Jewish world, a hunger that began in the Byzantine world and was sustained throughout the Middle Ages. One Genizah letter published by S. D. Goitein describes the efforts of one Jewish community to obtain new poems from as far away as Marseilles.[26] Even more than this letter, however, the sheer quantity of poetic texts recovered from the Genizah attests to the tremendous popularity of these works.

The Andalusian poetic revolution, reflected in the writings of Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, and others, was, in part, a rebellion against the poetic aesthetics of the earlier Palestinian- Ashkenazic style of piyyutim.[27] For all their protests, however, many famous poems by Iberian Jews are, themselves, technically piyyutim, written in a neo-Classical (i.e., biblicizing) style.[28] No matter their specific place of or-

26 S. D. Goitein, *Jewish Education in Muslim Countries Based on Records from the Cairo Genizah* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben-Ẓvi, 1962), 97–103 [Hebrew].

27 Abraham ibn Ezra famously derided the "Qilliran" style of piyyut. His commentary to Eccl 5:1 is a veritable manifesto for Andalusian neo-Classicism. In this comment, ibn Ezra accuses *payyetanim* of filling their works with riddles and parables; of mixing biblical idiom with that of rabbinic literature (including non-Hebrew loan words); of violating the rules of Hebrew grammar (for example, making a feminine word masculine); and finally, of filling their poems with aggadic allusions. For the Hebrew of this text, see J. Yahalom, "Appendix I," *Sefat ha-shir shel ha-piyyut ha-erets-yisraeli ha-kadum* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 185–96.

28 The poetry of medieval Spain has received substantially more attention than the piyyut of the pre-Classical and Classical period. For accessible studies that include ample translations of poetry, see Raymond Scheindlin, *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel*

igin, piyyut offered each generation's best sacred poets an opportunity to add their voices to the synagogue service, and these poems, while often difficult for modern readers to appreciate, were very much the *kavvanah* ("intentionality")—the responsive, flexible fluidity of meaningful prayer—of their day. As communities became more remote from both the distinctive Hebraic idiom and the Byzantine thematic concerns of these venerable poems, however, these texts became obscure and ossified remnants of the past—the worst examples of rigid *qeva*. Indeed, as Jakob Petuchowski noted, piyyutim were the "*bête noire*" (dark beast) of the early Reform movement and were among the first texts purged from the early Reform prayerbooks.[29]

Nevertheless, the inclusion of contemporary poetry and readings in many modern synagogue services reflects the same impulse that popularized the early piyyutim, often without the congregational liturgists realizing that they are participating in an ancient Jewish tradition. Additionally, in an intriguing "neo-Classical" twist, some modern prayerbooks, particularly those used on the High Holidays (*maḥzorim*), have reintroduced works by the classical poets of Byzantine Palestine, including Yannai.[30]

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and the Soul (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) and Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

29 Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968), 30. For an example of the low regard in which *piyyutim* were held by the early Reformers, due to the fact that piyyut language had become completely incomprehensible and its aesthetic alien to the Jews of nineteenth-century Germany, see Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 152–58. Note, in particular, the assertion of Joseph Maier, chair of the First Rabbinical Conference in Brunswick (1844), who considered "the lack of the truly poetic element as a technical defect in our prayer book" (154). Note also, however, the impassioned plea of Gustav Gottheil on behalf of retaining the piyyutim because he believed they elevated the decorum of Shabbat and holiday observance: "I fully recognize the rights of the present to change the prayer [service], but I believe that the religious consciousness of other times also has the right to find expression in our prayers. … I would rather go back to the warmer religious sentiment of antiquity. Therefore I must speak out against the generally condemnatory judgment against piyyutim" (184).

30 Prayerbooks associated with the Conservative movement in the mid-twentieth century in the U.S. have been particularly likely to reintroduce classical piyyut; see, for example, the Silverman *maḥzor* (M. Silverman, ed., *High Holiday Prayerbook: Rosh Hashanah–New Year's Day, Yom Kippur–Day of Atonement* [Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1951]) and the Harlow *maḥzor* (J. Harlow and the Rabbinical Assembly of America, *Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: A Prayer Book for the Days of Awe* [New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1972]). These prayerbooks reflect the important role that scholars at the Jewish

In sum, piyyutim exist at the intersection of multiple discrete fields of study: as liturgical works, they shed light on the development of the Jewish liturgy; as Hebrew texts from a period when Hebrew was supposedly "dead," they reveal much about the status of the language; as poetry, they reveal transformations in Hebrew literature and aesthetics; as prayer, they offer insight into the concerns and experiences of Jews at various moments in their history; and as a forum for the public interpretation of Scripture, they must be contextualized as part of the same dynamic tradition that produced midrash and targum. Furthermore, because these works were composed for recitation in the synagogue, they often shed an incidental light on the complex reality of that world—issues of topical concern to the congregants, events of contemporary importance, popular theological trends, exegetical motifs, and even the language and intellectual background of the audience.

Though not readily apparent, insights into the cultural history of a fascinating but murky period of Jewish and Western history may also be found within these works. Was Jewish life in this period a story of external coercion and oppression, rebellious messianic foment, or creative independence and interdependence? Scholars have posited variant readings of Jewish history at this moment, and the piyyutim are a major (but overlooked and oversimplified) Jewish voice in the discussion. Likewise, the early piyyutim of the Byzantine period have also proven to be literary complements to the visual art and architecture of the early synagogue, helping scholars place the startlingly rich mosaics discovered during the last century in the Byzantine synagogues within a larger cultural context.

Piyyutim also have much to offer scholars in fields outside of Jewish Studies entirely. In particular, research in Byzantine Christianity—especially Christian hymnography and liturgy—reveals suggestive confluences and parallels with Jewish sources from the same period. Shared traditions of interpretation (convivial and polemical) are readily apparent, as are common rhetorical techniques, although the details of the relationship remain thorny and have defied easy interpretation. In short, scholars from an array of fields, disciplines, and approaches—Jewish and Christian, his-

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Theological Seminary (Solomon Schechter and Shalom Spiegel, especially) have played in Genizah and Piyyut Studies as well as the ideological preference in Conservative Judaism to innovate by means of reviving traditional texts.

torical and literary, phenomenological and New Critical—can all find a treasure trove of new material in the piyyutim.

A Poet Lost and Found

A thorough and comprehensive introduction to piyyutim at all these different levels and across the many centuries in which the genre flourished exceeds the scope of a single book (and possibly the abilities of a single author).[31] Instead, in hopes of complementing works already in existence, the present study focuses on a single poet, Yannai, whose historical context and creative output best intersect with the host of interests delineated above.

Yannai lived before the Muslim conquest of the Land of Israel, probably in the sixth century, during the tumultuous reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian.[32] Yannai's time and place situate him at a critical moment in Jewish cultural history: important rabbinic sources were crystallizing; the synagogue was thriving; the liturgy was taking definitive shape. Looking at Yannai's period more broadly, he probably lived at a time when the Byzantine Empire was undergoing a military resurgence, witnessing a tremendous Christian building program (including Hagia Sophia and the splendid edifices of Ravenna), and experiencing the cultural flowering that created works such as the monumental oeuvre of the Greek hymnist Romanos. It was a period when, under strong imperial leadership, Byzantium truly became a Christian empire.[33] Yannai's works, with their dynamic mixture of messianism, defiance, and restraint, reflect and engage this society in flux and show him to be a poet of transformative importance at a period when Jewish (and Western) culture itself was both coalescing and becoming something new.

