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THE PLOT WITHIN THE PIYYUT: RETELLING THE STORY OF BALAK ON THE LITURGICAL STAGE

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"God made Man because He loves stories."
—Elie Wiesel, prologue to *Gates of the Forest*

The Torah is more than "merely" a book of stories,[1] but few would deny that between the creation of the world and the death of Moses, many memorable and dramatic stories are told. Far from being simple ornaments, biblical tales are memorable, consequential, and inextricably interwoven with other kinds of writings, notably genealogies, prophecies, laws, and poems. While it can be easy to take the Torah's stories for granted—as they are, after all, so familiar (at least in vague outline) and often deceptively straightforward—we should not underestimate the importance of storytelling as a human endeavor. Received narratives, the tales we imbibe from earliest youth, ground us in traditions—familial, cultural, or religious—and inform the stories we tell ourselves; they shape

[1] "Story" is here defined as a narrative featuring characters whose actions can be traced in a linear fashion—that is, they display a conventional plot.

our values and our worldviews. As contemporary scholars ranging from theologians to psychologists to medical school professors have noted, our internal stories dictate the scripts against which we measure our lives.[2] As humans (Jonathan Gottschall's "storytelling animals"[3]), each individual is the protagonist of his or her own tale, but as singular as our individual lives are, the "plots" we map onto and narrate into our autobiographies are unique syntheses of older material reworked.

Over the millennia, the biblical text has provided a particularly rich and evocative source for the construction of identity—of autobiographical self-narration—among those who see themselves as the heirs of the biblical ancestors. This is certainly true in the Jewish context, where the many references to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the fathers of the Israelite nation resonate through the millennia as speaking directly to the "children of Israel," their lineal descendants. Viewed through such a lens, the biblical stories function not just as the sacred history of a nation but also as family lore, as a kind of inherited memory.[4] Current events constitute the newest chapters in the ongoing tale, and each recipient of the tradition becomes a new character in the still-unfolding story.

The liturgical context, in which the biblical text was (and still is) both recited and explicated, amplifies the power of the biblical text to shape its listeners' interior narrations. Read in the sanctuary, the Torah scroll speaks directly to the people in imitation of the revelation at Sinai, an event that becomes, in practice as well as in theory, an ongoing experience

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[2] For example, see: *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, edited by Theodore Sarbin (New York: Praeger, 1986); Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Vieda Skultans, *Empathy and Healing: Essays in Medical and Narrative Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Publishing, 2007); and *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

[3] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

[4] The most articulate and potent description of this issue remains Yosef H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

rather than a singular occurrence.[5] In the synagogue of Late Antiquity, midrashic homilies and Aramaic translations (*targumim*) further underscored the continuing significance of the biblical words in the present tense. Likewise, Jewish liturgical poetry (called *piyyut*), which was experienced not in the context of the Torah service but in the context of prayer, translated narration into something actively enjoined rather than passively received and experienced "only" intellectually.[6] The liturgical content and context of piyyut served to embed the retelling of biblical stories in highly-charged ritual performance and to embody it within the community.[7] Through rhetorical techniques such as refrains, which integrate the audience into the performance, the listeners would join their voices as well as their sympathies to the retelling. The liturgical poet (in Hebrew, *payyetan*) mediated and structured the relationships between his text and his community of listeners as much as between congregation and deity. Viewed this way, then, we can imagine the individuals in the community of the ancient synagogue as engaging in a complicated "multi-authorship" dynamic, participating in the performance—the activation—of the piyyut as effective prayer. Each participant, whether physically present (the poet-cantor and the community) or assumed (the ancestors, the deity) in the performative dynamic shapes the story the others hear even as he becomes an implied character in the tale he tells.

Liturgical poets were not, of course, "storytellers" in a conventional sense; *piyyutim*, particularly compared to other genres of synagogue literature, are non-linear and oriented as much toward the rituals of prayer as toward the interpretation or elaboration of the biblical text. And

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[5] See Ruth Langer, "From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai," *Worship* 72:1 (January 1998): 43-67; reprinted in *The Journal of Synagogue Music* 31:1 (Fall 2006): 104-125.

[6] For a concise and accessible overview of piyyut as a genre of Jewish writing, see Michael Rand, "Fundamentals of the Study of Piyyut," in Clemens Leonhard and Helmut Löhr (eds.), *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107-125.

[7] Laura Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *The Journal of Religion* 90:2 (April 2010): 119-147.

yet, payyetanic engagement with biblical stories was sustained and sophisticated, and examining the narrative elements of classical *piyyut* can illustrate some of the more complicated ways in which storytelling was an important part of the communal experience of the ancient synagogue.[8] Payyetanim taught their listeners ways of re-narrating a story, a self-conception, to their communities (and arguably to their deity, too), and they were doing so self-consciously. They did not, however, simply put the biblical tales into new language or enrich them with new details; they wove a new story—a meaningful narrative for their contemporary listeners—out of the images, language, and concerns of the inherited material, freely transforming, adapting, and embellishing the received tradition and shaping it in ways that would explicitly engage their communities.

As intuitive as some of these ideas may seem, a specific example, worked through in detail, will clarify more precisely how poets transformed biblical stories into constructive and consequential narratives for their communities. The selection of a well-known biblical tale will help to highlight the differences between biblical and payyetanic storytelling, and so the present essay examines one of the more famous stories from

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[8] The present author here acknowledges a debt in particular to the work of Shulamit Elizur, whose writing—particularly her piece "The Congregation in the Synagogue and the Ancient *Qedushta*" in S. Elizur, M.D., Herr, S. Shaked (eds.), *Knesset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1994), 171-190 [Hebrew]—reflects a keen sensitivity to the rhetorical sophistication of piyyut. Another study which paves the way for the present analysis in important ways is Joseph Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee in Late Antiquity* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Hameuchad, 1999) [Hebrew]. More recently, readers are advised to consult Yehoshua Granat's doctoral dissertation, "Preexistence in Early Piyyut against the Background of its Sources" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009) [Hebrew], as well as Yosef Yahalom, "The Drama of Joseph and His Brothers in Piyyut Literature," in *Studies in Arabic and Hebrew Letters: In Honor of Raymond P. Scheindlin*, eds. Jonathan P. Decter and Michael Chaim Rand (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 251-262; and Avi Shmidman, "Congregational Participation within the Biblical Story in the Yotser Poems of Shlomo Suleiman," in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 137- 158. The present article applies and expands on some ideas from these works and applies them specifically to the poetry of Yannai, one of the most important early payyetanim.

the biblical book of Numbers: that of Balak, the king of Moab, who hires the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites in Numbers 22-24.[9] This story may have originated in folklore (as indicated by the external evidence of the Deir Alla inscription[10]), and it possesses unique charm and humor; it is a good story for telling, and ancient exegetes displayed great creativity in expanding the tale. Because it was part of the lectionary, this biblical pericope also provided fodder for the great payyetanim, including Yannai, the master- poet of the 6th century whose piyyut—specifically the kind of piyyut called a *qedushta*[11]—for the Torah portion which opened with Num. 22:2 has survived almost intact among the treasures of the Cairo Genizah.[12] This nearly-complete piyyut—eight of the nine units standard in this form are extant—provides an opportunity to examine the various ways in which the poet selected and distilled key elements from a received story and transformed it into something of his own.

