

Zutot: Perspectives on Jewish Culture

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A HEBREW HYMN OF PRAISE FOR A HIGH-PRIESTLY RABBINIC
MARTYR: A NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
SYNAGOGUE LITURGY AND RABBINIC LITERARY CULTURE

This paper analyzes a brief hymnic composition that praises R. Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest for his special abilities to enter the heavenly realm and learn its hidden secrets. This Hebrew hymn expands upon the role that R. Ishmael's visionary powers and high priestly lineage play within the post-talmudic work *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.¹ I show that this composition adopts and adapts the specific language and imagery that are used to describe the redemptive function of the High Priest (*kohen gadol*) in the earliest extant liturgies for the Day of Atonement from Late Antiquity. In particular, in the Yom Kippur liturgy, the high priestly ritual of communal expiation brings about a state of collective atonement that pre-figures the messianic age. I argue that by appropriating the messianic idiom of the Yom Kippur liturgy the hymn to R. Ishmael underscores the redemptive function of its protagonist's visionary experience and subsequent martyrdom. In addition, I suggest that the generative role that the synagogue liturgy played in shaping rabbinic martyrological discourse has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between the late antique synagogue and the rabbinic academy. In my view, the social and ideological gap between

¹ I would like to express gratitude to my cherished, new colleagues at the University of Minnesota, Andrea Berlin and Bernard Levinson, for their astute advice on this paper. Their personal warmth and professional support have smoothed the transition to my new academic home.

See R. Abusch, 'Rabbi Ishmael's Miraculous Conception: Jewish Salvation History in Anti-Christian Polemic', in A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed, eds, *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Tübingen 2003, 307-343. For the text of the martyrology, I use G. Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern*, Tübingen 1985. For my present purposes, I am not concerned with the *historicity* of rabbinic traditions concerning R. Ishmael's priestly lineage (e.g., tHal. 1:10; bKet. 105b; bGit. 58a; bHul. 49a). In his encyclopedic study of R. Ishmael, G.G. Porton finds no basis for crediting these traditions (*The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael*, 4 vols, Leiden 1982, 4:212-214). But compare M. Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1999, esp. 114-149.

these institutions was not as great as many have recently wished to argue.²

Despite being set during the Roman 'persecutions' of the second century CE, *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* as a literary composition dates to Byzantine-period Palestine (circa sixth to seventh century CE).³ This work embeds the individual martyrological units of which it is composed within a single, unifying narrative framework.⁴ The punishment meted out to the ten martyred sages is not attributed to their individual guilt or even to the immediate political circumstances of the persecution, but is explained as the direct consequence of the crime committed by Yoseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery (Gen. 38). Their deaths are thus understood to serve as expiation for the original national sin committed by the progenitors of the tribes of Israel. As the scion of a high priestly family, R. Ishmael plays a particularly central role in this narrative of communal sin and vicarious atonement. The ideology of self-sacrifice in the martyrology concentrates on the image of the heavenly altar upon which R. Ishmael's angelic double, the heavenly High Priest Metatron, sacrifices the souls of the righteous martyrs who offer their lives on behalf of their community (*Ten Martyrs*, I-IX.20.1-5).

Before proceeding, I cite the R. Ishmael hymn here in full:

אשרי עין שראתה כך ואשרי הגבר שזכה לכך תחברך האם שתכלה אותו ואשרי המעים
 שגדל בהם אשרי דדים שינק מהם אשרי האב שהולידו ולמדו תורה אשרי עין שהציצה
 בו אשרי זרועות שחבקוהו אשריך ר' ישמעאל שזכית לכך
 Happy is the eye that has beheld these things! Happy is the man
 who merited this (vision)! Blessed is the mother who bore him!
 Happy is the womb in which he grew! Happy are the breasts from
 which he nursed! Happy the father who begot him and taught him
 Torah! Happy the eye that has glimpsed him! Happy the arms that

have embraced him! Happy are you, R. Ishmael, that you merited this!⁵

The hymn of praise to R. Ishmael is a freestanding unit; it does not form an essential part of the literary fabric of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* as this work was transmitted in the medieval manuscript tradition.⁶ The hymn most often appears at the culmination of short collections of loosely related literary traditions concerning R. Ishmael's apocalyptic visions.⁷ The hymn opens by praising R. Ishmael's 'eye' (עין) for the heavenly revelations to which it has just been privy. But beyond merely praising R. Ishmael for his visionary powers, the hymn proceeds to honour his parents – and especially his mother – for their role in producing their wondrous child. In particular, the hymn lingers over the various body parts that have nurtured him (*viz.* womb, breasts, eye, and arms). The repetition of the phrase 'happy is the eye' signals a shift in the hymn from R. Ishmael's active role as visionary to his passive role as the object of his parents' adoring gaze. I will return to the double usage of this formula below.