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31 Readers seeking a concise general introduction to "Piyyut" should consult the entries in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (s.v., "Piyyut") and the *Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (s.v., "Piyyut"), or, for a more extensive treatment in English, Weinberger's *Jewish Hymnography.*

32 For a discussion of the problems in assigning Yannai a more specific date, see my article "`You Have Skirted This Hill Long Enough': The Tension Between Rhetoric and History in a Byzantine Piyyut" (forthcoming in the *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2010).

33 Averil Cameron articulates with particular eloquence the emergence of Christian Byzantium as an imperial force. Especially worth noting in this context are her two monographs, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, A.D. 395–600* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Furthermore, Yannai—"a father of piyyut"[34]—influenced Hebrew sacred poetry for centuries beyond his lifespan. He was the first non-anonymous Hebrew poet, signing his name into his works by means of an acrostic; he was the first to consistently use true end-rhyme; and he was among the first to have written for the weekly service and festivals rather than just particular holidays such as Tisha b'Av, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur.[35] Many important Classical *payyetanim*, including Judah, Shimon bar Megas, and most famously Qillir, composed works modeled on Yannai's compositions. His poems stand out both for their complex form and their complicated content. As a poet, Yannai drew more intensely and allusively on rabbinic traditions than the poetry of previous generations did. At the same time, however, he was highly original not only in form but in content. Indeed, while much work remains to be done before definitive conclusions can be offered, it is possible that Yannai's exegesis, rather than merely echoing more widespread traditions and methods of aggadah, may well have influenced later prose exegetes; some of Yannai's original interpretations (or, at least, interpretations attested only in Yannai's works) appear in prose *midrashim* from much later dates. The precise mechanism by which this happened remains subject to diverse interpretations, but the commonalities tantalize. Yannai was, in short, a trendsetter in terms of form, style, and content.

The poetic form most associated with Yannai—the *qedushta* (plural, *qedushtaʾot*), which embellishes the first three benedictions of the Amidah, "the prayer" *par excellence* of Judaism—became one of the most important genres in the following centuries. The origin of this type of poem is unknown. We do not know whether Yannai invented the *qedushta*, con-

34 See S. Spiegel, *Fathers of Piyyut: Texts and Studies toward a History of the Piyyut in Eretz Yisrael*, ed. M. Schmelzer (Jerusalem and New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996) [Hebrew]. For a presentation of a variety of texts that attest to Yannai's importance, from the Karaite Abu Yusuf al-Qirqisani to Ephraim of Bonn, see Israel Davidson, *Maḥzor Yannai*, xliii–xlix.

35 Yannai's formal innovations and their consequences for Hebrew poetics are explored in Chapter One.

36 For an intriguing hypothesis on the origin of the *qerova*—the larger genre to which Yannai's *qedushtaʾot* belong—see Aharon Mirsky, "The Origins of the Qerova," in *The Piyyut* (Magnes: Jerusalem, 1991), 86–92 [Hebrew]. See, too, E. Fleischer, "Towards a Solution of Some Fundamental Problems in the Structure of the Classical `Qedushta,'" in *Henoch Yalon Memorial Volume*, ed. E.Y. Kutscher, S. Lieberman, and M.Z. Kaddari (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1974), 444–70.

structed it out of diverse but existing styles of poetry which he combined into a single new form, or whether he followed an established poetic structure of which earlier exemplars simply didn't survive.[36] The essential structure of the *qedushta* was adapted to later styles of poetry, notably the genre called the *yotzer* (a poetic cycle adorning the blessings before the Shema), which became popular in Ashkenaz in the Middle Ages. Individual poems within the *qedushta* (which consists of nine or more individual poems, ranging from highly stylized "pattern poems" to unrhymed rhythmic prose) show signs of continuity with the simpler Hebrew poetry of the previous generations, such as that of Yose ben Yose, but also anticipates the intricate developments of medieval Ashkenazic Hebrew poetry.[37]

So influential was Yannai that Jewish tradition considered the most prolific, famous, and enduring Byzantine *payyetan*, Qillir, to be his student; a poet as great as Qillir could only have studied with the greatest poet of the previous generation. At the same time, tradition was also aware of Yannai's strange disappearance from the prayerbook. One legend, cited by Ephraim of Bonn (twelfth century C.E.), goes so far as to assert that Yannai's obscurity was intentionally enacted as punishment for his murder of Qillir in a fit of jealous rage.[38] More likely, Yannai's works simply became obsolete when the so-called "triennial" Torah cycle, for which his works were composed, was eventually replaced by the Babylonian annual cycle of Torah reading, which is still in place today.[39] Later poets and editors did not adapt

37 For examples of Yose ben Yose's work, with English translation, see Swartz and Yahalom, *Avodah*.

38 The legend is cited in Eliezer Landshuth, *Amudei ha-avodah: Reshimat rashe ha-paytanim u-meʿat mi-toldotehem al sedar alfabeta im mispar piyutehem ha-nimtsaʾim be-sifre tefilot* (Berlin: Bernstein, 1857–1862), 1:103. Israel Davidson also cites this tradition in his *Maḥzor Yannai*, xlix, as the next-to-last of the medieval sources on this poet. In Davidson's text, Ephraim of Bonn states: "[As for the hymn] `The firstborn who opened each womb (*onei pitrei raḥmatayim*),' the world states that its source is Rabbi Yannai, the teacher of Rabbi Eleazar berabbi Qillir, but throughout the region of Lombardy it is not said, because it is said about him that he was jealous of Rabbi Eleazar, his student, so he cast a scorpion into his shoe and killed him. May the Lord forgive all who say this about him if it is not true." This passage, in addition to preserving a colorful legend about Yannai, indicates an awareness of Yannai's authorship of the *qedushta* for Exod 12:29 ("And it came to pass at midnight") in at least some circles in the pre-modern period.

39 See Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 132–34; he notes that the Palestinian synagogue in twelfth-century Cairo still retained the triennial cycle (133). The "triennial" cycle used in many Conservative congregations is a variant of the Babylonian annual cycle, not a recreation of the old Palestinian-Jewish lectionary. Yannai's poems presume that the Torah is read over the course of three and a half to four years, in linear order; modern triennial cycles divide the Babylonian annual Torah portion into thirds, resulting in a non-linear reading of the

his works to a new context, and vigorous younger poets arose to fill the lacunae. Indeed, prior to the rediscovery of Yannai among the texts of the Cairo Genizah, the only extant work by this important poet was his *qedushta* for Exod 12:29 ("And it came to pass at midnight…" [ויהי בחצי הלילה]).[40] Otherwise, despite his importance and the vastness of his creative output (poems for every *sidra*—every Torah portion—of the triennial cycle and the festivals and holidays), Yannai was essentially lost.[41] Fashions changed and the piyyutim of Yannai—once the most influential trendsetter in the world of Hebrew poetry—had become passé.

Being "lost," however, may have served Yannai well in the end; the works of other poets, which remained parts of living liturgical traditions in various Jewish communities, were often edited over time—abbreviated, adapted, and reused to suit local liturgical norms and aesthetic ideals. Particularly as Hebrew receded in popularity and became a more remote "sacred language," opportunities for misunderstanding and mis-transmitting the piyyutim increased. Yannai's works, precisely because they became outmoded early on, were spared this fate. Furthermore, while Yannai's body of work is impressively complete, it is not overwhelming. In contrast, Qillir—one of the most prolific poets in the history of Hebrew—wrote a tremendous number of piyyutim, leaving behind such a vast body of work that scholars have yet to assemble a complete collection, let alone produce a critical edition of his *oeuvre*. Because Yannai's works were so well preserved and are so manageable in size, and because his historical and cultural context is so significant, he provides a unique yet representative point of entry into the field of Piyyut Studies.