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[9] The choice of Num. 22-24 offers a familiar biblical tale but, unlike the even more well-known tales from Genesis, it is one somewhat less encumbered by the sheer volume of Hellenistic and rabbinic exegesis. Other biblical narratives, and certainly non-narrative passages as well, should be studied to shed further light on payyetanic rhetoric.

[10] See Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), among other studies of this famous inscription.

[11] A *qedushta* (plural, *qedushta'ot*) is a nine-unit piyyut embellishing the first three benedictions of the Sabbath or Festival Amidah (the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy). Its text was in place of the later-standardized liturgical blessings familiar from modern prayerbooks, meaning that the actual text of the blessings changed from week to week in dynamic with the weekly Torah reading. Only a few fixed liturgical phrases and standardized acrostics provided predictable structures from Sabbath to Sabbath. For more details and examples, see Laura Lieber, "Themes and Variations: Yannai on Exodus 3:1 and Deuteronomy 6:4," *Prooftexts* 30 (2010): 180-216.

[12] A qedushta for the following week is also extant; it embellishes Num. 23:10 and as a result we know that the reading for the present week was Num. 22:2-23:9. On the history of the Cairo Genizah and the story of its recovery, see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah* (New York: Schocken-Nextbook, 2011).

The Biblical Story

The biblical story of Balak and Balaam, as we have it in the Masoretic text, displays signs of a complicated redactional history but has long been recognized as a distinctive unit.[13] The complexities of the biblical text attracted the attention of various ancient exegetes, but the overall plot of the biblical story can be clearly discerned and easily summarized. Balak, the king of Moab, hears of how the Israelites have defeated the Amorites in their campaigns against Og and Sihon. Moab and its ally, Midian, seek to engage Balaam to curse Israel lest Moab and Midian fall to the same fate as the Amorites. Balaam, to whom God speaks in his dreams, refuses the royal emissaries twice, but upon their third visit, God permits Balaam to go. In one of the seams in the story, God becomes incensed at Balaam when he departs, apparently having had a change of mind; while this passage presents a redactional-interpretive challenge, it also provides us with the famous story of Balaam's donkey: the donkey perceives the angel blocking Balaam's path and veers aside. When Balaam—the seer who cannot see—beats his donkey to drive it forward, God grants the donkey speech and the donkey rebukes its owner. Only then does Balaam see the angel blocking his way, and the angel affirms the earlier instruction that Balaam will say only the words that God puts in his mouth (just as the donkey has done). Balaam proceeds to join Balak, who prepares seven altars and offerings at Balaam's instruction. Balaam then goes in search of revelation, and we hear the first of four oracles in which Balaam, hired to curse Israel, blesses them instead. In Yannai's lectionary, the weekly reading concludes with Num. 23:9, the opening of the first oracle; the next week resumes there and continues with the subsequent oracles.[14]

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[13] E.g., b. BB 16b, "Who wrote the Scriptures? — Moses wrote his own book and the scrolls of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch."

[14] Yannai's poetry has been crucial in reconstructing the so-called Triennial cycle, in which the Torah was read over the course of three to three- and-a-half years, in contrast to the Babylonian annual cycle, in which the Torah is read in its entirety in a single year. See Ben Zion Wachholder "Prolegomenon" to Jacob Mann, *The Bible As It Was Read and Preached in the Ancient Synagogue*, 2 vols (1940; reprint New York: Ktav, 1971), I:xviii-xxi.

The repetitive iterations of Balaam's refusal and concession display a common rhetorical technique familiar from folklore as much as from more "elite" forms of literature—delays and reiterations which create and then resolve narrative tension—while the curse that turns into a blessing provides a fine example of the aesthetically satisfying trope of ironic reversal (so-called "poetic justice").[15] Similarly, the three-way confrontation between Balaam, his donkey, and the angel provides a robust example of situational humor, as the donkey perceives the truth more readily than the professional seer, and she speaks with the same divine authority. In terms of aesthetics and rhetoric, this pericope is intellectually and artistically pleasing, even if details of the story—particularly the conflicting directives of the deity, but also certain details such as how the Moabite emissaries attempt to court Balaam—can be puzzling. For later readers, these puzzles present an opportunity rather than a problem.

Balak and Balaam in Midrash and Targum

When considering how a liturgical poet such as Yannai innovates in his approach to telling—or retelling—a story in the context of a piyyut, the more familiar Hellenistic and rabbinic treatments of the same material provide important counter-examples.[16] As Geza Vermes notes, "It will be seen that not every part of the biblical text receives equal attention from the commentators. Also, they are far more interested in Balaam's actions than in his prophecies."[17] Furthermore, the ancient exegetes are universally more interested in Balaam than in Balak. Philo and Josephus display interest in this passage, but Midrash Tanhuma is the earliest

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[15] For a thorough study of another body of traditions from a storytelling perspective, with substantial attention to issues of orality and literary composition, see Kristen H. Lindbeck, *Elijah and the Rabbis: Story and Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[16] The still-standard overview of aggadic material on Balaam remains Geza Vermes, "The Story of Balaam: The Scriptural Origin of Haggadah," in his *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 127-177.

[17] Vermes, "The Story of Balaam," 127.

rabbinic midrash to treat this pericope extensively and systematically.[18] While the written version of the Tanhuma is often dated to the 8th century, making it somewhat late (later than Yannai, in particular), it likely draws on extant and circulating but otherwise unrecorded traditions, which in some case find their earliest attestation in piyyut.

Speaking broadly, early Jewish and rabbinic interpretations of Num. 22-24, colored by the Israelite apostasy at Baal-Peor in Num. 25 and Balaam's execution in Num. 31:8, accept a negative understanding of the gentile seer. We encounter this unfavorable view in Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament, among other early sources, and certainly in the classical aggadah. Milgrom summarizes the clear exegetical trajectory:

> The postbiblical texts exaggerate Balaam's vices to such a degree that he becomes an exemplar of villainy...Later traditions acknowledge almost nothing of Balaam the obedient servant of the Lord, who could not be bribed by all the wealth of Moab. He is, instead, the archetypal enemy of Israel, a Pharaoh or Haman, whose power would threaten to annihilate Israel were it not for the intervention of Israel's God.[19]

Although the biblical text provides evidence of a positive understanding of Balaam—particularly in Num. 22-24—he is not, in post-biblical writings, remembered as good.

Whereas the Tanhuma traditions provide diverse, anthologized, and often granular interpretations of the story of Balaam and Balak, often reading it phrase-by-phrase and keyword-by-keyword, the Palestinian *targumim* (Neophyti, at least, probably predating Yannai) provides a different physical model of storytelling in that it leaves the overall biblical narrative intact. Targum, to borrow a phrase, gives us the Bible "translated

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[18] Balaam is mentioned four times in SifN *Mattot* 5; Balak is not mentioned at all.