The hymn to R. Ishmael thus seems to be directly dependent on the story of the martyr's miraculous conception, which plays a central role in the narrative logic of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.⁸ This narrative recounts how R. Ishmael's mother, the pious wife of Elisha the High Priest, conceived him after having encountered God's angelic messenger Metatron, who transmits to the child his angelic form and appearance. Later in life, when R. Ishmael and his colleagues are threatened with execution, it

⁵ Hebrew text transcribed according to MS NY J TSA ENA 3201. Note that in the manuscript 1a/39-40 reads שחבלה אותו rather than שתכלה אותו, but this grammatically difficult reading is not supported by the other versions of the hymn. I have, therefore, amended the text.

⁶ The hymn is found in only *one* of the ten recensions of the martyrology, *Ten Martyrs*, V.23, 28-29.

⁷ MS NY J TSA ENA 3201, 1a/39-40; MS Oxford Michael 175, 27b/32-28a/1; MS NY Enelow 704 (J TSA 1786), 29b/14-16; and MS Heb. 8° 5226 (transcribed in A.M. Habermann, ed., *Hadashim gam yeshanim*, Jerusalem 1975, 87). In these manuscripts as well as in *Ten Martyrs*, V.23.28-29, the hymn is found together (in various combinations and sequences) with the 'David-Apocalypse' (cf. P. Schäfer, ed., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen 1981, §§122-126) and 'Aggadat R. Ishmael' (cf. *Synopse*, §§130-138), both of which describe R. Ishmael's heavenly visions.

⁸ The conception narrative appears in the martyrology at *Ten Martyrs*, I.15.11-30; V.11.16-23; VII.11.10-23; VIII.11.16-23. It also circulated apart from the martyrology. For a comprehensive list of citations, see Abusch, 'Miraculous Conception', 312, n. 12.

² On the social and cultural opposition between the synagogue and the rabbinic academy, see especially O. Irshai, 'The Priesthood in Jewish Society in Late Antiquity' (Hebrew), in L. I. Levine, ed., *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, Jerusalem 2004, 67-106 and the literature cited there; also R. Eilior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*, trans. D. Louvish, 2004, esp. 204-231; J. Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1999, 107-135.

³ As was already suggested by L. Zunz, *Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*, second ed., repr., Hildesheim 1967), 139-144 and P. Bloch, 'Rom und die Mystiker der Merkabah', in *Festschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstag Jakob Guttmanns*, Leipzig 1915, 113-124.

⁴ Reeg, *Geschichte*, 33f.

is these miraculous attributes that permit him unfettered access to heaven, where the role of the rabbinic martyrs in the future redemption of Israel is revealed to him by his angelic counterpart.

The hymn to R. Ishmael is, of course, structured around the stereotyped exclamatory expression ‘*asbre* + X’ (‘Happy is + noun’), which functions in the Hebrew Bible as a standard eulogistic form for praising those whose status, wisdom, or piety is thought to bring reward or well-being.⁹ In post-biblical literature, this ‘makaristic’ idiom came to serve as a conventional literary expression for honouring rabbinic sages for their piety and learning.¹⁰ In addition to these important rabbinic parallels, the specific idiom used in the hymn to R. Ishmael is also reminiscent of the liturgical adoration offered to the mother of the Messiah in early Christian worship. Thus, the mention of the ‘breasts’ and ‘womb’ of R. Ishmael’s mother bears a striking resemblance to the invocation of various parts of Mary’s body in what is perhaps the earliest of these *makarismoi*, found already in the NT text of Luke: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you (Jesus) and the breasts at which you nursed!’.¹¹ Indeed, it may well be that Jewish and Christian hymns of adoration share a common formal and even conceptual background.¹² Yet, because of the longevity and ubiquity of this idiom of praise, these general parallels do not shed light on the specific claims that the hymn to R. Ishmael seeks to make about its protagonist.