Torah. For the text and calendar of the modern Conservative triennial lectionary, see http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/teshuvot/docs/19861990/eisenberg_triennial.pdf. In this work, I use the term *sidra* to distinguish the triennial Torah portion from the Babylonian *parashah*.

40 The first seven units of this poem were preserved in the Ashkenazi liturgy for Shabbat HaGadol, and in the seventh unit by itself. The hymn "And it came to pass at midnight" is included in the Passover Haggadah; the final two units of the piyyut appear only in Genizah manuscripts, and the final unit is fragmentary. The complete text of this *qedushta* can be found in Z. M. Rabinovitz, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai according to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentateuch and the Holidays*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1985–1987), I:296–304. A translation of the piyyut can be found in Sarason, "Midrash in the Liturgy," 485–90.

41 Davidson was the first to recognize and publish Yannai texts. See his *Maḥzor Yannai*. The first major edition of Yannai's corpus was published several decades later by Menachem Zulay as *The Liturgical Poems of Yannai: Collected from Geniza-Manuscripts and Other Sources* (Berlin: Shocken, 1938) [Hebrew]. Zulay also published important studies of Yannai's language and forms, as will be noted throughout this study.

The modern history of Yannai studies is intimately connected to the recovery of material from the Cairo Genizah. As noted above, Yannai is one of the great treasures to emerge from that vast and amazing storeroom. In 1919, Israel Davidson published *Maḥzor Yannai*—a slender volume containing eight Genizah fragments and supplemental poems.[42] It caused a stir in part because it indicated that piyyutim were composed at this early period for the weekly Sabbath service as well as the holidays, and thus, by extension, it revealed an appreciation for poetry among the Jews of Byzantine Palestine beyond what had previously been imagined. Almost exactly two decades later, the Schocken Institute for the Study of Medieval Hebrew poetry brought out Menachem Zulay's magnificent *Liturgical Poems of Yannai*, an almost complete edition of Yannai's works. It contained 138 piyyutim, albeit most of them fragmentary, and was one of the last Hebrew books published in Nazi Germany.[43] However, while Zulay provided a body of texts, he did not include commentaries, and it was Saul Lieberman, in *Ḥazzanut Yannai*, who provided a scholarly analysis of Yannai's resonances with rabbinic writings and determined the direction of scholarly study of Yannai in future decades. In the 1960s, Z. M. Rabinovitz followed Lieberman's lead and published *Halakhah and Aggadah in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai,* a book-length study of Yannai's relationship with classical midrashic and halakhic sources. At last, in the 1980s, Rabinovitz published his critical edition of Yannai's poetry—providing the current generation of scholars with the resources necessary to undertake a variety of in-depth studies. Thus the second century of Yannai scholarship begins.[44]

The Present Work

Our study of Yannai moves from the "small scale" of examining his poetry's language and forms to the "large scale" of its cultural and societal importance. It concludes with an examination of selected intriguing and important motifs. Along the way, important works of scholarship (in Hebrew as

42 Davidson, *Maḥzor Yannai.*

43 Zulay, *The Liturgical Poems of Yannai.*

44 Z. M. Rabinovitz, *Halakhah and Aggadah in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai* (Tel Aviv: Alexander Kohut, 1965) [Hebrew]; and *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai according to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentanteuch and the Holiday*s, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1985–87) [Hebrew]. For a discussion of Rabinovitz's edition of the Yannai corpus, see the "Issues of Text and Translation," below.

well as English) will be noted. Each chapter builds upon the previous, expanding and deepening the scope and range of analyses presented.

The first chapter approaches Yannai's *qedsuhtaʾot* as poetry, a medium in which form is primary. While it may seem obvious to study poetry *as poetry*, scholars have, by and large, neglected the artistic and aesthetic aspects of piyyutim. There was, in the scholarship, something of a sense that these poems were interesting for many reasons, but as poetry they were mediocre or worse—certainly not as lovely as the lyrics of the Hebrew poetry of Andalusia. Indeed, compared to the poetry of Shmuel HaNagid, Judah HaLevi, and Moses ibn Ezra, the classical piyyutim can appear clumsy, long, and willfully obscure. If, however, piyyutim like Yannai's are taken at face value—accepted in principle as meaningful performative pieces reflecting an aesthetic different from our own—then significant artistic merit becomes manifest.

An understanding of a *qedushta*'s intricate structure and its rhetorical effects is vital for a full appreciation of Yannai's artistry. Like a symphony, a *qedushta*'s artistic power and emotional effects emerge cumulatively from the totality of the complicated whole, although each of the component parts of the lengthy poem possesses its own integrity. Indeed, it may be that some units possess a distinctive history; the unit called a *rahit*, in particular, often stands out for both its formal artistry and its resonance with midrashic techniques of exegesis. Furthermore, because *qedushtaʾot* were composed for a liturgical setting, these poems by definition engaged an audience, and that aspect of their composition must also be considered—the ways the poems drew the community into the story, into the performance, into the experience. Piyyutim were, after all, not abstract works to be studied, but intense textual phenomena that were to be lived; their artistry is theatrical as well as literary. The poet mediated his listeners' experience at the same time that he constructed it. Precisely because the poetry operates at so many levels, the poet's role must be understood as similarly complex. In many ways, the poet fills the role once held by prophets and priests, but he does so from what seems to be a rabbinic vantage point.

The topic of the second chapter—payyetanic language—is already a very well researched area. Peculiarities in grammar, syntax, and rhetoric were among the first topics to attract attention to these works and to invite scholarly argument, even as the poetics of the piyyutim generated only peripheral interest. The purpose of the essay in this volume is not to rep-

licate or translate the important work done by German and Israeli scholars but to complement their studies by examining Yannai's Genesis *qedushtaʾot* from a more idiosyncratic perspective, in which the performative effects of his use of biblical language are placed in the foreground.

This approach will hopefully open the texts up in a new way to readers perhaps not expert in the field of Hebrew language but interested in questions of why grammatical irregularities and allusions may be important and how vocabulary can be particularly charged. Intertextuality is particularly important at this level; quotation, allusion, and pun were all essential tools in constructing piyyutim, but are often among the most difficult for readers to appreciate. The present treatment attempts to convey a sense of the strange richness and evocative depth of Yannai's language, which works at many levels simultaneously and over time. In truth, with the piyyutim, there will always be new notes to hear, new resonances to catch; the footnotes in the translations provide only tinny echoes of this aural richness, but they are important for conveying to less sensitive modern ears the richness inherent in these works.

Of course, the experiential element and allusive language of the piyyutim lead to questions of context, the focus of the third chapter. The material at the heart of this chapter—the rise of a rich rabbinic culture in the context of Christian Byzantine society—could fill volumes. Yannai's *qedushtaʾot* offer a lens through which this complex period can be examined. They provide a glimpse of an important aspect of Jewish life from literary, artistic, and societal perspectives. His poems are important cultural artifacts, and their richness emerges with even greater clarity when they are regarded as part not only of the ancient synagogue, but also of a wider poetic and artistic revolution in the Byzantine world—one that was played out on the stage of religious ritual and belief as much as in the political sphere.