[19] Milgrom, *Numbers*, 471. See, too, Judith Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counselors: Job, Jethro and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition.* Brown Judaic Studies 47 (Scholars Press: Chico, CA), l983; and more recently, George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (eds.), *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

and improved (*verdeutscht und verbessert*)."[20] In the major exegetical Palestinian *targumim* (particularly Targum Neophyti but also Targum Pseudo-Jonathan), the most substantial embellishments concern Balaam's exchange with his donkey in Num. 22 and, in contrast with the major midrashic sources, the content of his oracles in Num. 23-24.[21] In short, the Palestinian targumic versions expand the entertaining and affirming parts of the tale. A piyyut on this passage, however, will be as responsive to the liturgical setting and the lectionary as to the text itself; thus, the poet will have the impetus (which he may or may not resist) to emphasize the oft-neglected figure of Balak simply because he is the subject of the first verses of the Torah portion and is thus an integral part of the poem.

In short, any given text must be analyzed with an eye toward its appeal to the audience as a key component of its "life-setting." The schoolhouse had its own norms of performance, as recent work on rabbinic orality has amply demonstrated;[22] piyyutim clearly participate in

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[20] According to American Jewish lore, this ascription referred to a Yiddish production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. See Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

[21] The Fragment Targum does not, by nature, systematically treat a passage; see Michael Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch: according to their extant sources*. 2 vols. Annalecta Biblica 76 (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1980), especially pages 1:86-87 and 2:73-75. Pseudo-Jonathan and the Fragment Targum also both post-date Yannai, in their extant forms. Neophyti is usually dated to roughly the fourth century CE and thus predates Yannai.

[22] The topic of orality in rabbinic literature, particularly in the earlier body of works (ca. early 3rd-century) has received significant attention in the last decade, and many of these studies attend specifically to the performative and rhetorical elements of these oral traditions. Of particular note is Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), who emphasizes the importance of the *chreia* (anecdote) in rabbinic literature, using the Greco-Roman progymnasmata to inform his study; Catherine Heszer, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 81. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); and Steven Fraade, "Literary Composition and Oral Performance in Early Midrashim," in *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999): 33-51, "Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence," *Jewish Studies* 48 (2012): 1*-40* (English section), and "Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism: Oral Torah and Written Torah," *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 31-46. All are rich and multifaceted studies which engage in the dynamics between

the same "exegetical culture" as midrash and targum in terms not only of motifs but also of techniques, and yet the significance of their embeddedness in liturgy surely affected how common traditions were received. As a result of these variations in settings, audience-dynamics, and purposes, midrash, targum, and piyyut approach storytelling with varied and distinctive purposes along various continuums of theatricality.[23] Where the targumim are linear and faithful to the structure of the biblical base-text, thus they resembling (at least superficially) the edited presentation of midrashim (both of which were in some fashion likely connected to the Torah service rather than prayer), the piyyutim dynamically weave together the biblical text with the liturgy; thus, the relationship between piyyut and biblical story is less predictable than in a more exegetical, explanatory work, and the result more reliant on the active involvement of the audience-*cum*-participants.

Yannai's Qedushta for Num. 22

While exegetical midrashim are episodic in nature because of their phrase-by-phrase, anthologized method of composition which often lends

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text and orality, both from within the textual sources themselves and with attentiveness to material culture and, perhaps to a lesser extent, more theoretical analyses. Serious interest in the oral and rhetorical elements of rabbinic literature dates back to the mid-20th-century and the works of such scholars as Saul Lieberman (author of, among many other works, *Greek in Jewish Palestine/Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* [New York: JTSA, 1994; a single-volume reprint of works originally printed in 1965 and 1962, respectively]) and David Daube (author of, e.g., "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric," *HUCA* 22 (1949): 239–264). This, in turn, arose in part out of the interest of New Testament scholars in the Hellenistic nature of certain rhetorical elements of Christian writings, including Jesus' parables in the New Testament and the writings of early Church Fathers.

[23] Space does not permit an exploration of the "relative theatricality" within the various corpora, but the diversity should be noted: for example, "homiletical" midrashim such as Leviticus Rabbah are significantly more "theatrical" than exegetical midrashim such as Genesis Rabbah—and arguably equivalent in theatricality to some Targumic texts. In turn, Targum Onqelos is far less theatrical, and less inclined to embellishment in general, than any of the midrashim, and certainly less so than Targum Neophyti or Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. For a discussion of piyyut through the lens of Late Ancient theater, see Laura Lieber, "Theater of the Holy: Jewish Piyyut, Christian Hymnography, and the Rhetoric of the Late Ancient Stage," *Harvard Theological Review* (forthcoming).

to the creation of "micro-stories" within larger anthologies of exegesis, and while the Palestinian targumim are linear if uneven embellishments of the biblical text, piyyutim select and highlight key images, phrases, and motifs within the biblical story and develop, distill, and revisit them from a variety of perspectives. It is not that piyyutim are not verse-centric; like a *petichta*,[24] a qedushta (such as the text which follows) is very much centered on the opening verses of the Torah portion and the *haftarah* (the reading from the Prophets that complements the Torah portion). The key differences are, instead, a matter of proportion—of how lengthy and how varied the embellishments of the verses are in a poem as complicated as a qedushta compared to the prose petichta.[25] Furthermore, distinctive elements of payyetanic rhetoric emerge in part because liturgical poems were not created primarily as exegetical works but rather as liturgical works that engage with exegesis, and in part because piyyut is poetry rather than prose. Hebrew poetry in Late Antiquity, with its reliance on parallelism, repetition, and word-play and its aesthetic of binaries and polarities, lends itself to a rhetoric which explores and deepens particular elements within a text in a kaleidoscopic rather than direct way.

The poem that follows is Yannai's *piyyut* (that is, liturgical poem) for Num. 22. It would have been recited in the synagogue sanctuary on the Sabbath morning when the Torah reading began with Num. 22:2; as the cues in the manuscript indicate, the poetic text was interwoven with fixed language of the prayers and it reflects a time before the texts of the prayers themselves were fixed. As a kind of exegetical-liturgical hybrid, this poem—a fine exemplar of a popular Late Ancient form of Jewish liturgical

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[24] A *petichta* (sometimes called a proem) is a rabbinic genre of exegesis that "opens" (*patach*) with a verse originating far from the verse at hand (often from Writings) and cleverly working its way towards the goal of using that "verse from afar" to explicate the verse under scrutiny.

[25] For a comparison of the qedushta and the petichta, see Elizur, "The Congregation in the Synagogue."

writing—provides a clear example of how payyetanic aesthetics, poetic form, and liturgical setting intersect with biblical story.[26]

The poem examined here is an example of a *qedushta* (a poem which culminates in the recitation of the third blessing of the Amidah, the Qedushah: Isa. 6:3 and Ezek. 3:12), a subset of the larger genre of piyyut known as *qerovot* (piyyutim which embellish the Amidah). Piyyutim as a genre of writing are first fully attested in the fourth or fifth-century CE, although precursors can be found centuries earlier. Initially, piyyutim were composed primarily for the High Holy Days and other "special" occasions, but by the sixth century, we find them composed for the weekly Sabbath service. Each week, in the congregations where these works were performed, the prayer texts varied in dynamic engagement with the lectionary, rather like a cantata. The Qedushta is the earliest of these weekly types of poems, and Yannai (who lived in the sixth century, presumably in the Galilee) was an early master of the style. Qedushta'ot consist of nine basic units that follow standardized structures and patterns—akin to the movements that constitute a symphony.[27] The Qedushta form provides a kind of scaffolding—with a variety of fixed structures and patterns but a tremendous amount of space for creativity and innovation, too—for poetic exegesis and narration, as well as the creation of a prayer experience.

