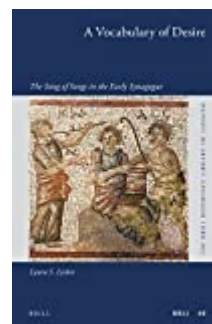


Laura Suzanne Lieber. *A Vocabulary of Desire: The Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014. 450 pp. \$210.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-23463-5.



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“I am My Beloved’s”: The Mosaics of Love in Early *Piyyut*

The title “Vocabulary of Desire” implies that *payyetanim*, liturgical poets, used the available words of the biblical Song of Songs as lexemes to construct richly woven, liturgical poetry. In post-biblical interpretation the Song of Songs expressed God’s love for Israel and Israel’s love for God, and it provided ancient Jewish exegetes with a powerful vocabulary. Perhaps of even greater significance, the poetry of the Song of Songs provides a natural language for liturgical prayer. The Song, while hardly an overtly religious work, nevertheless offers a profound, and important, vocabulary for theology (p. 22). The resulting *piyyutim*, liturgical poems, are examined in this book, which contains two parts. The two parts are successfully integrated and explain certain concepts concerning the structure and the religious messages of the *piyyut* and the culture that produced it.

Part 1 of the book investigates the history of interpretation of the biblical Song of Songs and the early history of *piyyut*. It presents essays on the utilization of the Song of Songs in liturgical poetry. In the opinion of this

reviewer, the Song of Songs itself is ripe with ambiguities and intrinsic beauty regarding its text, expressions, imagery, sexual explicitness, and rhetoric, which invited and still invites interpretations regarding its meaning, its Egyptian counterpart, and its applicability to a faith community. The *piyyutim* on Song of Songs also reveal exegetical strategies that interpret biblical lemmata in a liturgical context of the early synagogue, which was a public setting, in opposition to the rabbinic interpretation in a House of Study. Lieber mentions that the *piyyutim* occasionally refer to midrashic and targumic approaches to the Song of Songs; she differentiates this type of poetry from other poetic activities in the first centuries of the Common Era, such as poetry in Syriac. These short comparisons serve to further define the distinctive characteristics of *piyyut*; the author also shows that this type of poetry thrived in Palestine (Land of Israel), whereas initially some Geonim in Babylonia were opposed to this mode of liturgical expression. One may summarize this historical development with the observation that the early synagogue provided intellectual and

liturgical space for its own, innovative poetic endeavor; nevertheless, the use of poetry as such is somewhat comparable to the presence of another genre of poetry found in Psalms that were part of the liturgy chanted in the Jerusalem Temple.

Part 2 of the book focuses on several *piyyutim*, a Passover *qedushta shel sheva* from the fifth century, a Passover *shivata* by the liturgical poet Yannai from the sixth century, a Passover *qerova* by Yannai, a *qedushta* for *shivata* regarding the prayer for dew by the liturgical poet Elazar Birabbi Qallir (sixth/seventh century), a *qedushta* for the first Sabbath after a wedding, and a Passover *yotzer*, both also by Elazar Birabbi Qallir. A short definition of several genres of *piyyutim* may suffice here: a *shivata* embellishes all seven blessings of the *amidah* (standing prayer) recited on the Sabbath and on festivals; a *qedushta* introduces the first three blessings of said prayer; a *yotzer* presents imagery pertaining to light and embellishes a part of the morning prayer's section, the *shema*, "Hear O Israel." The reader is informed that in the *piyyutim* the initial word sequences of verses in the Song of Songs are cited; the *payyetan* (poet) subsequently complements and interprets these poetic stitches. Lieber remarks that "the early *piyyutim* selected for inclusion in this volume reflect the vibrancy and creativity" of Judaism in late antiquity (p. 19). The *piyyutim* draw attention to the environment of the early synagogue, while simultaneously divulging facets of Jewish life in Palestine in the fifth through seventh centuries. Furthermore, the *piyyutim* demonstrate that their composers were aware of prior Jewish interpretations of the Song of Songs, although they never abandoned the original poetry. In the *piyyutim* we are presented with poetic interpretations of previous poetry, or alternatively, a fragment of the Song of Songs was used and then the liturgical poets continued writing in their own words (*Fortschreibung*). The existing poetry (fragments from the Song of Songs) is part of the festival liturgy of Passover, when this scroll is recited. The *payyetanim* were adept at breathing life into one of the most beautiful books of the Hebrew Bible by integrating interpretations expressed in preceding texts. In this reviewer's opinion, the relationship between the base text (the Song of Songs) and its interpretation in one continuous line almost amounts to a textual doubling or a mirror image of the Song of Songs; this creative relationship between texts is only partially periphrastic or chiasmic. We could refer to semantic-integrative theories in linguistics to describe the cataphoric/anaphoric relations between the two poetic texts; however, descriptors of this type of *piyyut* in its poetic and musical compo-

