



Yannai on Genesis

An Invitation to Piyyut

Laura S. Lieber

Piyyutim are Hebrew or Aramaic poems composed either in place of or as adornments to the Jewish statutory prayers. Laura Lieber's seminal study uses the piyyutim of a single poet, Yannai (ca. sixth century c.e.), to introduce readers to this important but largely unfamiliar body of writings.

Yannai, the first Hebrew poet to sign his name to his works (by means of an acrostic), influenced Hebrew sacred poetry for centuries beyond his lifespan. 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. As literary works of art, his poems are as dazzling as they are complex. They are rich with sound play and allusion, as their multiple units function together as poetic symphonies. Lieber demonstrates how, beyond these accomplishments, Yannai's poetic presentations in a liturgical context transformed common ideas into powerful experiences. With Yannai as creative guide and narrator, the worshippers became active participants in still-unfolding biblical events.

Lieber points out that Yannai's time and place situate him at a critical moment in Jewish cultural history: despite Roman oppression, important rabbinic sources were crystallizing; the synagogue was thriving; the liturgy was taking definitive shape. His works, with their dynamic mixture of messianism, defiance, and restraint, reflect this society in flux and show him to be a poet of transformative importance in a period when Judaism and Western culture itself were both coalescing and becoming something new.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part One, Lieber examines Yannai's poetic language and structures, considers broader questions of his exegetical, cultural, and societal importance, then explores intriguing motifs in Yannai's worldview — mysticism, holiness, God, the Covenant of the Land, Jewish-Christian relations, and the roles and importance of women in his piyyutim. Part Two presents the texts of the Yannai's 31 extant piyyutim embellishing the Book of Genesis. Lieber translates, annotates, and analyzes these complex *qedushta'ot*, which display a representative range of Yannai's techniques, styles, themes, and motifs and highlight the poet's treatment of some of the most familiar biblical narratives.

Lieber's groundbreaking study is an invitation to scholars to approach these beautiful and neglected texts using all the tools of their own disciplines. It encourages those in diverse cognate areas — such as liturgical studies, rabbinic literature and *targum* studies, the early synagogue and its art, Byzantine Christian culture and society, and the history of biblical interpretation — to engage with the piyyutim and include them in larger intellectual conversations.

Laura Lieber received Rabbinic Ordination from Hebrew Union College in 1999 and her Ph.D. in History of Judaism from the University of Chicago in 2003. She is currently Assistant Professor of Late Ancient Judaism at Duke University.

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