In the qedushta for Num. 22, Yannai takes the lively and exegetically ever-expanding story of Balak and Balaam, as presented not by the portion

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[26] Translation of this piyyut is included as an appendix to this essay; the translation is based on the *Ma'agarim* version of the Hebrew (http://hebrew-treasures.huji.ac.il/). Readers will note that instead of the static text of the statutory prayers, the qedushta provides poetic units that interweave the language of the Torah portion into the theme of the blessing, with only the benedictions from the blessing being fixed from week to week. Each week, the Amidah—the central prayer of the service—changed in response to the lectionary. For more on this fluidity in the liturgy and the structure of the qedushta, see Laura Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 2010), especially pp. 36-64. This volume also offers an overview of the history of piyyut in Late Antiquity and highlights the contributions of the liturgical poet (*payyetan*) Yannai.

[27] For an outline of the standard Qedushta form, particularly as employed by Yannai, see Lieber, "Appendix II: Outline of the Generic Qedushta Form," in *Yannai on Genesis*, 783-784. See also, Lieber, "Themes and Variations."

in its entirety so much as in the opening two verses of the reading; he interrupts the biblical text's linearity and distills its key motifs, images, and emotions, and he integrates those varied elements into a new context, creating a new narrative in which his community—the audience—plays as large a role as any of the biblical characters. The piyyut, then, constructs a narrationally-grounded experience, one indebted to, shaped by, and engaged with the biblical text but not identical to that source.

To understand how the qedushta works as a story requires approaching the text in a linear fashion, recreating, insofar as possible, the experience of hearing the work as a performed liturgical piece. We should "listen" to all nine "movements," in order. The opening word of the first unit (the *Magen*, which praises God as the shield (*magen*) of Abraham) is the word, "fear," establishes one of the major tonal motifs of the poem: Moabite terror. With this word and its many synonyms throughout the first unit (terror, trembling, dread, and awe), the poet vividly conveys a sense of the Moabites' emotional response to the Israelites' approach. The fact that Yannai introduces Israel as "this people" (from Exod. 15:13) emphasizes that it is the triumphant exodus from Egypt that has stricken the Moabites with terror, in fulfillment of what is written in Exod. 15:14-15. The second stanza of the first unit, which opens with a reference to the Moabites' "perverse anger" (l. 3), introduces a second motif: Moabite rage. Through the juxtaposition of these two stanzas, the poet reveals how Moabite *emotion* led to active Moabite aggression. The third stanza makes clear that this course of action was misguided—"their minds were enfeebled and inflamed" (l. 5)—and locates responsibility directly with Balak. The complete arc of the biblical story (Moabite fear leading to Moabite humiliation) is here suggested not in terms of plot—of action—but in terms of interiority and emotion.

If we approach this opening unit from the perspective of storytelling, we appreciate how efficiently and effectively Yannai has set the stage: we witness the approach of the Israelites through the eyes of a fearful, hostile, panicking witness. The intensity of fear, quickly mutating to blind rage, results in a misguided conspiracy against God's chosen nation. Only with the last phrase of the unit, however, do we learn through whose eyes we

are seeing: those of Balak, son of Zippor the Moabite king. The list of intertexts that follows this unit underscores the futility of Balak's panicked, precipitous scheming while the transition to the benediction emphasizes God's ongoing protection of Israel. For the listeners, the perspective is one of indirect omniscience, as if viewing the scene through one particular perspective (Balak's) even as we understand it through the eyes of an omniscient bystander. The cited biblical verses—from Proverbs, Psalms, Isaiah, and Micah—testify to the reliability and veracity of the more remote witness.[28] At the same time, these verses, like the poem itself, decouple the new story from the biblical past and start the process of reframing it in a timeless, ongoing present tense.[29]

The second unit of the poem, the *Mehayyeh* (the unit embellishing the benediction praising God as "He who resurrects [*mehayyeh*] the dead"), does not move the narrative forward, but instead it elliptically revisits elements from the first unit but with an emphasis here on the physical and concrete rather than the interior world. In the first stanza of the Mehayyeh, the sight of the arriving Israelites causes the Moabites to writhe in physical pain. In the second stanza, the poet describes how the Moabites were felled by fear at the failure of Sihon and Og to withstand the Israelite onslaught through arms or sorcery. The third stanza depicts the terrified Moabites taking action and girding their loins for battle, but the final words, re-articulating their dread, cast an ominous pall over their preparations. The Moabites suspect what the listeners already know. The intertexts for this unit underscore the fact of Israel's physical triumph through God's gift of strength, as the transition to the benediction underscores, and once again, these verses—from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Psalms, and (unusually) Deuteronomy—disrupt the temporal framing of the story and make it timeless. In both the first and second units, through the recitation of the benedictions (part of the fixed framework of the genre of

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[28] On the verse chains, see Shulamit Elizur, "The Chains of Verses in Hebrew Prayers and Liturgical Poetry," Tarbiz 77 (2008): 425-473 [Hebrew].

[29] I would like to thank Alan Cooper for his insight into this temporal function of the intertexts, which anticipate the function of the haftarah in the lectionary.

poem, unchanging from week to week), the descendants of those ancient Israelites enter their voices into the story as they, like their ancestors, give thanks to God for saving them in the face of the foe. It is as if the community shifts fluidly from audience to chorus. They feel with the poet—see with him—and now, empowered and instructed by the liturgical structure, they speak together with him.

These first two poems—the Magen (Poem One) and Mehayyeh (Poem Two)—provide Yannai's listeners with a vivid and pointillist snapshot of Moabite feeling and frantic response. It is as if the listeners stand within the Moabite camp, within Balak's mind, even while simultaneously retaining an awareness of divine perspective. The third unit, the *Meshallesh* ("third," i.e., the third unit), turns and speaks directly to the deity.[30] In this section, which introduces the first verse of the haftarah (Mic. 7:16), the poet steps back from the intense immediacy of the Torah portion's scene as if to survey the situation from a more cosmic perspective. He now speaks within the "past tense" of biblical narrative, regarding the defeat of the Amorites and the Moabites as completed long ago. At the same time, as he weaves this scene from the past into the future-looking orientation of the haftarah, he decouples the story of Balak from a specific timeframe. He transforms the singular biblical narrative into a paradigmatic story: "*The peoples will be shamed / and the nations abashed*" (Meshallesh, line 1). That is, the humiliation soon to be experienced by the Moabites in the Book of Numbers will become the common experience of all of Israel's foes, not only past but present and future as well. The poet, affirming the truth of the biblical prophets, adopts the omniscient perspective of the deity who has spoken in the past and whom the poet now addresses. Informed by God's own language, the poet can speak both to his human listeners with confidence about the future defeat of Israel's enemies even as his words serve to remind the deity of divine promises still awaiting fulfillment.