Several sources from Byzantine Palestine do, however, illuminate the particular cultural and ideological context out of which the R. Ishmael hymn emerged. The hymn to R. Ishmael exhibits remarkable formal and verbal similarities to the hymn that is recited by the people of Israel in praise of the suffering Messiah Ephraim, who figures centrally in the

narrative of redemption recounted in the late midrashic work *Pesiqta Rabbati* 34-37.¹³

Like a bridegroom adorned with a priestly diadem, like a bride bedecked with her finery (Is. 61:10). This text teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, will put upon Ephraim, our true Messiah, a garment whose splendor will stream forth from world’s end to world’s end. And Israel will make use of this light and say: ‘Happy is the hour in which he was created (אשרי שעה שבה נברא)! Happy is the womb whence he came (ואשרי הבטן שממנו יצא)! Happy is the generation whose eyes behold him (ואשרי הדור שעיניו רואות אותו)! Happy is the eye which yearned for him (אשרי עין שחבתה לו) who opens his lips with blessing and peace, whose speech is pure delight, whose heart meditates in trust and tranquility. Happy is the eye which merits seeing him (אשרי עין שזכתה בו), the utterance of whose tongue is pardon and forgiveness for Israel, whose prayer is sweet savour, whose supplication is purity and holiness. Happy are the forebears of the man who merits the goodness of the world (i.e., the Messiah), hidden for eternity’.

Like the R. Ishmael hymn, this passage offers praise to the ‘womb’ of Ephraim’s mother (here בטן not מעים).¹⁴ Strictly-speaking, Ephraim is not a martyr, but instead performs his redemptive function through suffering. Nevertheless, like R. Ishmael, Ephraim intercedes on Israel’s behalf by earning their forgiveness from God. Indeed, much like the characterization of martyrdom in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, *Pesiqta Rabbati* describes the prayers of Ephraim on behalf of the nation in the language of cultic sacrifice.

There is, however, a small, but highly significant difference between the two hymns. The hymn to Ephraim repeatedly praises the eyes of the ‘generation’ (דור) that has had the great fortune of witnessing the advent of

⁹ For a useful analysis of the morphology and function this expression, see A.A. Anderson, *Psalms 1-72*, Grand Rapids, MI 1981, 58f.

¹⁰ See, e.g., yHag. 2.4 (77a) and bHag. 14b, where R. Yohanan ben Zakkai employs this idiom to praise his students for their successful exegesis of Ezekiel’s throne-vision (Ezek. 1 and 10). Also MidProv 9:2; bYoma 86a.

¹¹ Luke 11:27: Μακαρία ἡ κοιλία ἢ βαστάσασά σε καὶ μαστοὶ οὓς ἐθήλασας. Cf. Gos. Thom. §79.

¹² On the possible Jewish Aramaic background of the Lukan text, see M. Black, ‘The Aramaic Liturgical Poetry of the Jews’, *JTS* o.s. 50 (1949) 179-182.

¹³ For discussion of this series of homilies, see A. Goldberg, *Erlösung durch Leiden: Drie rabbinische Homilien über die Trauernden Zions und den leidenden Messias Efraim* (*PesR* 34.36.37), Frankfurt 1978.

¹⁴ *Pesiq. Rbt* 37, §8 (R. Ulmer, ed., *Pesiqta Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps*, 2 vols, Atlanta 1997, 2002, 844). I have slightly modified the translation in W.G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths*, 2 vols, New Haven 1968, 2:835.

this suffering Messiah. Ephraim is throughout the passive object of their expectant gaze. By contrast, we have seen that the hymn to R. Ishmael is inconsistent in the way it deploys this idiom: it begins by praising the martyr's own eyes for the heavenly visions they have seen ('Happy is the eye that has beheld these things!'), but later embeds this idiom in the praise of his parents ('Happy the eye that has glimpsed him! Happy the arms that have embraced him!'). This movement within the hymn creates an odd slippage. Unlike Ephraim, R. Ishmael plays a dual role as both active visionary and passive object of sight. And, in the case of R. Ishmael, it is seemingly his parents – rather than his contemporaries – who are praised for having had the honour of seeing him.