Just as Yannai mediated the experience of the divine and the sense of the text for his community, he interpreted their experience of the larger world on both a small and larger scale, both as a participant in and a shaper of the culture and society of Late Antiquity. His works, Janus-faced, looked inward to the Jewish prayer experience and outward to the world in which the Jewish community lived—in this case, a Christian world experiencing its own transformative epoch. The relationship between piyyut and early Christian hymnography—and traditions of poetic exegesis—has the potential to be a particularly rich field of study. The poetry of these two com-

munities hints not only at the internal experience of each group but the tense and complicated interactions between them.

The final chapter presents six mini-essays that highlight the significance of these poems as literary works, liturgical texts, and cultural artifacts by considering very specific facets of their content. The first piece explores the relationship of Yannai's works to *Hekhalot* mystical traditions and considers the prominence of angelic figures in his works; the second considers the concept of "holiness" that permeates his works and nuances its liturgical function; the third examines the poet's theology and how he depicts God; the fourth delineates the omnipresent theme of exile and restoration that runs throughout Yannai's poetry; the next examines the depictions of non-Jews in these poems, both negative and positive; and the final essay studies the ways in which he crafts female and feminine characters.

The selected topics are not exhaustive; other threads could be traced just as well, and the ones presented here developed much further. Ideally, these miniature essays will whet appetites to read and study more. Their very incompleteness suggests the wealth of research yet to be done. Indeed, the creation of such an awareness is one goal of this project.

A comprehensive study of Yannai's entire corpus exceeds the confines of a single volume, so I have chosen to concentrate specifically on his piyyutim for Genesis. The Genesis *qedushtaʾot*—there are thirty-one in total, many complete but others fragmentary—display a representative range of techniques, styles, themes, and motifs while highlighting the poet's presentation of some of the most familiar biblical narratives. The limited size of the corpus also makes it possible to include translations. Given this study's interest in understanding Jewish perception of Christianity and the Byzantine Empire, the Genesis material is particularly fruitful because of the prominence of Esau (understood allegorically as Rome and identified, by Yannai's day, with Byzantine Christendom) in the biblical base text. A study of Yannai's piyyutim for the High Holidays and festivals also has great appeal—these works are lengthier than routine Shabbat *qedushtaʾot* and, as a result, contain a rich repository of exposition and exegesis. Their irregularity, however, conflicts with the introductory nature of this work. The routine must be explored before the exceptions can be appreciated.[45]

45 The volume planned to follow this will focus on the place of the Song of Songs–a text that rivals Genesis in terms of its rich history of interpretation–in the context of the Byzantine synagogue.

In sum, Genesis is an important text with a unique (and frequently extensive) history of interpretation in both Judaism and Christianity. When introducing the rich world of piyyut to a diverse audience, it makes sense to begin with a familiar text and well-known stories—to begin "at the beginning."

Issues of Text and Translation

R. Judah said: If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar;
if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer and a libeler.
b. Kid. 49a

Translation is the art of failure.
Umberto Eco

The translations that constitute the second part of this book work in concert with the first; where the chapters lay out broad points and concepts, the translations provide lengthy, concrete examples of specific compositions. Translating Yannai's *qedushta'ot* represented a profound challenge, one that this author undertook with no small amount of trepidation. Poetry is best translated by poets—a profession to which the present writer has no pretense. Furthermore, the very features that make Yannai's poetry so impressive—his delightful word play, deft puns, learned allusions, and clever wit—defy attempts to render them in another language; key elements of the works can survive translation but the whole cannot be truly communicated. Readers adept at Hebrew may well argue with specific choices made in these translations, but such is the nature of the endeavor—indeed, the original Hebrew of the poems is presented here in order to facilitate the study of these works by those with the language skills to read them in their original language. Ultimately, the translations should be understood as a bridge into the world of the Hebrew piyyutim; it is my hope that even readers with relatively rudimentary Hebrew skills—in particular, familiarity with biblical Hebrew—will, with practice and a biblical concordance, be able to grasp the brilliance of these works with a minimum of mediation.

The translations presented here balance a variety of competing demands: first, they strive to convey faithfully the *content* of the originals, replicating insofar as possible the vocabulary, puns, allusions, and quotations that texture the Hebrew; second, they attempt to convey the *sound* and *sense* of the original by drawing on the rich vocabulary of the English

language; finally, they are intended to be readable as free-standing works of literature, although in no way can the English versions replace the works of Hebrew art they endeavor to convey.

In order to give a sense of the complexity and richness of these compositions, the translations are accompanied by annotations, often benefiting from the work of earlier scholars of Yannai as discussed below, plus my own brief commentaries, which highlight some important or intriguing elements of that particular work. In some cases, these annotations and commentaries link the individual texts to the book's introductory essays or to other translated poems. In other cases, they stand alone. This structure recognizes that some readers will begin with the major essays, turning to the translations for additional depth and specificity. Others will begin with the translations, looking secondarily to the essays or to other poems for a sense of context, and still others will dip into each section without any particular system, moving back and forth between the two halves of the book.

Sources and Editions

The Hebrew text presented here is based on the version provided by the Historical Hebrew Dictionary project (*Maʾagarim*). The Maʾagarim database offers the best, most accurate, most complete, and most current readings of the extant manuscripts.[1] In order to make the text as approachable as possible, the Hebrew text presented here begins with and adapts from that in the electronic database. In particular, technical sigla used to indicate lacunae, corrections, uncertain readings, and copyists' additions have been dispensed with; manuscript abbreviations have, for the most part, been completed; extremely damaged passages have been omitted; and textual variants are noted only when they are highly significant. In addition, while the Maʾagarim text is unvocalized (although the database itself reflects vocalization extant in the manuscripts) due to the technical challenges of creating the electronic database, the present edition has been vocalized except in cases where the reading is dubious. Those wishing to

1 The Historical Hebrew Dictionary Project, accessible (subscription required) via: http://hebrew-treasures.huji.ac.il. I am extremely grateful to the Project staff, in particular Dr. Benjamin Elizur, for permission to use their texts in this volume and for their assistance in working with the material.

understand the full complexity of manuscript work beneath the surface of this edition are encouraged to make use of the apparatus of the Maʾagarim database, which contains a wealth of information about the manuscripts used as well as indicating the textual difficulties smoothed over in the present edition.[2]

The Maʾagarim database text represents a significant advance from the text available in the standard, and more accessible, critical edition of Yannai's work published in the 1980s by Zvi Meir Rabinovitz.[3] In particular, many lacunae and uncertain readings in Rabinovitz's edition have been completed on the basis of manuscripts unavailable to Rabinovitz, at times to the extent of entire units (for example, Poem Six and a *rahit* for the Gen 1:1 *qedushta*). Rabinovitz's volume is itself an updated version of the groundbreaking volume by Menachem Zulay published in 1938.[4] Due to the proliferation of discoveries from the Cairo Genizah, Rabinovitz was able to consult more (and more complete) manuscripts than Zulay had at his disposal. Furthermore, Rabinovitz—whose previous major work examined the relationship of Yannai's compositions to rabbinic and biblical writings[5]—supplied each poem with substantial annotations, paying particular attention to the parallels between the piyyutim and other sources. While his interpretations are not always persuasive, all scholars of Yannai owe Rabinovitz a debt for his efforts. References to Rabinovitz's edition of Yannai appear as "**R**" in the present text's annotations, and while this present volume does not include even a fraction of his ample annotations and

2 See also Joseph Yahalom, *Palestinian Vocalised Piyyut Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This volume focuses on those piyyut manuscripts which employed the superlinear vocalization system, and includes many plates with photographs of manuscripts.