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[30] On the Meshallesh, see Shulamit Elizur, "On the Literary Structures of the *Meshallesh* in the Yannaite Qedushta," in *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 10-11 (1987-88): 309-417 [Hebrew].

The conquest and shaming of the nations is made concrete through its physical imagery. Defeat results in utter sensory and communicative deprivation: muteness, darkness, and silence. Victory, explicitly and implicitly, is the opposite: physical empowerment and honor. The unit is structured on binaries: the high fall, the arrogant are humbled, those who plot fail, and the boastful will be silenced while the silenced sing. The biblical verses that conclude this unit underscore this opposition: "they" (the nations) are shamed; "you" (Israel) rejoice. Whereas the first two units articulated Moabite fear, now the poet expresses his confidence in Israel's eventual triumph and conjures up a sense of how that experience of victory will feel.

The Meshallesh, written with a fast-paced rhythm and structure that anticipates the pace of the two *Rahit* (literally, a "runner") poems to come in units 7a and 7b, widens the scope of the story. Developing the trend begun in the earlier units, it reframes the biblical narrative as something timeless and yet also utterly timely and current, and it focuses on the broader emotional contours of the original tale without specific reference to the events of the Torah portion itself. In turn, Poem Four (which has no specific name) creates a powerful intellectual contrast, as it continues to speak directly to the deity but shifts attention back to the story of Balak. Where the Meshallesh presented a global view, poem four explores the nuances of a single figure: the sparrow (*zippor*). Balak ben Zippor ("son of a sparrow," but behaving like a bird of prey) here hunts a sparrow-like Israel; the poet creates a sense of disproportion along with self-delusion.[31] The royal hunter assumes he possesses superior physical and supernatural power as he plans to battle against the fragile if numerous "flock" of Israel, but it is he who is truly weak. This imagery—a tiny bird facing both snares and sorcery—makes the conflict more vivid even as it renders Israel's triumph more dramatic. The poet's use of the first person (he speaks of "our lives" and how Balak "hunted us") draws his listeners into the story as participants rather than bystanders.

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[31] The language draws on Prov. 26:2, an intertext from Poem One, highlighting the futility of Balak's effort and unifying the language of the poem.

Rather than constructing a linear narrative or faithfully retelling the biblical story in sequence, the poet instead revisits selected motifs, thus amplifying them and highlighting select, vivid elements and activating the latent potential of the original. By doing so, he creates an emerging unity within the poem while also increasing the likelihood that less literate or attentive listeners would grasp the overall sense of the poem.[32] In the *Asiriyyah* (a "tenner," so-called because Poem Five always contains ten lines), Yannai circles back to the senses of hearing and sight first mentioned in the Meshallesh; at the same time, he develops the motif of the triumph of the small but numerous over the powerful (lice and locusts defeat bows, swords, and spears, much as the sparrow overcomes nets and sorcery) and the theme of Israel's distinctiveness when measured against all other nations. Again, the story's significance is broadened far beyond the narrative context of the biblical tale. Balak joins the five others who "saw and were ashamed," who stand in contrast to the ancestors of Israel who "saw and rejoiced." In the final lines of this unit, the poet connects the defeat of the Moabites to Noah's flood, underscoring the paradigmatic nature of their defeat.

In poem six, Yannai returns to the themes of the opening units, taking us into Balak's mind and letting us see through his eyes, even as we are privy to the inevitability of Israel's triumph. In this unit, each stanza opens with the phrase, "*Then he saw*" (from Num. 22:2) and describes how the scene of Israel's approach appeared to Balak; the second stich develops some aspect of either Balak's vision or his internal response to the sight; the third stich depicts how Balak plotted to rid himself of the Israelites; and the final stich affirms the futility of his plans. Yannai's listeners thus become privy to the inner workings of the mind behind the plot, but also to the larger "plot" he cannot and will not comprehend. The two *Rahitim* (poems 7a and 7b), in turn, loop back to this basic structure and further refine and develop it. The first rahit is like poem six but faster paced: it returns to the phrase "*Then he saw*" followed by a phrase describing Israel,

[32] Elizur connects this pedagogical aspect of poetic ellipticism to the puzzle-like appeal of the petichta; see Elizur, "The Congregation in the Synagogue."

a brief description of Balak's emotional and even physical response, and reiteration of his plan against them. Rhetorically, this first rahit is purely "narration" in that it speaks about Balak and Israel in the third person. The second rahit picks up the theme of the last line of each stanza of poem six—the futility of Balak's scheming—but now speaks directly to the deity; each line of this unit is structured on the pattern of "*If You...Who can..?*" The first phrase is completed by a litany of synonyms for God's protection of Israel (second person singular perfect verb forms) while the second catalogues the many ways one could harm another (third person singular imperfect verbs), all of which are doomed when the foe is Israel. Balak's folly becomes a general paradigm of futility, and this understanding of the world becomes the knowledge that the poet and the community share with God.

In the last extant unit of the poem, Unit Eight, is the *Silluq* (lit., "that which is taken up," indicating the conclusion). In this passage, the poet continues to pull back from the scene and enlarge the view through which he and his listeners imagine it; now, instead of viewing the world through Balak's eyes, the poem offers a vision through the divine eye—an elegant shift in perspective from the direct address of the deity in the second rahit (7b). In the Silluq, the entire future is known: every birth and every word and every action. The poem has shifted from the flawed, limited vision of Balak to the all-knowing vision of God. Then, in the final lines, we (the audience/congregation/readers) see God through the poet's own eyes; we perceive how dreadful and delightful God is, and, overcome, the congregation joins with the narrator and the angels as every mouth utters "*Holy*!". The past recedes in the glory of the present moment, the moment of the recitation of the Qedushah, even as the boundary between heaven and earth is transcended.[33] The community enters not simply a story, but a sublime world—and the story, wedded to the liturgy, is their portal.

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[33] The Qedushta, as a genre, culminated in the recitation of the Qedushah (the Sanctus or Trisagion, "thrice-holy," as it is known in Latin and Greek). The essence of the Qedushah are the quotations from Isa. 6:3 and Ezek. 3:12, words overheard by prophets in the heavenly realm and believed to be core elements of the angelic liturgy. The Qedushah was tremendously popular in early Jewish and Christian liturgy. See Albert Gerhards, "Crossing Borders—The Kedushah and the Sanctus: A Case Study at the Convergence of Jewish and

If we regard this poem, as a whole, as a kind of story, we notice first that the focus is largely on Balak; if nothing else, this is a consequence of the biblical lemma with which the poet worked, and yet it is not of necessity a limiting factor. The poet displays great freedom in his corpus in terms of shaping his biblical material through selective emphasis.[34] Yannai sometimes treats Balak as an individual character and sometimes as a stereotype representing all of Israel's enemies.[35] The poet seems to delight in his ability to show his audience the world through varied perspectives. He revels in making his listeners privy to Balak's frantic, impulsive, and futile scheming. Deploying the full force of the biblical canon, Yannai layers *schadenfreude* over irony as he anticipates the shaming of Israel's arrogant foe. And yet, as the poem progresses, the focus shifts from a scene grounded in the biblical text to something more present or timeless in response to the liturgical frame, by the influence of the words of the prophets and the Psalms, and in anticipation of the approaching recitation of the heaven-focused Qedushah. The shift happens subtly yet predictably, and the following week, with the next qedushta (which will embellish the next week's Torah reading), the pattern will repeat.[36]

Lacking an explicit anchor in time, a fixed perspective, or a discernable narrative motion, this poem does not present a conventional

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Christian Liturgy," in Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship: New Insights into its History and Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 27-41.

