

QUMRAN POETRY AND PIYYUT: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON HEBREW POETIC TRADITIONS IN BIBLICAL AND POST-BIBLICAL TIMES

It is easy to understand that at an early stage in investigations into the issues raised by the findings of the Genizah and Qumran, scholars were hardly attracted to hymnography. Pre-classical examples of *piyyutim* which were composed from the second to the fifth centuries CE were at first sight so close to the masoretic standard that they did not generate special attention. The same can be said of the first Qumran psalm manuscripts which resembled the biblical psalms in both content and arrangement.¹ However, the Qumran findings of non-masoretic psalms marked a definite step forward in the investigations into their literary and liturgical status. Their language still depends much on biblical material to such an extent that some scholars firstly dismissed these psalms as mechanical imitations of their biblical predecessors. Early studies of the Thanksgiving Scroll qualify this collection of hymns as ‘a mosaic of Old Testament quotations’, ‘a patchwork of phrases from the masoretic psalter’, ‘expansions from the canonical Hebrew psalter’, and the like.²

Such definitions are not reiterated in present times, because gradually one has understood that alongside the anthological style of the hymns rearrangement and rewording of biblical passages demand a closer look to the text. Poetic modifications of the biblical text appear to imply certain theological presuppositions and developments. In the Entreaty for Deliverance, the phrase of Psalms 119:133b *we-al tashlet bi khol awen* (‘May any iniquity not rule over me’) becomes *al tashlet bi satan* (‘May Satan not rule over me’).³ Such an example shows that a scriptural passage, regardless of its usual connotation, can absorb a new and quite

¹ P.W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalm Scrolls and the Book of Psalms* (Leiden 1997) 7-9.

² E.M. Schuller, *Non-Canonical Psalms from Qumran: A Pseudepigraphic Collection*. Harvard Semitic Studies 28 (Atlanta 1986) 10.

³ Cf. F. García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden 1994) column XIX, line 15.

unrelated meaning from the context or the climate in which it occurs in the apocryphal psalm.

The nuanced ways in which Scripture is used in Qumran poetry can be studied from the characteristics of biblical references in compositions of a later date. A mixture of verbatim quotation and paraphrase can be observed in poetic benedictions from the second and third centuries. One well-known example is the poem *asher heni 'azat goyim* for Purim, recited after reading the scroll of Esther.⁴ Poetic benedictions like this one, and other genres of Hebrew poetry from the first centuries CE, such as the *qinot* for the Ninth of Av, the *'avodot* for Yom Kippur, and the *hosha'not* for Sukkot, are clearly characterized by imitation of scriptural contents: not merely verbal presence of biblical vocabulary and phraseology, but also words and formulae which immediately evoke associations for everyone familiar with the Bible. Also formal imitation of stylistic devices like the use of acrostics and *parallelismus membrorum* is outstanding in these genres. What we find in these poetic texts is ranging from true quotations to free use of biblical idiom and vocabulary for creative interpretive purposes. The legitimisation or defence of such so-to-speak 'derived' poetry could be attained by appealing to the poetic examples of the Bible and the position of song and poetry in the Temple.

If we wish to consider the influence of biblical psalmody on Qumran and *piyyut*, and I can add Byzantine church poetry as well, our evidence in the strict sense is confined. A crucial and difficult problem confronts us at the outset: the varied ways in which psalms and biblical hymns themselves became part of standard liturgy. The Christian church had to reconcile two opposing processes for the theological guidance of the individual and the collectivity. For the sake of fixity of divine worship free literary practice of the individual had to be excluded from liturgical use. For the sake of religious needs over the course of time a variety of psalms and poetic texts was incorporated within the framework of fixed communal prayer in accordance with the theoretical theological tradition of Christianity. In the early synagogue a similar indication can be found of using psalms for the sake of stabilization of Jewish liturgy. One can suppose that there were certain theological reasons for the choice of psalms known as the *Hallel* which acquired a place among obligatory

⁴ I. Davidson, *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry I* (New York 1970) 372 no. 8215.

blessings and compulsory formulae. The biblical Psalms of the *Hallel* are a classical example of conventional anonymity in order to convey religious and ideological messages and to express communal ideas in a standard way.

Moreover, it is typical of the rabbinic attitude towards the Book of Psalms that they emphasize the exegetical value of the psalm verses rather than the poetic value. The biblical collection of psalms never turned into a mere psalter or a book of songs in Judaism, but was in the first place an essential part of the interpretive tradition of the rabbis and the classical synagogue poets themselves who primarily cite psalm verses in their compositions for exegetical purposes.⁵ Psalms as much as the Song of Songs and other biblical poetry are to be understood as components of one sacred, canonized religious text which served as an authoritative source of hermeneutic-Midrashic activity. The delicate position of the psalms between liturgy and exegesis is a hotly debated issue in the writings of Rav Saadia Gaon. In some fragments of the introduction to his *Siddur*, in his Bible commentaries and in his polemical remarks about the Karaites we find that Saadia did not qualify the Book of Psalms as an exclusive liturgical work or communal prayer book for the people of Israel, but rather as an exegetical guidebook and a book of praise, suitable for reading and not for singing, as an addition to standard communal prayer and definitely not as a substitute for it.⁶ According to Saadia, one could not fulfill one's obligation to pray by reciting psalms. The view of the Karaite scholar Yefet ben 'Ali is exactly the opposite: the psalms were obligatory, prophetic prayers, composed by different authors, divinely inspired, and compiled by an inspired editor. They were intended to fill Israel's need for all times; thus any later prayers were, at the least, superfluous. Because they were prophetic and eternal, the psalms could always be interpreted as pertaining to one's own days. Yefet applied their interpretation to contemporary polemics between Rabbanites and Karaites in a manner similar to the Qumran *pesharim* and analogous to the exegetical attempts of finding specific references to

⁵ J.L. Kugel, 'Some Medieval and Renaissance Hebrew Writings on the Poetry of the Bible', in I. Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge etc. 1979) 57-81.

⁶ U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms. From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra* (Albany 1991) 24-44.

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