3 Z. M. Rabinovitz, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1985–87).

4 M. Zulay, *The Liturgical Poems of Yannai.* This work built on the pioneering work of I. Davidson, who published nine of Yannai's *qedushtaʾot* from the Cairo Genizah twenty years earlier (*Maḥzor Yannai*). Zulay's volume is a remarkable scholarly accomplishment; he assembled 138 poems (many fragmentary) from the vast quantity of Genizah fragments. Saul Lieberman's *Ḥazzanut Yannai*, published a few years after Zulay's volume appeared, delineates the relationship between Yannai's poetry and rabbinic writings, and it serves as the first "commentary" on Zulay's edition of Yannai. All later commentators on Yannai, including Rabinovitz and Nachum M. Bronznick, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yannai*, 2 vols. (Rubin Mass: Jerusalem, 2000, Supp. 2005), cite Zulay and Lieberman frequently.

5 Rabinovitz, *Halakhah and Aggadah.*

commentary, the existence of his critical edition made undertaking the translation element of this project, particularly in the early stages, feasible.

Texts as complicated as these poems lend themselves to ever more detailed annotation, and readers of Yannai can now benefit as well from Nahum Bronznick's two Hebrew volumes of annotations. I have cited his works as "**B1**" and "**B2**," respectively.[6] Bronznick took the Rabinovitz edition as his starting point, noting that while Rabinovitz's volumes were "unquestionably of great value," they nonetheless left some unclear passages unexplained, some biblical allusions unreferenced, and some midrashic sources unidentified.[7] With these shortcomings in mind, Bronznick undertook a massive project: the completion of a commentary on Rabinovitz's volumes—poem by poem, not once, but twice. Bronznick's first volume represents his initial review of the poems, in which he supplies notes on sources, allusions, and interpretations as well as, based on both manuscript readings and learned conjecture, emendations and completions for lacunae. Five years after his initial commentary was published, Bronznick deemed his own work in need of supplementation and revision, resulting in the publication of his second volume, in which he revisited his initial commentary and added even more notes, clarifications, and readings. While Bronzick's commentaries assume a different edition of Yannai than that employed here, they remain eminently useful and his interpretations, annotations, and restorations are frequently noted in the annotations of the present edition. In many places, the Maʾagarim database concurs with or even confirms Bronzick's proposed readings.

In addition to the substantial resources provided by the Maʾagarim database, Rabinovitz's critical edition, and Bronznick's commentary on Rabinovitz, Shalom Spiegel's *Fathers of Poetry*, edited by Menachem Schmelzer, contains annotations of a number of Yannai fragments (the texts themselves are, with one exception, included in the Maʾagarim database), and his contributions have been noted wherever possible.[8] My

6 Bronznick, *The Liturgical Poetry of Yannai*. While in the preface to **B2**, Bronzick states, "[T]his volume, coupled with the previous one and taken together with most of the comments by Zvi M. Rabinovitz… make for a comprehensive commentary that will enable even the non-expert to gain an enlightened insight and delightful appreciation of Yannai's multifaceted liturgical poetry," obviously this only holds true if the "non-expert" reader has access to scholarly modern Hebrew.

7 English preface to **B1**.

8 Spiegel, *Fathers of Piyyut*. The piyyutim of Yannai included in this volume are: Gen 17:1, 38:1, and 44:18. Spiegel also includes a very brief fragment of the *qedushah* (Poem Nine)

work benefited also from the opportunities I had to read many of the *qedushtaʾot* in their original manuscripts, particularly those housed at Cambridge University. While the various tools now available make Yannai one of the easiest poets to study if one can work in modern Hebrew, inspecting the originals was invaluable for conveying the reality beneath the tidy surface of the various printed editions.

Rabinovitz and Bronznick both offer extensive annotation and discussion of Yannai's poetry—between the two authors, almost every line receives attention—with Bronznick often nuancing Rabinovitz or, in **B2**, his own earlier reading. While I have drawn on the works of both scholars, I have not limited myself to their annotations, but freely added notes and interpretations of my own as I saw necessary or useful—always with an eye towards those insights that will be most engaging to this volume's intended audience and relevant to the discussions in the introductory essays.

It is important to note that the present Hebrew edition is eclectic. Upon rare occasion it differs from the Maʾagarim version, favoring a reading suggested by other scholars or reflecting my own inspection of the manuscripts; such alterations to the Maʾagarim text are indicated in the notes. Likewise, when I accept a line-completion supplied by **R**, **B1**, or **B2**, I use square brackets to indicate the lacuna and reflect the source of the additional text in the notes; nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that these often reflect "educated guesses" rather than actual readings of the manuscripts. In cases where the Maʾagarim text itself contains variants, requiring that one wording be chosen over another based on variations preserved in manuscripts, the present edition represents a judgment as to the "best" reading. Likewise, when manuscripts differ in their lists of quoted intertexts, I have included *all* the potential verses. In places where there are multiple viable but distinctive readings, I have left the Maʾagarim text intact and noted alternative readings (and their translations) in the footnotes. In two cases—the *silluq* for Gen 1:1 and the second *rahit* for Gen 48:1—I have included passages whose attribution to Yannai has been cast into doubt. I do this out of deference to earlier published editions (which remain in many ways more accessible than the Maʾagarim database) and because of the poetic merits of those two units, but with due caution.[9]

for a *qedushta* for Gen 27:1 (p. 59), but as that passage does not appear in Rabinovitz's edition or in the Maʾagarim database, I elected not to include that fragment in this edition.

9 This edition also does not include the *qedushta* for Gen 42:1 which is included in Zulay's edition (pp. 59–62) but is absent from Rabinovitz's edition and considered anonymous by

Method of Translation

Abundant in deft allusions and fleeting puns, Yannai's piyyutim are written in an idiosyncratic variation of post-biblical Hebrew that possesses a distinctive cadence and grammar. English simply cannot replicate the consonance, assonance, rhythm, and rhyme of these works, let alone characteristic formal elements such as acrostics or rhyme. Yet, to publish the essays without the accompanying texts and translations would deny readers a sense of the sheer scale of Yannai's output, let alone the texture and variety of his piyyutim.

My approach in translating these poems is, thus, as eclectic as the poems themselves. In some cases, the essential element of a stich, line, or stanza derives from intertextuality and allusion; in others, the primary features are repeated words, refrains, or rhetorical flourishes that embellish lines focused primarily on narrative content. In each case, the translation emphasizes what I believe to be the poem's dominant element. While some formal features, notably acrostics and rhyme, simply cannot be reproduced in English, other elements (consonance, alliteration, repetition, parallelism) can survive translation in some fashion.