sition of neologisms and midrashic insights are difficult to describe. Lieber is aware of these difficulties to find an adequate theoretical description of the *piyyutim* and she mentions a few theorists (pp. 101-102), but it is obvious that nothing is fully applicable to the *piyyut*. Lieber states, "The intricacy of these poems provides a literary counterpart to the mosaics of the synagogues of late antiquity" (p. 95). I agree with her criticism of Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, who had argued that the *shivata* has a linear, narrative structure referring to certain elements in Israel's history with God. According to Lieber, there is no explicit narrative and the poem focuses on emotions, such as "rejection, anger, delight, nostalgia, tension," and not on religious history (p. 204).

The Hebrew text edition is accompanied by a lucid and poetic English translation with annotations and a commentary. In this excellent, scholarly text edition, the commentary is focused and to the point. A comparable midrashic passage to the *piyyut* on p. 229 (line 70) is similarly expressed in a parallel midrashic passage: The poetic line "Awaken, O gift of the burnt-offering of the North! / And arouse, O ceremony of the gift of the peace-offerings of the South!" reflects a midrashic interpretation which refers to the sacrifices of the Temple. One parallel passage is Pesiqta Rabbati 5:11 (Ullmer ed.), which states: "Awake, O north, and come O south, blow upon my garden that its fragrance may stream out (Song 4:16). Awake, O north (ibid.) refers to the whole-offerings, which are slaughtered at the north side of the altar." And Pesiqta Rabbati 5:14 states: "And come O south (Song 4:16); [this speaks of] the peace-offerings which were slaughtered south [of the altar]." We cannot expect the author to list all comparable passages in homiletic midrash. Lieber's annotations are appropriate and illuminate veiled references intrinsic to the poetry that are no longer obvious to the modern reader.

The *payyetanim* of late antiquity that are represented in this book responded to issues of their time, such as the imminence of redemption. The Persian and Arab (Muslim) armies may have been perceived as forces that were assisting in the implementation of divine retributive justice and the redemption of Israel. For example, Eleazar Birabbi Qallir, *Shivata for Dew*, playfully engages with the topic of the redemptive power of dew: "Upon (Ps 23:2b) The valley of holiness He will delight us / Where once He looked down and judged our cause" (p. 299, line 193). On the redemptive power of dew the reader may wish to refer to my article "Consistency and Change"[1]

The book includes a bibliography and indices of lines

of poetry, biblical citations, subjects, and ancient Jewish and Christian texts. This book is as beautiful as its topic—the Song of Songs in early *piyyutim*. The publisher and the series editors, Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck, are to be commended for providing ample space for the text edition. This reviewer highly recommends this monograph to scholars interested in the early synagogue and its liturgy, late antique and medieval Hebrew poetry,

rabbinic Judaism, and early Christianity. The book invites further comparative work in these areas.

Note

[1]. Rivka Ulmer, ‘Consistency and Change in Rabbinic Literature as Reflected in the Terms ‘Rain’ and ‘Dew,’’ *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26, no. 1 (1995): 55-75.

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