

about the Merovingians? If the latter, should we stop seeing the Merovingians as normative and see them instead as outliers?

These questions were not supposed to (and could not be) answered by *East and West in the Early Middle Ages*. This volume provides the first step in demonstrating that the relations between the Merovingian kingdoms and the East were complex and multilayered and, thus, places the “first” early medieval kingdom back into the rest of the late antique Mediterranean. This shift in analytical framework will certainly be a source of exploration in the future, which another recently published volume from some of the same scholars, *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World*, will likely discuss further. We have moved past the old paradigm of a localized Merovingian world, uninterested in intellectual knowledge or connected to the rest of the Mediterranean, but I, for one, am excited to see what comes next.

Merle Eisenberg

National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC)

This work was supported by funding received from the NSF DBI 1639145.

Tzvi Novick, *Piyyut and Midrash: Form, Genre, and History*. Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements 30. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage, 2019. 235 pp. ISBN 9783525570807. €90.00.

In 1938, Menahem Zulay published what is often considered to be the first critical edition of classical *piyyutim*, Hebrew liturgical poems from late antique Palestine. At the time, scholars had only just begun to publish these long-forgotten works from manuscript fragments rediscovered in the Cairo Genizah. While the edition was nothing less than groundbreaking, Zulay chose to hold off on providing a commentary, such that, in the words of Saul Lieberman, “the book remains closed and sealed in terms of its content.”¹ For Lieberman, and for those scholars who came after him, the key to understanding *piyyut* lies in *midrash*, rabbinic exegesis, and thus, for the past eight decades, scholars have read *piyyut* as hierarchically indebted to rabbinic texts. When combined with its baroque aesthetic and the simple fact that much *piyyut* still remains unpublished, the perception of hierarchy has allowed scholars of late antique Judaism to largely avoid this corpus. *Piyyut*, it is believed, is hard to penetrate, and anyway, it is largely derivative and unoriginal.

1. Saul Lieberman, “*Hazanut Yannai*,” *Sinai* 4 (1939): 221–50 (225).

Tzvi Novick's learned and subtle new book, *Piyyut and Midrash: Form, Genre, and History*, seeks to rectify this situation. Over the course of seven chapters, Novick attempts "to build bridges across the disciplinary divide that separates the study of rabbinic literature in late antique Roman Palestine from the study of early (pre-classical and especially classical) *piyyut*" (215). In Chapter 1, Novick outlines the terms of his study, the program of the book, and also the ways in which the explicit performative element of *piyyut* differs from what is usually found in *midrash*. Much of the chapter takes up the issue of voicing in the two corpora. Novick looks at the way *midrash* and *piyyut* each represent the voicing of biblical characters, of God and Israel, and of the performer and audience. The differences between these corpora in this regard are, on the whole, perhaps fewer than one may have anticipated: Novick concludes one case study by stating that "despite the fact that the poems are more interested in and attentive to subtleties of voicing than is the midrash passage, even the latter includes much character speech" (30). Similarly, in light of his findings that "the poet speaks in his own voice relatively rarely," Novick suggests that "the relative reserve of the *paytan* may perhaps serve as evidence. . . that the absence of a self-referential homilist in rabbinic homiletical texts is not a marker of the gap between text and performance, but a feature of homiletical performance" (36), and thus "that the homiletical midrashim may more closely preserve the form of homiletical performance than scholars have heretofore assumed" (25). Novick finds larger differences when it comes to the role of the audience's voice, allowing himself, "even if this line of inquiry is inevitably speculative" (41), to suggest that the congregation may have experienced the refrain and conclusion of some *piyyutim* as an instance of "delayed gratification" or perhaps didactically, as students learning from a teacher (*ibid.*).

In Chapter 2, Novick thinks with Aharon Mirsky's *The Origin of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry*, first published in 1958, and also with more recent work by Shulamit Elizur, in order to address the topic of *piyyut* as poetry. Novick here describes the use of analogy in the two corpora: "In the case of midrash, analogy occurs at the level of substance: The exegete attempts to identify, and to reason from, analogies that he identifies in Scripture. In the case of *piyyut*, analogy is a compositional principle: Poets use analogy to give expression to their thought" (54). For the remainder of this section, Novick nuances this distinction, finding evidence of exegesis in *piyyut* and elements of poetry in *midrash*. The remainder of the chapter looks at the use of iterative verse headers in *midrash*, *piyyut*, and in the Samaritan *Tibat Marqe*. Novick understands the prevalence of such verses in all three corpora "as evidence of a common milieu, encompassing both

Jews and Samaritans, that incorporated a sense of how the practice of exegesis ought to be represented” (75).² Yet, with that, the relatively less frequent occurrence of iterative verse headers in rabbinic texts “gives reason to think that rabbinic literature is in this case not altogether representative of rabbinic homiletical practice” (ibid.).

Chapter 3 takes up what is one of the most obvious yet also most understudied aspects of *piyyut* when compared with *midrash*—the fact that *piyyut* is prayer, and not just verse. When comparing *piyyut* with *midrash*, Novick finds that God’s presence is significantly more pronounced in the former, where God often functions as a hermeneutical key akin to the role of Christ’s role in Christian exegesis (79). Novick spends most of the chapter analyzing the “doxological lens” through which *paytanim* retell biblical stories, showing how this lens impacts the reception and reformulation of earlier rabbinic traditions.