Examples:

In some places, the poet emphasizes content over form; that is, while there are formal features within a stanza (acrostics, rhyme, etc.), Yannai's main objective seems to be narration—moving the action of the story forward or giving readers clear, substantial information. These passages are often the easiest to translate because they are the most like prose. The final lines of Poem Six of Yannai's *qedushta* to Gen 38:1 illustrate this tension between form and content and its resolution. The original can be transliterated as:

> **Q**idshah shem tamar haqedoshah // asher kamhah lezeraʿ qedushah
> **R**imat ve-ʿastah qedeshah // ve-hitsliaḥ darkaḥ qedoshah
> **Sh**imrah almenutah penei Adonai // [ve-reyqam] lo hashivah Adonai
> **T**aʾavah lehagziaʿ be-ʿam Adonai // ki hem zeraʿ beyraḥ Adonai
>
> (Poem Six, lines 41–44)

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the Maʾagarim database. Two badly damaged texts that do appear to be by Yannai—part of the *qedushta* for Gen 24:1 (beyond the *qedushah* which is included here) and various passages from the *qedushta* for Gen 46:28—were, reluctantly, not included in the present edition due to their fragmentary states.

which we have translated as:

> Tamar hallowed the Holy Name // for she hoped for holy seed
> She harlequinned and played the "holy" harlot // and her holy path He prospered
> She preserved her widowhood before the Lord // the Lord did not return her empty
> She longed to grow the garden of the Lord // for they are the seed the Lord has blessed

These two stanzas are typical of the style of Yannai's Poem Six.[10] In terms of form, each line is relatively lengthy (6–8 words per line), embeds the letter of the alphabetical acrostic (here, *qof, resh, shin*, and *tav*, respectively), includes internal and end-rhyme, and employs repeated words/roots. At the same time, in term of content, the poet here uses his format for exposition; he is retelling and interpreting the biblical story.

The English version of this passage does not attempt to replicate two of the most basic formal features of the stanzas: acrostic or rhyme. To do so would result in stilted English and awkward idiom—the opposite of Yannai's clear narrative exposition of the lines. Although at times I have resorted to including the transliteration of key words in the body of the poem (see, for example, the end of Poem One in the *qedushta* for Gen 9:18), English is, quite often, sufficiently flexible to permit the repetition of key words/roots. We see this here in the translation of the two stanzas quoted above: "holy/hallow" (*q-d-sh*) in the first and God's name in the second. The translation does not attempt to replicate the placement of the theme words within the line, but the simple repetition of the words conveys at least some of the sound-play of the original. Furthermore, in the first of the quoted stanzas, every effort was made to include words that begin with the letter "h"—not because the Hebrew original used a single letter so consistently but because this consonance suggests the rich and resonant sound of the original. Thus, the word *rimat*, literally "deceived," is translated as "harlequinned"—a neologism coined both for its sound-play and because the image of the harlequin conveys the element of costume involved in Tamar's seductive deceit. In some cases, two words—e.g., the phrase "holy harlot"—are necessary to capture the nuance of the Hebrew *qedeshah* (lit. a "holy woman" but with connotations of

10 See discussion in Chapter One.

sacred prostitution). In short, the English does not replicate the poetry of the original, but it attempts to create a kind of poetic idiom of its own, while faithfully rendering the sense of the Hebrew.

Translating passages where both form and content are important proved the most challenging, particularly when both elements rely heavily on the resonant language of biblical allusion or when the words themselves convey multiple resonances simultaneously. The following example indicates the challenge of translating passages where allusions and sound-play are almost as important as narrative content. The stanza appears in the first unit (the *magen*) of Yannai's *qedushta* for Gen 16:1, and it represents a relatively typical line where biblical allusions must be preserved and elements of the sound-play retained or recreated. The lines are transliterated as:

> **H**aytah kemo gan naʿul // **v**e-ḥatumah kemo gal naʿul
> **Z**aʿaqah ve-dafqah kapot ha-manʿul // **ḥ**anun leḥonenah mibaʿalah ʿul
>
> (Poem One, lines 5–6)

which we have translated as:

> She was like a garden locked // and she was sealed like fountain locked
> She cried out and knocked upon the latches of the lock // O Gracious One to grant her from her husband, a child.

Although the original Hebrew is deceptively simple, much is lost in translation. For example, the English version sacrifices the acrostic (the embedded letters *heh*, *vav*, *zayin*, and *ḥet*), the rhyme (*ʿul*), the rhythm of the four-word stichs, and the richly resonant sound of the alternating "ah" and "oo" vowels. It also fails to replicate the thick sound of the *ʿayin*, which subtly emphasizes the sound *naʿul* ("locked") that concludes the first three stichs, and the unexpected final word, *ʿul* ("child")—the potent semantic antithesis of Sarai's "locked" (infertile) status.

All elements of form are not lost in translation, however. The English rendering does convey the presence of "lock/locked" in each stich of the first three stichs (if not the pun on "child," which concludes the stanza), and this lends the English a cadence that is faithful at least to the outlines of the Hebrew original. Similarly, the phrase translated here as "latches of the lock" creates alliteration not found in the Hebrew (*kapot ha-manʿul*), but this sound helps suggest the general sense of alliteration present in the

original. Similarly, we are fortunate that in English "knock" and "lock" rhyme, as this also creates a resonance with Yannai's Hebrew version. Even if *naʿul* ("lock") and *dafqah* ("knock") do not actually rhyme, other words in the lines *do* rhyme. In sum, the English does not try to replicate the actual *form* of the Hebrew—as if that were possible—but rather to create an English work faithful to the *sense* and the *ambiance* of the Hebrew.

The translation also anticipates several of the key *intertexts* and *subtexts* that undergird the language of the stanza. In places where the biblical verse is quoted in the body of the poem as an intertext[11] or by the present author in the footnotes, the translation of the biblical verse harmonizes with the language of the poem, so as to obscure the relationship as little as possible. Here the key verse, cited as an intertext following the unit, is Song 4:12: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a fountain locked, a spring sealed." This biblical language is readily apparent in the language of the poetic stanza: the "garden," "fountain," "locked" and "sealed" are all present, albeit reorganized to create the end-rhyme and acrostic that the poet needs. More subtly, however, this stanza relies on the language of two verses not cited as intertexts but included among the footnotes: Song 5:2 ("Hark, my beloved knocks!"), only with the poet reversing the genders and Sarai knocking at God's door rather than the male lover knocking at his lover's gates; and Song 5:5 ("I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the latches of the lock"), where the lock is opened, but too late. When God opens the lock, however, it is not—even for the ninety-year-old Sarai—too late.

Additional brief examples illustrate our efforts to preserve the poet's allusiveness while also conveying the sense of his lines. In the second unit of his *qedushta* for Gen 31:3, we have translated Yannai as:

> Pure women, and wise, free of disdain // the pure one, in his wisdom,
> called them to council
>
> (Poem Two, lines 11–12)

This language emphasizes the tact and subtlety necessary for Jacob and his wives to successfully deceive the vengeful Laban. It praises Rachel, Leah, and Jacob in terms of "wisdom" (literally, "discretion" or "modesty," from the root *ts-n-ʿ*). This line difficult to translate because it relies on a verse

11 The first three units of a *qedushta* are followed by lists of biblical verses quoted in full, which I have called "intertexts." See the discussion in Chapter One.

quoted subsequently as an intertext: Mic 6:8, which is usually translated as "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord seeks from you: nothing except doing justice, keeping loyalty, and walking humbly (*ve-hatsneʿa lekhet*) with your God." In this case, in order to convey the resonance between the poetic line and its biblical subtext, I resorted to altering the translation of the biblical verse (a change significant enough to be mentioned in the notes) in order to highlight the intertextuality. This translation of Micah, while unusual, reflects the way that the biblical language would have been "heard" in the context of the poetic stichs that preceded it. Among all the other things this line does, it offers an interpretation of Micah in which "humility" is transformed into wisdom—not only articulating but enacting the deftness and discretion needed to complete successfully a boldly necessary scheme. The awkward translation highlights Yannai's exegetical move.

In some cases, English barely manages to convey the richness of Yannai's language. He alludes to biblical texts, but they are read through the lens of rabbinic interpretation—either exclusively or in a way that creates meaningful ambiguity. We see this in the *qedushta* to Gen 27:28, where we find a line that I have rendered as:

> In cunning he came / yet he did not—such a sin!—con him;
> but as for the con-man, who came with his "game":
> "The con-man shall not enjoy his game."
>
> (Poem Five, lines 3–5).

