

Two Aramaic Piyyutim from the Second Crusade (1148)

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Abstract

A single folio from MS 119 in the Geneva Genizah includes two unknown and unpublished piyyutim in Aramaic, which are presented in this study for the first time. The two hymns can be precisely dated to the year 1148, the time of the Second Crusade. They resemble each other to a significant extent in terms of content and prosody, referring to a dire historical situation that can be explicitly linked to the siege of Damascus in the summer of 1148. This study presents a critical edition of the two Aramaic piyyutim together with an English translation alongside other textual elements within the remarkable context of this unique folio.

Keywords

piyyut – Aramaic – Second Crusade – Damascus – Geneva Genizah

Introduction

In this first publication, we present two piyyutim that may have a significantly different geographical origin, but the date of which is certain. Both hymns are made up of short lines with the rhyme scheme *גִּי*, suitable for loud congregational recitation without any clear liturgical destination. Furthermore, each line in the second hymn is structured according to the reverse alphabetic acrostics *תשר"ק*. The combination of Aramaic

phrases does not correspond to anything similar in targumic or rabbinic literature, but the plain language and direct speech are more likely to represent oral culture in the Near East.

The choice of Aramaic suits the urgent call to prepare for the time of redemption and the gathering of the dispersed; this is why, after the last line, an exact date has been offered as a calculation for the messianic times amidst great turmoil and persecution: 'In the year that is 1459 according to the Seleucid calculation of the calendar, which is the year 1148 according to the Gregorian calendar.' The year 1148 is essential for the understanding of the historical background of these two piyyutim. This is the time of the Second Crusade (1145–1149), a Christian military campaign par excellence that started in Europe and would ultimately affect the city of Damascus in exactly the year 1148.¹ This awful situation as the result of ferocious fighting and heavy losses is reflected in an urgent call upon God to bring together all different sorts of people, and to remind him of his promises. The theme of redemption was likely to have featured prominently in the hearts and minds of Jewish dignitaries and their communities in many towns and countries where the Second Crusade had a devastating effect upon the Jewish population. This situation may explain the occurrence of the two unique and otherwise unknown poems, intentionally written in the Aramaic language as a preferable instrument of strong emotional expression, that reflect the people's cry for salvation. Both anonymous hymns have not been published before and can be found in MS 119, fol. 12r, of the Geneva Genizah.² We present the texts following the (partial) vocalization of the manuscript.³

Edition

¹ J. Phillips, *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven, CT 2007); D. Nicolle, *The Second Crusade 1148: Disaster outside Damascus* (Oxford 2009).

² The Geneva Genizah is a relatively small collection of 350 large vellum sheets at the Bibliothèque de Genève (BGE): B. Roth-Lochner, 'Fragments de la Genizah du Caire à la Bibliothèque de Genève,' Bibliothèque de Genève, Département des Manuscrits, 2010, 1-5; also in D. Rosenthal, ed., *The Cairo Genizah Collection in Geneva, Catalogue and Studies* (Jerusalem 2010) 42–45 [Hebrew].

³ S. Elizur, 'Innovations in the Research of Poetry and Piyyut', in D. Rosenthal, ed., *The Cairo Genizah Collection in Geneva*, 76–85, esp. 83–84 [Hebrew]. These hymns are part of a single folio and preceded by a number of Hebrew lines with the rhyme scheme גא-. The refrain לֵן שְׁאַלְתֵּן, 'Please, let us ask', concluding the Hebrew lines, appears three times. The opening words מִמֵּתִיק מְרִירִי and נֹקֶם וּמִקְנָא occur within the same context in Cambridge MS T-S NS 238.88.

אבי אבי מתי תביא
אבי אבי מתי תביא את אליהו הנביא

My Father, my Father, when will you bring?
My Father, my Father, when will you bring the prophet Elijah?⁴

بسم الله الرحيم
לרביא הא[.]עלי מרן דבשמיא

In the name of God, the Compassionate.
For the [highest Lord] Our Lord who is in heaven

נוקם ומקנא
בנו אל תקנא
לארצך קנא
ואותנו תקנה
רך כקנה
תפדה משונא
טרם נקרא
אתה תענה
הב לן שאלתן וג'

Who retaliates and is zealous,
Do not accuse us in envy,
Be zealous for your land,
And you will purchase us.
Soft like a reed (Israel),
You will redeem from the hateful,
Before we will call,
You will answer.

⁴ This is possibly the opening line of a piyyut *havdalah* composed by Abraham ibn Ezra (see the edition of I. Lewin, *The Religious Poems of Abraham ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem 1975) 42–43 [Hebrew], or it may be the opening line of another piyyut *havdalah* found in MS T-S 8 H 19.6 in the Cambridge Genizah. The two Aramaic piyyutim are preceded by a short Hebrew poem about which we have no further information.

Please, let us ask, and so on.