The second half of the book, encompassing Chapters 4–7, focuses on one “macroform,” the “serial narrative,” and the varied ways in which it is used in *midrash* and *piyyut*. By “serial narrative,” Novick refers to the extremely common phenomenon in which *midrash* or *piyyut* trace a theme or event shared by various figures in Israel’s past and perhaps also by Israel in the present or future. Novick charts the history of this macroform from the later strands of the Hebrew Bible until Jewish literature of Late Antiquity, noting also the form’s function in some Christian texts. Novick maps the macroform’s various sub-genres, and develops a vocabulary through which to discuss their employment in different liturgical settings (e.g., “The Exemplum Series,” “Salvation History,” “Serial Confession,” etc.). The attention to form allows him to better understand the roles of the “historical,” “performative,” and “liturgical” present, and thus to better explain the content of the works in question. For example, Novick uses “liturgical present” to explain the differing representations of non-Jewish rule in the works of the mid-sixth-century Yannai and the seventh-century Elazar be-Rabbi Qillir. As noted by Elizur, Yannai frequently laments “the contemporary condition of exile,” whereas for Qillir “the exile as lived reality figures rarely” (143). Elizur had interpreted these differences as perhaps reflecting diachronic changes in the state of the Palestinian Jewish community. In contrast, Novick looks to the “performative present” of these two poet’s oeuvres: for Qillir, “writing chiefly for the festival cycle, the performative present becomes manifest

2. For the theoretical framework of such comparative work, see Ophir Münz-Manor, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1, no. 3 (2010): 336–61.

in his poems as the post-biblical present,” and the exile “is an event in the biblical past”; whereas for Yannai, who writes “within the framework of pre-exilic history,” “[t]he exilic present is . . . a thing specifically of the present, in marked contrast to the Pentateuchal past” (ibid.).

The overall conclusion of Novick’s study is that a simple hierarchical model is no longer warranted. Instead, Novick claims to have painted a “complex portrait of the relationship between midrash and *piyyut*” (217). As opposed to mere indebtedness, “[t]he appropriation of midrash texts in classical *piyyut* represented a massive work of creative revision” (ibid.).

Piyyut and Midrash is an astoundingly dense book. Although Novick moves quickly, his book is ideally read slowly, so that one can fully appreciate each of its many ingenious readings (given the vast number of texts discussed, it is unfortunate that no index of primary sources is included). Novick engages with a vast body of secondary literature and often times corrects interpretations provided by the editors of the primary sources he discusses. Further, Novick should be commended for presenting scholars with excellent translations of notoriously difficult texts.

While the book is subtitled *Form, Genre, and History*, the analysis is primarily literary. Novick only occasionally discusses the possible experiences of Jews who encountered or created these texts in Late Antiquity, although, as we have seen above, the book has significant ramifications for the study of Jewish history in late antique Palestine, for the study of Jewish literature, and for the study of Jewish historical understanding. The language he refines throughout the book will also be of help for scholars of non-Jewish liturgy and homiletics, as will the various case studies of non-Jewish texts. Novick’s book also has ramifications, which he does not examine, for the question of religious leadership in late antique Palestine, as it problematizes the stark distinction some scholars make between priestly and rabbinic modes of leadership.³ One further issue worth addressing is the question of periodization. Novick refers interchangeably to “Late Antiquity” as the “Roman-Byzantine period” in Palestine. But a significant portion of the *piyyutim* discussed were actually composed during the

3. See, for example, Joseph Yahalom, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic and Its Story,” in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss, Supplement Series 40 (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000), 83–91, and Oded Irshai, “Confronting a Christian Empire: Jewish Culture in the World of Byzantium,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 181–221 (193–98).

Umayyad period (Pinhas the Priest, often considered the last of the classical *paytanim*, is thought to have died in the mid-eighth century). What can *piyyut* teach us about the continuation of earlier religious models into the early Islamic periods, and the eventual shifts that occurred with Abbasid rule?

Much of Novick's discussion relates to the very fabric of both *midrash* and *piyyut*, and while dealing with very large issues, he never loses sight of the details. It is not always easy, however, to see the larger import of Novick's analysis while following him in the weeds. But it is the sustained reading of many texts that allows Novick to reach important conclusions with regards to these astonishingly vast and intricately related corpora. At one point in the book, Novick attempts to address the question of why it is that *piyyut* embraced an ever-growing amount of formal constraints, particularly in its classical period. The first answer he suggests is "sociological": the restraints allow us to "hypothesize that the classical period saw the rise of a guild of liturgical poets, and of the reconceiving of liturgical composition as a distinct, quasi-professional practice. . . a context in which intensification in form might plausibly occur" (76).⁴ Novick's second answer should be of special interest to readers of this journal: "Perhaps, then, form becomes, for the classical *paytan*, a way of generating something new in an age that conceives of itself as belated, as coming after the interpretive canon was in important ways already established" (77). While Novick's readings are at times highly technical and difficult to parse, it is these moments of almost profound reflection that make *Piyyut and Midrash* an outstanding contribution to the study of late antique literature and aesthetics.

Yitz Landes
Princeton University

4. Here Novick's reading should be compared with the salient remarks by Seth Schwartz in his *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001): "The *piyyut* is an artifact of the professionalization of liturgy in some Palestinian synagogues, for it is a type of poetry produced by a newly emerged professional class, the *payetanim*. . . In brief, it seems that starting in the sixth, or possibly the fifth, century, some Palestinian synagogues began employing poets whose job it was to compose a new cycle of liturgical poetry for each Sabbath and holiday. This development may be seen as the institutionalization, perhaps under the impact of a similar development among Christians, of the practice of liturgical improvisation that had prevailed in at least some Palestinian synagogues—a practice that had favored employing the eloquent and learned as prayer leaders" (265).