[34] An extreme example of Yannai's flexibility, for instance, is the way Yannai uses the biblical story of the trial of the suspected adulteress (Num. 5) to provide a treatise on the nature of womankind from Eve to the present.

[35] Strikingly, Balaam is never mentioned (nor is he named in the following qedushta, although his oracles are). This can be explained, on the one hand, by his absence from the opening verses of the Torah portion, but at the same time Yannai and other payyetanim routinely felt free to introduce characters beyond those opening lines into their poems, so Balaam's absence nonetheless reflects the poet's choice to focus elsewhere.

[36] Yannai's qedushta for Num. 23:10 (units one through four are extant) happens to be thematically similar to the present text, but with a greater focus on Balaam and his interactions with Balak, in response to the lectionary.

form of storytelling. Indeed, while Yannai's piyyutim contain many discreet wordplays and motifs in common with other works of exegesis,[37] when compared as narratives to midrashic anthologies and even more so to the targumim, piyyutim stand out for their non-linear, elliptical, and even kaleidoscopic presentation of shared themes and motifs.[38] Payyetanic language can be dense and ambiguous even as the affinity for binaries, polarities, key phrases, and catalogues can make them intensively repetitive. The narrative content of these poems—their "story crafting"—can easily be overlooked entirely or isolated into specific, hospitable units which are more overtly constructed according to a linear plot. In this essay, my analysis has emphasized the constructive-narrative elements of every unit. But to what end?

Conclusions: "The Plot within the Piyyut"

Piyyutim are not "stories" in the way many biblical narratives are. Nor are piyyutin a variety of "retold Bible" (such as Jubilees or Pirke deRabbi Eliezer) or narrative modes of exegesis and interpretation, including midrash and targum—all forms in which later writers smooth over irregularities in the biblical text and fill in its real or perceived gaps. Payyetanic constructions are elliptical and even askew, as what was linear becomes circular; their language can be cryptic and often emphasizes

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[37] Z. M. Rabinovitz, *Halakhah and Aggadah in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai* (Tel Aviv: Alexander Kohut, 1965) [Hebrew]. This builds on the earlier and very important essay by Saul Lieberman, "*Hazzanut Yannai*," *Sinai* 4 (1938): 221-50 [Hebrew]. Rabinovitz, in his edition of this piyyut (*Machzor Piyyutei Rabbi Yannai*, 2 vols. [Tel Aviv: Bialik, 1985-87], II:89-97) cites Numbers Rabbah, Tanhumah, Tanhumah Buber, Midrash HaGadol, Esther Rabbah, Exodus Rabbah, Deuteronomy Rabbah, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and Midrash Lekah Tov as rabbinic sources which shed light on the content of this piyyut. Most of these sources, however, in their surviving form, postdate Yannai.

[38] This phenomenon in Late Ancient poetry has been described as "jeweled poetry" by Michael Roberts (*The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989]), whose work informs that of Yahalom, *Poetry and Society*, and has proven influential in general in aesthetic treatments of late ancient hymnography very widely, including in work of Michael Swartz and Laura Lieber. See also Elizur, "The Congregation and the Synagogue."

verbal and aural patterns and structures over content and plot. That said, while piyyutim may not tell stories in a conventional manner, they do engage in storytelling of a different kind. Piyyutim and other liturgical poems (including Late Ancient Christian poetry in Syriac and Greek) create experiential narratives in which the community members are active, sympathetic participants. That is, the poems integrate the audience—human and divine —into the ongoing sacred histories they embellish. History becomes memory, and Scripture becomes a kind of communal autobiography in process.

Whenever the poet speaks in an inclusive way—to God as "You" or with the community as "we"—he breaks down the barriers (theater's "fourth wall") separating speaker from audience and draws them into the experience that he is not only narrating but is also constructing.[39] Unlike other ways of retelling biblical stories, as in midrash or targum, the boundaries between past and present and heaven and earth collapse not just intellectually but experientially.[40] The integrity of the biblical story as a past-tense narrative gives way to a work yet unfinished, one that segues seamlessly from history into a liturgically timeless present tense.

As a consequence of both form and function, the version of the story of Balak presented here does not necessarily enrich our understanding of the biblical story, although it certainly amplifies elements of the original tale. Its power as a text derives from the way in which it simultaneously generalizes the story, decoupling it from its moment in time and tailor it

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[39] See on this issue of address Daniel Weiss, "The (Odd) Deixis of 'You' in Rabbinic Prayer," in *The Journal of Textual Reasoning* 5 (2007), online (http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/volume5/number1/TR05_01_weiss.html). This same issue contains other articles relevant to the larger issue of direct address of the deity in Jewish prayer. The present article is interested in address of both the deity and the community in multiple, dynamic ways. More directly related to piyyut, see Michael Tzvi Novick, "The Poetics of Yannai's Sixth: Between Scripture, God, and Congregation," in W.J. van Bekkum and N. Katsumata (eds), *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Leidin: Brill, 2011), 69-81.

[40] For a more elaborate and substantial discussion of this element of piyyut, see Laura Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *Journal of Religion* 90 (2010): 119-147.

to the community at hand, whenever and wherever this piyyut may have been performed. Its message is one of triumph as both a promise (to be experienced again in the future) and a reality (when the present is transcended during the Qedushah). The elliptical nonlinearity of payyetanic storytelling serves, like carefully applied layers of color in a painting, to deepen, nuance, and texturize the vivid and varied experiences in the poem from diverse perspectives.

This understanding of liturgical poetry as story crafting brings piyyut into the realm of ancient oratory. As Ruth Webb writes:

> In all the examples [of *ekphrasis* from the *progymnasmata*] cited above, the readers who felt that they were in the presence of the subject matter were responding to a text from an earlier period. They reveal a concept of classical texts as privileged points of access to the experience of the past, which make not just the subject seem present but the authors as well...Theon of Alexandria recommends that the student reading the text of a classical orator should think himself into the skin of the original speaker...All readers, even of the deadest of poets, are thus assimilated into the audiences of a live performance. The live audiences of spoken orations were also assumed to respond in the same way to the effective use of vivid language.[41]

In general, ancient orators—actors, declaimers, and performers—assumed a dynamic involvement with both texts and history, for themselves and for their listeners. The classical past, which for the Jewish community consisted of the biblical tales much as Greco-Roman traditions did for non-Jews, was still alive and continuously unfolding, and it could be consciously used to shape both the stories the listeners told themselves as they surveyed their day or their lifetimes and the way in which the past came to life in their minds' eyes.[42] When the poet or cantor—or, by extension, the preacher or translator—took a breath to breathe life into the

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[41] Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 25-26.