מִמֶּתִיק מֵרִירִי
וְשָׁרִי אֲסִירִי
מִפֶּתַח עִירִי
וְאֶסִּיא דְקִצִּירִי
חֲזִי לְבָנִי בֹכֶרִי
דְּפֶעַן כְּיָרֹרִי
מִתּוֹקֶפֶא דְנִירִי
דְּמָטָא עַד נְחִירִי
כְּרוֹזָא יְקָרָא
מִקָּרִי לִיקָרִי
וְיִתְעַר כָּל פִּיגְרִי
דְּדִמְיָא בְּקִבְרִי
חִירוּתָא תִתְקַרֵּי
לְקַדְמָאִי וּבִתְרָא(א) [י]
וְיִדְעוּ כָּל דִּירִי
דָּאֵת סִמָּא וּסְבָרִי
ה' לֵן שְׂאֵלְתֵּן וּג'

Who sweetens the embittered ones,
And releases the prisoners,

Who opens (the eyes of) the blind,

And is healing the sick:
Look at the firstborn sons,
Who howl like jackals,
Because of the strength of the yoke,
Reaching up to the nostrils.
He will proclaim,
From town to town,
That all the dead will be awakened,
Those who lie in the graves.
Freedom will be called out,
For the first and the last,
So that all inhabitants will know,
That you are the essence and the hope,

Please, let us ask, and so on.

תבר גיבִּרִי
שִׁמַּע קֹלָא דְּתַבִּירִי
רַב־רַבִּי וְזַעִירִי
קִיָּמִין לְךָ לְמַקְרִי
צֹחִין כּוֹת תּוֹרִי
פָּעֵן כּוֹת אִימֶרִי
עֲנֵי לְכָל דְּקָרִי
סִמּוֹךְ בְּנֵיָא בְּחִירִי
נְשִׂיא וּגְבִירִי
מִסְכְּנֵי וְעֵתִירִי
לְמַרְעֵי וְאִיסוּרִי
כְּבִישִׁין וְאַף לְצַעֲרִי
יִתְכַנְשׁוּן מִבְּדָרִי
טִילְטוּלִיהוֹן בְּטוּרִי
[ח... ..]
זֶרְעָהוֹן דְּעֵקִירִי
וְתִדְכַּר לִישִׁירִי
הִימְנוֹת כְּשִׁירִי
דְּכִתִּיבִין בְּסִפְרִי
גְּמִירִין בְּפֹם סִפְרִי
בְּזִכּוּתָהוֹן תִּתְבָּרִי
אַסּוּ לְכָל דָּרִי

בְּשֵׁתָא דְּהִיא אֶלְפָּא וְאַרְבַּע מָאָה
וְחִמְשִׁין וְתִשְׁעַ לְשָׁטְרִי
הֵב לָן וּג'

Break the valiant,
Listen to the voice of the broken,
Both great and small,
They stand up before you upon the call,
Being loud like oxen,
Crying like lambs.
You answer all those who call upon you,

Close to the elected sons,
The women and the men,
The poor and the rich,
The ill and the imprisoned,
The distressed and also the suppressed.
The dispersed will be gathered,
Their wanderings on the mountains,
[... ...]
The descendants of the uprooted.
You will remember the righteous,
The confidence of the just,
About whom it is written in the books,
And about whom it is told orally from the books:
By their virtue you will become pure,
[It is] a cure for all generations.

In the year that is 1459 according to the official documents.
Please, let us ask, and so on.

On the basis of the strong sentiments and the compelling requests repeatedly expressed in these lines, we assume that both Aramaic piyyutim were composed as a direct response to the tragic effects of the Second Crusade. Initially, we had the impression that these two hymns could be localized in France or Germany, where the Second Crusade led to excessive anti-Jewish violence that cost numerous Jewish lives. Susan Einbinder has documented that the events surrounding the Second Crusade led to an increase of martyrological literature and poetry in Ashkenaz.⁵ However, the explicit

⁵ S. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death, Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* (Princeton 2002) 17–20, 27–30; idem, *No Place of Rest: Jewish Literature, Expulsion, and the Memory of Medieval France* (Philadelphia, PA 2009) 48–50, 61–83. See also K.A. Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities* (Philadelphia, PA 2010). Whatever the relatively prosperous situation of Ashkenazic Jews in some towns may have been, the Crusades, the anti-Jewish doctrines of the Church, and the occasionally violent animosity of local town lords and bishops ultimately had a strong effect on Jewish expressions of hope for better times. See, for instance, Simeon bar Isaac in 10th-century Mainz: E. Hollender, *Synagogale Hymnen, Qedushta'ot des Simon b. Isaak im Amsterdam Mahzor* (Berlin

presence of the *tasmiyah* makes the assumption of an Ashkenazic origin highly improbable. A Near Eastern origin of these piyyutim in relation to the siege of Damascus in July 1148 is most credible.

1994). On the significance of Eleazar b. Qallir in Ashkenaz: E. Hollender, *Piyyut Commentary in Medieval Ashkenaz*, *Studia Judaica* 47 (Berlin 2008) 151–160.