These lines are, *in situ*, amply footnoted. As I note in the commentary to this passage, the translation "cunning" (*mirmah*) attempts to capture the ambiguity of the Hebrew: "deceitfulness" (as in the biblical text itself) and "wisdom" (as in, for example, the targumic rendering of the verse). Similarly, the Hebrew underlying the word "game" could also have been translated as "prey"—but that translation would have sacrificed the grimly serious "playful" nuance of the original. It is a happy coincidence that, in so many places, English is able to supply words that capture at least some of the same complicated nuances as Yannai's deft and clever Hebrew.

And yet, it is impossible to render in English the ambiguity of the verb in the first stich: הובא (pronounced "*huva*'"). On the one hand, this verb seems obviously passive (a *hofal*), meaning "he was brought" and suggesting that Rebecca brought Jacob in (and that she is therefore the agent of guilt). At the same time, in rabbinic and payyetanic idiom, the *hofal* can

have an active connotation, which would implicate Jacob directly. Furthermore, it is possible that in an oral context, sixth-century listeners may have heard the active phrase הוא בא (*hu ba'*). We chose to translate the ambiguous term simply "he came." In the end, the translation reflects the overall sense of the passage, and notes must convey some of the knottier nuances.

Finally, there are numerous passages where Yannai truly exploits the formal possibilities of Hebrew to their richest potential. In these places (particularly the units called "*r'hitim,*" which are often intricately patterned[12]), where form is so much a part of the unit's structure, English cannot adequately render even a fraction of the Hebrew's complexity. Nonetheless, I have attempted, as much as English would allow, to write lines that convey some of the sensation of the original, even if ultimately footnotes are necessary to understand the true complexity of a passage. Indeed, while English does not lend itself as easily to the rhymes and resonances of Hebrew, it is capable of its own rich and playful sound. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate both the challenge of Yannai's Hebrew in such passages and the techniques used to retain some elements of the original in translation.

The first *rahit* for Yannai's *qedushta* for Gen 11:1 employs a structural device in which he repeats the final word of one line as the first word of the next, within the context of a densely alliterative acrostic. A transliteration of the first three lines (reflecting the letters *alef, bet,* and *gimmel*) reads as follows:

> (alef) *aḥadim aḥudim imrah aḥat avilei adamah* ***bizu***
> (bet) ***bizu*** bevitaḥon bituyam beʾomram benot birah ***gevohah***
> (gimmel) ***gevohah*** gibru garei gayʾ gidufei gaʾavah ***dibru***
> (dalet) **dibru**…
>
> (Poem Seven[1], lines 1–3)

We have translated this as:

> Unified, united, one of speech, fools of the earth, **they disparaged**
> **They disparaged** Him who tested their speech when they said, "Let us build a castle **lofty**"
> **Loftily**, haughtily—they thought heroically—those valley-dwellers, arrogant blasphemers, **they spoke**
> **They spoke**…

12 See the discussion of the form of the *rahit* in Chapter One.

Obviously, English cannot replicate Yannai's intricate acrostic, in which each line contains six words beginning with the same letter and a seventh word that begins with the next letter (i.e., AAAAAAB – BBBBBBC – CCCCCCD, and so forth). With some effort, however, I was able to recreate the "daisy-chain" effect (the technical term is "anadiplosis") of linking the final word of each line with the first word of the next. My efforts were not perfect. "Lofty" is not identical to "loftily," but close enough to suggest the nature of the original.

Translating the *rehitim*, in particular, led me to push English to its limits, and at times I was willing to present somewhat stilted English in order to convey, however roughly, the dramatic intensity of the original language. Thus, the English grammar of the second *rahit* (unit 7^2) for Gen 44:18 is somewhat stilted because the form of the unit—with its reuse of the biblical verse's language "please… do not…"—is the most important single element to preserve. To an extent, the awkwardness of the English mirrors a certain awkwardness in the Hebrew. For example, the eighth line in Hebrew states:

Bi adoni sinʾah / al tisnʾa // Bi adoni ʿalilah / al taʿas

(Poem Seven^2, lines 15–16)

This is translated as:

Please, my lord, hatred — *do not* feel;
Please, my lord, a wicked deed — *do not* do!

Of course, it would be more straightforward simply to say, "Please, my lord, do not feel hatred; please, my lord, do not do this wicked deed," but such a translation would obscure the pattern in Yannai's language integral to his rhetoric.

Even more difficult were those units where a single word forms the keystone of a composition, such as in the first *rahit* of the *qedushta* for Gen 32:4. There, the theme word "Edom" (from the root *ʾ-d-m*, "red") becomes the basis for a complicated meditation on Edom (i.e., Rome), its actions, and its fate. In some cases, it proved simply impossible to translate the nuances, such as the line giving voice to messianic yearnings that alludes to Song 5:10 ("my beloved is radiant and ruddy"—*dodi tsaḥ va-ʾadom*). The poetic line is translated in the present volume as: "We yearn for You, O Beloved, radiant and red (*ʾadom*)" (Poem Seven^1, line 11); while in the biblical context, "ruddy" is the more pleasing translation, in the

context of this poetic unit, repetition of the word "red," despite some awkwardness, conveys clearly the repetition of the theme-word. In some cases, I had to resort to parentheses to convey the sound-play of Edom – *ʾadom*/red in the body of the piyyut; it was impossible to translate both the sound and the sense—both the form and the content—without recourse to somewhat awkward mechanisms.

In other places, English can more successfully recreate some elements of the form of the underlying Hebrew. For example, in the first line of Poem Four for the *qedushta* to Gen 49:1, the Hebrew is a string of passive participles, all of which convey the idea of concealment and hiddenness; transliterated, it would read:

> *kamus ve-satum / ganuz ve-ḥatum // tamun ve-safun / ʿamus ve-tsafun*
> (Poem Four, lines 1–2)

In English, this appears as:

> Suppressed and sealed / hidden and concealed // secreted and covered / closeted and veiled

To be sure, the passive participles in English lack the strong, regular pattern of the Hebrew form, but English morphology is sufficiently patterned on its own that it lends the translation an organic rhythm of its own. Furthermore, English contains a sufficiently rich vocabulary to supply the needed synonyms for the concept of concealment, thereby permitting relatively "literal" rendering of the line's content (unlike, for example, the lack of synonyms for "lion" in English, which hampered translation of the *qedushta* to Gen 44:18, where many different terms for the king of beasts are employed). The English line ("Suppressed and sealed…" etc.) has its own cleverness and sound-play—a richness of language in English that echoes the Hebrew text it strives to render.

As these brief examples demonstrate, translators of Yannai must balance a variety of delicate demands. They should create, above all, clear and idiomatic English texts that can be comprehended on their own terms. At the same time, translations must provide a sense of the original—for example, introducing alliteration even where it is not present in the Hebrew because this feature is so important generally in Yannai's works. Likewise, occasionally awkward translations may be allowed in order to capture biblical allusions or intricate forms. And, at times, of course, only the generous addition of footnotes and the occasional parentheses enable the reader

to appreciate the full complexity of Yannai's verse—but this is true for readers of the Hebrew editions of his texts, as well.

Yannai's poetry is as lovely and lyrical as it is complex. Yannai's voice can conjure sensations of majestic grandeur and delicate grief, thunderous apocalypse and fragile hope. The rich sound and texture of these works ultimately defy translation. Yet, it is my hope that through these texts and translations—as imperfect as they are—the beauty of Yannai's words will be perceived.

