

AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMICAL *PIYYUT* BY YOSEF IBN AVITUR
EMPLOYING ELEMENTS FROM *TOLEDOT YESHU*

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Abstract

This article presents a critical edition of the *piyyut* של ישי אב ובן ורוח for Yom Kippur by Yosef ibn Avitur (tenth-eleventh centuries). This *piyyut*, which contains an explicit anti-Christian polemic, is examined in light of two antecedents belonging to the same type. Furthermore, Avitur's *piyyut* displays literary elements that are attested in the complex known as *Toledot Yeshu*—especially the epithet ובן נידה referring to Jesus himself as well as a reference to him having been crucified “on a cabbage stalk.” These elements are analyzed and conclusions are drawn with regard to their implication for the study of the evolution of the *Toledot Yeshu* literature.

Keywords

Genizah, Toledot Yeshu, Avitur, Polemics, Piyyut

The Piyyutim שוע לכילי האומרים and לאיל ממוזר התומכים

In 1938, Menahem Zulai published his magisterial edition of the *piyyutim* of Yannai.¹ Among the material contained in this volume there occur two relatively short *piyyutim*, both bearing the clear stamp of religious polemic.² These have generated a certain amount of scholarly discussion in their wake and are of interest in the present context. The first begins שוע לכילי האומרים “Those who call a knave noble” (the text is translated in the Appendix). It is found among a group of *piyyutim* copied at the end of Yannai's *qedushta* סלסלה בזמר ארץ for Yom Kippur.³ The place of

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¹ Menahem Zulai, *Piyyute Yannai* (Berlin: Schocken, 1938).

² The unvocalized texts of both *piyyutim* had previously been published in Menahem Zulai, “Mehkere Yannai,” *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry* 2 (1936): 269.

³ For the *qedushta*, see Zulai, *Yannai*, 328–341. The *piyyut* in question appears on p. 339. The *qedushta*, together with the *piyyut* in question, is also published in Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, *Mahzor piyyute rabbi Yannai la-tora u-la-moadim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Bialik,

such a group within the structural framework of the (Classical) *qedushta* is after the recitation of the liturgical *trishagion*, i.e., after the *piyyutim* labeled ט in standard critical editions.⁴ Such groups are characteristic of *qedushtot* for Yom Kippur, and the *piyyutim* of which they are comprised are structurally similar to *rahitim*.⁵

Formally, *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* may be described as an alphabetical series of participial phrases. The participle, governed by the definite article, occupies the first position in each line, such that the poem consists of 22 lines arranged in a straight acrostic. The *piyyut* is unrhymed. I cite the first two lines by way of illustration: הַאֹמְרִים לְכִילֵי שׁוֹעַ / הַבּוֹחֲרִים, “Those who call a knave noble (cf. Isa. 32:5) / those who choose revolting abominations.” Thematically, each participial phrase provides a brief, self-contained description of the beliefs and activities of a group of people whom the *payyeta*n clearly loathes and wishes to excoriate. All the descriptions belong to the thought-world of religious polemic—see, for example: הַחֲלוֹקִים עַל צִוּוּיֶיךָ, “Those who dispute against Your commandment,” or הַלוֹהֵטִים בְּתוֹעַ מַעֲבָדֵיהֶם, “Those who are inflamed with the error of their ways.” The descriptions themselves may be conveniently categorized into three groups. To the first group belong lines consisting of accusations of a general nature, which may have conceivably been directed against anyone not sharing the author’s religious convictions. Such are the *bet*, *het* and *lamed* lines cited above. The second group consists of lines in which it is natural to discern a reference to the Christian religion, especially ones referring to the worship of a dead man/god—e.g., הַדְּבֻקִים בְּמַת לְפָנַי הַי, “Those who cleave to the dead before the Living,” הַיִּיגוֹנִים לְמִיתַת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם, “Those who grieve at the death of their God.”⁶ The third group consists of lines that also appear to describe

1987), 210–227. See also Joseph Yahalom, *Piyyut u-metsiut be-shilhe ha-zeman ha-atik* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999): 73–74.

⁴ The group of which *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* is a part is comprised of *piyyutim* labeled ט-י in ed. Zulay. For the structure of the Classical *qedushta* see Ezra Fleischer, *Shirat ha-kodesh ha-ivrit b-ime ha-benayim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 138–164; together with the addendum to this volume by Shulamit Elizur, “Meqomo shel ha-kiklar ba-kedeshta ha-kilirit,” 513–20.

⁵ See Fleischer, *Shirat ha-kodesh*, 171–172.