[42] As Webb notes, "The term translated as 'reader' in several of the examples above is *akroates*—'listener'—and what is read is often referred to as a *logos*, with all its implications of live speech" (*Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 26).

weekly lectionary, he and all who heard him leaned in to hear—and to contribute their voices to—a song of themselves. Audience, characters, and performer merged, history became experience, and ancient history became collective memory, a story to be told to yet another generation.

Appendix: Translation of Yannai's Qedushta for Numbers 22:2

(Magen: Alphabetical acrostic from* alef *to* lamed*)

Fear of 'this people'[1] (struck them) /

from the moment they crossed the sea

Stricken with terror as soon as they heard, they trembled[2]

Indeed, as soon as they saw them, they fled[3]

They were seized with dread and awe

Perverse anger they donned (like garments)

And their hope turned to terror and shame

They conspired, whispered, and plotted

(But) their conjurers failed them utterly

Their minds were enfeebled and inflamed

They conspired to destroy the children of the smooth one[4]

When he hastened to utterly wipe (them) out

Balak possessed neither knowledge nor wisdom

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[1] Israel, as in Ex. 15:13.

[2] Ex. 15:14.

[3] Psa. 48:5-6, "For, behold, the kings were assembled, they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were frightened; they fled away."

[4] That is, the children of Jacob/Israel, who is described as "smooth skinned" in Gen. 27:11.

As it is written: "And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites" (Num. 22:2)[5]

And it is said: "Like a sparrow (zippor) *in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight." (Prov. 26:2)*

And it is said: "The wicked man sees it and is angry; he gnashes his teeth and melts away; the desire of the wicked man comes to nothing" (Psa. 112:10)

And it is said: "The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him." (Psa. 37:32)

And it is said: "Then they shall be dismayed and confounded because of Ethiopia, their hope, and of Egypt, their boast." (Isa. 20:5)

And it is said: "The seers shall be disgraced, and the whisperers put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God." (Mic. 3:7)

O God, be gracious to us / and let not evil against us be excused / and with

Your strong right hand shield us!

Blessed…Shield…

(Mehayyeh: Alphabetical acrostic from* mem *to* tav*)

Camps of the man (who led) the steadfast ones[6]

Lo, when the enemy beheld (them)

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[5] The Torah portion was Num. 22:2-23:9.

[6] Lit., "the man of rocks"—that is, the Israelites (rocks, sturdy or reliable ones) led by Moses (the man).

They shuddered like a woman with birth-pangs

They acted, and indeed were, afflicted

Fear fell upon them

They beheld the preparations and their visages darkened

He cast spells against them but they came to naught

The one who was tall and of exalted stature was felled[7]

The shields of warriors they gathered

Swords, sharp-edged, they belted on

Offspring of the daughters who conceived with their father[8]

They lifted their eyes, and they saw, and they were filled with dread

As it is written: "And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel" (Num. 22:3)

And it is said: "Let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a refuge to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples under foot has vanished from the land." (Isa. 16:4)

And it is said: "The cities shall be taken and the strongholds seized. The heart of the warriors of Moab shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her pangs." (Jer. 48:41)

And it is said: "Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see; and make their loins tremble continually." (Psa. 69:24)

And it is said: "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of you." (Deut. 28:10)

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[7] A reference to Sihon, a giant, using the language of Amos 2:9.

[8] A reference to the origin of the Moabites as told in Gen. 19:37-38; the word translated as "conceived" literally means "hatched."

And it is said: "Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed." (Isa. 61:9)

O Lord, gird with strength / and give not men power / and let us live again
through Your mighty dew!

Blessed…Who resurrects…

(Meshallesh: Name acrostic spelling out "Yannai" [y-n-y-y])

The peoples will be shamed / and the nations abashed
The fearsome ones humbled / and the *re'emim*[9] shall fall
O Radiant and Awesome One / set Your fear over them
Frustrate their plans / and doom their plots
Let them put their hands over their mouths /
while our mouths open freely
Aroused, You will put an end to their image[10] /
and You will cover them with disgrace
Let their eyes be plastered over / and their ears made deaf

[9] The rabbis understood this word to mean "unicorn" (see Isa. 34:7) and modern lexica understand it to mean "wild ox." The word puns on the name of Rome.

[10] See Psa. 73:20.

Their (verbal) fountains muted / by their sense of shame[11]

As it is written: "The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall put their hands over their mouths; their ears shall be deaf." (Mic. 7:16)

And it is said: "Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you." (Isa. 60:5)

And it is said: "The righteous shall see and be awed, and laugh at him" (Psa. 52:8)

And You are holy | enthroned on the praises of Israel…Please, God…

(Poem Four)

Our sparrow-like lives You saved /

from the netted web of Balak ben Zippor[12]

A pit he planned to dig / to hunt us like a sparrow /

when he beheld the people like a flock of sparrows

Then he sent for and summoned the son of Beor /

to curse and enchant, to defile[13] and imprecate

[11] Lit., "the shame of their faces," referring to the eyes, ears, and mouth specified in the previous stichs.

[12] Lit., "Balak, son of a sparrow."

[13] The root *n-d-d* or, more likely, *n-d-y* can have connotations of "mislead," "exclude," or "make detestable."

But his plans turned back upon his own head, O Radiant One[14] /

You who restore the sages[15]

As the sparrow flutters and as the swift flies,

his curse turned back against him[16] /

and extra blessings accrued to Your blessed ones

O Holy One…

(Asiriyyah: Alphabetical acrostic from* alef *to* yod*)

An ear to hear You created

And an eye to see You fashioned

Those who deal treacherously with You will fall with regard to the sight of their eyes

And those who trust in You will be exalted with regard to the sight of their eyes

Indeed, six are they who saw and rejoiced:

The father, the only one, the pure one, the beloved, the humble, and the zealous[17]

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[14] See Est. 9:25.

[15] From Isa. 44:25.

[16] See Prov. 26:2, quoted as an intertext after the Magen.

[17] That is, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Phineas.

Six wicked saw and were ashamed:

The Nephilim, Ham, Seir,[18] the Riffraff,[19] Haman, and Balak

The nation taken from within a nation[20] was wise with regard to deeds

For her paths are more exalted than any other nation

For every (other) nation is defended with bow and sword and spear

But they are defended with lice and locusts and many other plagues

Others, when they make war, if captives are taken they may come back

But they, when they make war, if captives are taken they get them back[21]

The (ordinary) one turns back when he wars if the city wall is bolted shut

But they do not budge until the wall crumbles

Every nation slays and a remnant puts to flight

But they smite until not a remnant or refugee remains[22]

He planned to curse them, thus, in the month of Bul[23]

The same stretch of days in which the Flood came upon…

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[18] That is, Esau-Edom-Rome.