I believe that the 'Praise of the High Priest' that is contained in the Yom Kippur *'Avodah* service stands behind the 'praise of the eye' found in both of these hymns. The *Sidre 'Avodah* are tri-partite penitential poems (*selihot*) that describe the creation of the world, narrate human history from Adam until the investiture of Aaron as High Priest, and culminate with the purification and scapegoat rituals of Yom Kippur described in Lev. 16. In what appears to be one of the earliest extant *'Avodah* hymns, entitled *'Az be-'ein kol*, we find the following unit:

מה בצפן למו	אשרי יריאך
נגד בני אדם	פעולת טובתך
משה ואהרן	אשריהם מאד
כבוד נחלך	כי אין לחקור
מה חזו עיניהם	אשרי אבותינו
למי הם מצפים	ואשרי בניהם

Happy are those who fear you! How (much) is in store for them:
your beneficence in the full view of men!
Most happy are Moses and Aaron,
for the glory they have attained is impossible to fathom!
Happy are our ancestors (because of) what their eyes beheld!
And happy their descendants because of (the one) whom they anticipate (i.e., the Messiah)!¹⁵

¹⁵ J. Yahalom, ed., *Priestly Palestinian Poetry: A Narrative Liturgy for the Day of Atonement*, Jerusalem 1996, 138f., lines 691-696 (Hebrew).

The hymn situates the high priestly ritual at the intersection of two temporally distinct communities: the 'ancestors' who were fortunate enough to witness the solemn actions of the High Priest when the Temple still stood are juxtaposed with later generations of their descendants who, through the hymn's verbal description of the High Priest, gain a glimpse of the future advent of the messianic age.¹⁶ Like numerous other early Jewish texts, *'Az be-'ein kol* reads the high priestly ritual of Yom Kippur through an eschatological lens.¹⁷ The 'eyes' of the Temple community – and by extension, the liturgical community – are trained upon the glorious appearance of the High Priest presiding over this ritual of communal expiation. In presenting the Yom Kippur ritual as a pre-figuration of the ultimate purging of Israel's sins that will accompany the messianic age, the *'Avodah* liturgy sets the annual cultic-ritual activities of the High Priest within a narrative of national redemption.

The 'praise of the eyes' – already present in *'Az be-'ein kol* – gradually came to serve as a central structuring element for the *'Avodah* service. Thus, in later versions of the *'Avodah*, the methodical descriptions of the Yom Kippur ritual are punctuated by the refrain 'Happy is the eye that has seen all these things' (אשרי עין ראתה כל אלה).¹⁸ And, like the hymn to the Messiah Ephraim, these later forms of the *'Avodah* characterize the community gathered around the sanctuary as the 'generation' of the High Priest.¹⁹

It seems that the hymns of praise for R. Ishmael and Ephraim appropriated the 'praise of the eyes' from the *Sidre 'Avodah*, where this formal element is clearly most at home. In doing so, both compositions sought to associate their respective protagonists with the messianic status of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. The creators of the Ephraim hymn carried out this operation in a relatively straight-forward fashion, simply transferring the liturgical praise of the High Priest to this non-priestly Messiah. By contrast, the R. Ishmael hymn adapts the 'praise of the eyes' to the complex narrative context of the martyrology: R. Ishmael is thus

¹⁶ Yahalom, *Priestly Palestinian Poetry*, 17-21.

¹⁷ On the eschatological dimension of Yom Kippur in early Jewish sources, see D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, WUNT 163, Tübingen 2003, 85-101.

¹⁸ D. Goldschmidt, ed., *Mahzor la-yamim ha-nora'im: lefi minhage bene Ashkenaz*, 2 vols., Jerusalem 1970, 2:486-487.

¹⁹ Goldschmidt, *Mahzor*, 2:485: 'His generation saw and rejoiced' (דורו ראו ושמוחו).

simultaneously an active visionary and the passive object of his parents' adoration. But the hymn's idiosyncratic double use of this idiom does little to obscure its original context. Instead, the awkward repetition of the phrase 'happy is the eye' highlights R. Ishmael's exalted status as a specifically *high-priestly* martyr.

If we are to judge from the hymns to Ephraim and R. Ishmael, it would seem that, at least in some cases, the literary production of the late antique synagogue provided the formal and ideological material for important innovations within rabbinic literary culture. Indeed, the capacious figure of Rabbi Ishmael – priest, rabbi, martyr, and perhaps also quasi-messiah – seems to encapsulate the multiple, though not necessarily competing, strands of Byzantine Jewish culture.

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