Chapter One

"Anatomy of a Qedushta:" How Form Shapes Meaning and Meaning Shapes Form

"My verses are a prophecy, and what's more,
they are written in meter."
Judah Halevi

At first glance, the *qedushta*—the genre of piyyut most closely associated with Yannai—looks like a complex and perplexing form. A complete *qedushta* presents its audience with an elliptical, elaborate poetic cycle: it is not one poem but a composition of nine or more interrelated but distinctive units which occur in a fixed order. These poems are called: (1) the *magen*, (2) the *meḥayyeh*, (3) the *meshallesh*, (4) "Poem Four," (5) the *asiriyyah*, (6) "Poem Six," (7) the *rahit* or *r'hitim*, (8) the *silluq*, and (9) the *qedushah*. Written not in a single style but in multiple modes, diverse structures, and shifting voices, these nine units blend biblical allusions with rabbinic exegesis and contemporary commentary, all in a liturgical context; somehow the anthology of texts constitutes a singular whole. Allusive rhymed benedictions anticipate the content of longer, more expansive recapitulations and extensions; terse, formally intricate pattern poems abut rhythmic but unrhymed prose narrations.

The complicated *qedushta* structure, with its dynamic repetitions and creative juxtapositions, can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives: formal and functional, most obviously, but liturgical and theological as well. Through the combination of poetic diversity and synagogue setting, the poems that constitute a complete *qedushta* create additional layers of meaning beyond the words themselves. Poetic structures can generate effects with theological implications as well as aesthetic effects; traditions that are received one way in a prose midrash may be deeply transformed by "translation" into a performed poetic piece. In Yannai's piyyutim, form, content, and context are fully intertwined. As much as theology informs the poetry, poetry shapes the theology, all in the realm of public worship.

Form is, by definition, essential to meaning in any kind of poetry; form is what ultimately distinguishes poetry from prose. In a genre as complex as the *qedushta*, questions concerning the relationship between form and meaning simply become more urgent. What are the effects of the *qedushta*'s many repetitions and changes in pace? Are formal features such as patterned repetitions and amplifications primarily aesthetic or do they offer clues about synagogue performance? How does liturgical poetry differ from prose examples of exegesis and prayer? How do we locate the *qedushta* in the context of Hebrew poetry in general? And above all, what are the distinguishing characteristics of the nine units that make up a single *qedushta*? While many important themes and motifs emerge when we analyze discrete facets of these poems closely, only a holistic exploration of the complete *qedushta* cycle as liturgical poetry reveals the true complexity of these compositions. *Qedushtaʾot* must be studied much like symphonies, where attention to the parts is balanced by attention to the whole.

Anatomy of a *Qedushta:* A General Overview

The *qedushta* (pl. *qedushtaʾot*) is a subset of the poetic genre of the *qerova.*[1] The term "*qerova*" encompasses a variety of early poetic forms embellishing the central prayer of Judaism, the Amidah. On the Sabbath and Festi-

1 The term *qerova* probably relates the idea that the prayer leader draws close to (דקרב, in Aramaic) the ark or lectern; see *Mid. Ps* 19:2, which refers to the prayer-leader as חזנא דקרב, "the cantor who approaches." It also recalls the biblical term *qorban*, which suggests that the poem could be perceived as a kind of offering like the Amidah, with the poet a kind of priest. *Qedushta* is a name that comes from the specific focus of the poem on the third benediction of the Amidah. The formal development of piyyut has received significant scholarly attention over the years, although not precisely from the literary-thematic perspective presented here. The definitive classic in the field remains E. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975) [Hebrew]. On *the qedushta* form in specific, see also Fleischer's essays, "On the Antiquity of the Qedushta," *Ha-Sifrut* 2 (1971): 390–414 [Hebrew] and "Inquiries in the Structure of the Classical *Qedushta*," in *Proceedings of the* 5th *World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1969), 291–95 [Hebrew]. Also important are A. Mirsky's monograph *Formal Foundations of Piyyut* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985) [Hebrew] and, more briefly, his essay "Foundation of the Qerova," in *The Piyyut* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 86–92 [Hebrew]; other essays in this volume are also valuable. Likewise, the anthology of M. Zulay's writings, *Eretz Yisrael and Its Poetry,* ed. E. Hazan (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995) [Hebrew], contains classic essays that delineate the formal structures of piyyut, notably "The Genealogy of Piyyut in the Land of Israel" (95–125). More recently, the work of Michael Rand stands out, although his focus is on Qillir rather than Yannai; see in particular: M. Rand, "The *Seder Beriyot* in Byzantine-Era Piyyut," *JQR* 95 (2005): 667–83.

vals, the Amidah consists of seven blessings.[2] The term "*qedushta*," meanwhile, describes a poem embellishing only the Amidah's first three benedictions: the *avot* (God of the ancestors) prayer, the *gevurot* (God's might) prayer, and, in particular, the *qedushat ha-shem* (God's holiness) prayer.[3] As poetry, *qedushtaʾot* display a variety of distinctive rhythms, but compared to the later Jewish poets of Andalusia or the early hymns of the Christian tradition, such as those of Ephrem the Syrian and Romanos the Melodist, Yannai's works are not truly metrical.[4] Like the Christian hymns, however, it seems quite likely that Yannai's *qedushtaʾot* were, in some fashion, set to music—a hypothesis supported by the system of vocalization apparent in many manuscripts.[5] While many details of the actual recitation or performance of these works remain unknown (and perhaps unknowable), Yannai's poetry—particularly when read in light of other textual and material sources—offers tantalizing clues to those attempting to reconstruct the rituals of the Byzantine synagogue.

An examination of the structure of a *qedushta*—those details that enable us to identify its component parts even when only fragments are preserved—is the most important place to begin a larger study of the form.

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2 The Amidah (i.e., "standing prayer") is also called *ha-Tefillah* ("the prayer"—that is, the prayer *par excellence*) in rabbinic sources. For the history of the Amidah, I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 24–62, is the classic source; also important is J. Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*. More recently, see Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*. L. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) offers perspective that contrasts the cultural contexts of the Land of Israel and Babylonian Jewry. And, for a summary of recent discussions in the context of the early synagogue, see Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, especially 162–63.

For the text of the first three blessings of the Amidah—those embellished in the *qedushta*—please see Appendix I.

3 The *Qedushat ha-shem* is also called simply the Qedushah (after the extended insertion added during the reader's repetition); it is so-called in distinction to the *qedushat ha-yom* ("the holiness of the day"), the single blessing that replaces the intermediate blessings of the Amidah on the Sabbath and holidays.

4 See Chapter Three for more on the relationship of Yannai's piyyutim to Byzantine Christian hymnography. Meter does not enter Hebrew poetry until the tenth century, under the influence of Arabic poetics. For a concise discussion of the history of Hebrew metrics and verse, see B. Hrushovski, "Note on the Systems of Hebrew Versification," in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse,* ed. and trans. T. Carmi (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 57–72. The topic is also discussed in L. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography.*

5 The use of superlinear vocalization in many of the surviving manuscripts supports the hypothesis that these piyyutim were musically performed. For an extended (not uncontroversial) discussion of music's role in the synagogue service, see E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge*, vol. 2. Peter Jeffrey's review essay of *The Sacred Bridge* in *JQR* 77 (1987): 283–98, nuances, emends, and supplements Werner's work.