[19] Num. 11:4-6.

[20] Deut. 4:34, referring to Israel.

[21] A reference to Abraham's war with the Canaanite kings on behalf of Lot.

[22] Reference to Deut. 3:3, the battle of the Israelites against Og of Bashan.

[23] That is, the month of Cheshvan (see 1 Kgs 6:38), according to chronology in *Seder Olam Rabbah* (see also Tan. *Hukkat* 24).

...the world...[24]

(Poem Six: Full alphabetical acrostic, from* alef *to* tav*)

Then he saw the tents of those who were compared to the apple of (His) eye[25]

Then he winked his eye / and made the Evil Eye

He looked and grew angry, and his eye dimmed

And likewise his magician was shut-of-eye

(*Then he saw*) a vine, a singular nation in the land

Whose shadow covered the face of the land

He planned to expel them from the land

But they were coming to take possession of the land

(*Then he saw*) the people that had been borne on wings of cloud

Against those who with their eye scorned their father and mocked their mother[26]

And he joined with the fellowship of Midian and Moab

But how can one rule over the people for whom God is as a father?

(*Then he saw*) the offspring of those compared with stars of light

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[24] Liturgically, the Hebrew *le-'olam* should be translated as "forever," but Yannai here exploits its alternative meaning as "to/for the world."

[25] Zech. 2:12.

[26] Prov. 30:11, here applied to the daughters of Lot – that is, the Ammonites and Moabites.

Lovely and bright like luminous lights

He hastened to summon the child of Beor / who was by the great river[27]

Against the blessed of the Lord, in order to curse (them)

(*Then he saw*) the assembly of the people that dwells alone

The camps of the mighty

He plotted with the Moabites and the Midianites

How to stir up strife in their midst

(*Then he saw*) the reed that was planted by the right hand of the Lord

For they are the seed blessed by the Lord

He learned nothing from he who said, "Who is the Lord?"[28]

He who said at the (sea of) reeds, "Righteous is the Lord!"[29]

(*Then he saw*) the raging battle that they waged

This nation that protected by the Man of War[30]

They lamented and their hearts melted

Lest they become like them[31] and crushed

(*Then he saw*) those who were born on the wings of eagles

Those who crouch like lions in secret places

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[27] Num. 22:5 describes Balaam as being by "the river" (the Euphrates).

[28] That is, from Pharaoh, who asked this question in Ex. 5:2.

[29] Pharaoh, in Ex. 9:27.

[30] That is, God (Ex. 15:3).

[31] The Egyptians.

He drew a circle to defeat the upright[32]

To entrap them in devastating destruction

(*Then he saw*) the freed who were ascending with (God's) strong hand

And strengthened by (His) outstretched arm

Crowned with mighty power

He rallied them with His cry

(*Then he saw*) the multitudinous assembly, like sprouts in a field

Freed from all their work in the field

They withered like the grass of the field

For they are compared to the beasts of the field[33]

(*Then he saw*) the vastness of the tents of Jacob

And within him, the heart of the deceiver stormed

The worm, Jacob! / He desired to destroy him—

He whose name was marked by the Name of God

(First Rahit [7a]: Full alphabetical acrostic, from* alef *to* tav*)

And thus, "Then Balak saw…"

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[32] This may be a reference to magical practices, as recorded in m. *Taan.* 3:8 (Honi the Circle-Drawer), by means of which Balaam lays a magical trap for the Israelites, or to a means of laying physical traps to ensnare them.

[33] That is, the Israelites (skilled, metaphorically as well as literally, through their experience of slavery in Egypt) mowed down the Moabites like dry hay.

Then he saw the loved ones and he wilted but he wanted to curse them

Then he saw those who were coming and he was afraid but he sought to swallow them

Then he saw the sojourners who would sojourn[34] and he pondered how to destroy them

Then he saw the bannered camp and was filled with dread, and he desired to deprive them

Then he saw the multitude and was overcome, and he mused how to crush them[35]

Then he saw those who were sown and he fretted, and he plotted to diminish them

Then he saw the hosts and trembled, and thought to defile them

Then he saw the babes and was crazed, and he schemed to sweep them away

Then he saw the unique ones and was afraid, and planned to scatter them

Then he saw the perfect ones[36] and was angry, and he swore to finish them off

Then he saw the united ones and scoffed, and joined to fight them

Then he saw those drawn out and quailed, and hastened to harm them

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[34] That is, Balak was wary of the Israelites who had gone down to Egypt "to sojourn there" and, in the end, defeated Pharaoh, lest Moab suffer the same fate.

[35] The letter *vav* is not included in the acrostic, perhaps because the letter begins every line.

[36] The root *k-l-l* (from the idea of "encircling") has overtones of marriage and exclusivity (*kallah* means "bride"), as well as completeness and protection.

Then he saw those who were lifted and trembled, and said to put them to flight

Then he saw the choice possession and stormed, and ordered to drive them out

Then he saw those coming up and swooned, and roused himself to uproot them

Then he saw the freed and feared them, and issued orders to break them

Then he saw the steadfast ones[37] and hated (them), and conspired to curse them

Then he saw the assemblies and abhorred (them), and rose up to shame them

Then he saw the multitude and trembled, and rushed to abuse them

Then he saw the tribes and hissed, and tried to wipe them out

Then he saw the pure ones and staggered, and endeavored to end them

(Second Rahit [7b]: Full alphabetical acrostic, from* alef *to* tav*)

And thus…

If You	love	*Who can* hate?
If You	bless	*Who can* curse?
If You	protect	*Who can* violate?
If You	join	*Who can* sunder?

[37] Lit., "rocks."

If You	multiply	*Who can* diminish?
If You	assemble	*Who can* disperse?
If You	find innocent	*Who can* accuse?
If You	favor	*Who can* deceive?
If You	declare pure	*Who can* defile?
If You	unify	*Who can* disband?
If You	honor	*Who can* shame?
If You	accompany	*Who can* stray?
If You	fill	*Who can* make deficient?
If You	give	*Who can* take?
If You	support	*Who can* knock over?
If You	help	*Who can* overcome?
If You	remember	*Who can* delay?
If You	illumine	*Who can* darken?
If You	bring close	*Who can* keep far?
If You	exalt	*Who can* bring low?
If You	watch over	*Who can* strike?
If You	hold fast	*Who can* smite?

(Silluq)

He foresees what the future holds / and promises what is to be

He sees he who will be born / and makes heard signs

And He makes utterance to the righteous / and speaks in order to save

He decrees and he rises / He adjures and he stands[38]

He who is lovely and also pleasant[39]

Dread and delight are both His

Sanctity and seemliness are His due

In the mouths of those above and those below, a single "Holy! "

As it is written, "And the one called…"[40]

[38] Job 22:28, Psa. 119:106.

[39] See Song 1:16.

[40] This cue indicates the transition to the recitation of the Qedushah (Isa. 6:3 and Ezek. 3:12). The final unit of the piyyut (Unit 9) contains the Qedushah proper.