⁶ The Hebrew text of ed. Zulay is restored on the basis of JTS Ms. 8190 (see Yahalom, *Piyyut u-Metsiut*, p. 74). For a description of this manuscript, see Michael Rand, “More on the *Seder Beriyot*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16 (2009): 183–85. Characterizations of Christianity as involving the worship of a dead man/god are attested elsewhere in Classical *piyyutim*: נְרוֹת אֶדוֹם מְבֵהִיקִים עַל מַת הַדֵּד אֶדוֹם, “the candles of Edom [=Byzantium] glitter for the dead one,” in the *piyyut* וְרֵבּוּ אֶמְצוּ וְרֵבּוּ אֶדוֹם אֶמְצוּ by Yannai (Zulay, *Yannai*, 189); לוחמת עבוד; למת, “militant for/in the worship of the dead one,” in the *qiqlar* לְמִשְׁפֵּט הַקְּלוֹמֵךְ from the *qedushta* חוֹג הַקְּלוֹמֵךְ for Rosh Hashana by Eleazar Qillir. The text is cited according

specific beliefs and practices. In this case, however, the association of such beliefs/practices with Christianity is ambiguous. Such, for example, are the lines *השורפים לרואי מיסתרימו / העורכים מנחה דם חזיר*, “Those who burn the seers of their mysteries / those who set out an offering of pig’s blood.” See also the *alef* line cited above, in which the word *שוע* may be a punning reference to the name *ישוע* (ע).

Along with *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*, which he attributed to Yannai with certainty,⁷ Zulay published a second *piyyut*, also belonging to the type to be recited in the Yom Kippur *qedushta* after the *trishagion*: *התומכים ממזר*, *לאיליל*, “Those who promote a bastard to [the status of] idol” (the text is translated in the Appendix).⁸ This second *piyyut* is nearly identical with the first in structure and content, and its attribution to Yannai in ed. Zulay is doubtful.⁹ In fact, the similarity between the two *piyyutim* is such that in some cases, they share lines that are variants of one another. Thus, for example, *השורפים לרואי מיסתרימו / העורכים מנחה דם חזיר* (see above) in *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* is paralleled by *הלוהטים למביטי סודם / הכמהים* “Those who set aflame the seers of their secrets / those who yearn to render up an offering of pig’s blood” in *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* (the participle *הלוהטים*, moreover, also opens the *lamed*-line of *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*—see above). It is evident, in fact, that one

to Cambridge T-S H 8.2 (line 119 in the forthcoming edition of Qillir’s *piyyutim* for Rosh Hashana by Shulamit Elizur and Michael Rand).

⁷ The attribution of *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*, which does not contain an acrostic signature, to Yannai rests on the fact that it is copied as part of his *qedushta* for Yom Kippur (see above). However, the *piyyutim* following the recitation of the *trishagion* cannot be considered as being integral to the *qedushta* in which they appear—either in the structural or the thematic sense—to the same extent as the *piyyutim* that precede it (i.e., the *piyyutim* conventionally labeled א-ט). Furthermore, in the liturgical manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah, the items making up the groups of *piyyutim* to be recited in a given *qedushta* after the *trishagion* are more or less selected at will by copyists out of a pre-existent stock, with the result that it is rare for two sequences to be exactly alike, either in order or content. In practice, therefore, it is nearly impossible to attribute a given *piyyut* from such a group to the author of the *qedushta* in which it is copied. In light of these considerations, the attribution of *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* to Yannai must be considered doubtful, though not improbable. Ezra Fleischer, “Iyunim bi-v’ayot tafkidam ha-liturgi shel sugē ha-piyyut ha-kadum,” *Tarbiz* 40 (1970): 61, note 55 also casts doubt on the attribution of the *piyyut* to Yannai.

⁸ Zulay, *Yannai*, 382.

⁹ The doubtful attribution to Yannai is based on the similarity of the *piyyut* in question to *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*; see Zulay, “Mehkere Yannai,” 269: “[*Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*] is found among the *piyyutim* of Yannai, and the second [*piyyut*] is similar to it in all regards, so that it is difficult to entertain doubts as to their having a common author.” The translation is mine. However, in light of the doubt that has been cast on the attribution of *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* (see note 7), the attribution, albeit doubtful, of *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* to Yannai is unreasonable.

is a conscious imitation of the other, and on the basis of a judgment as to originality and elegance of expression it appears that *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* served as a model for its fellow.¹⁰

As mentioned above, the appearance of these two *piyyutim* in print has engendered a certain amount of discussion in the scholarly literature, the main object of which is to identify the targets of the polemic that they contain: is it only Christians, or are other groups—perhaps pagans or Gnostics or apostate Jews—also meant? This discussion is summarized by Maier, who in his own analysis weighs in strongly against the view that the polemics in the two *piyyutim* are directed solely against Christians.¹¹ No firm conclusions have been reached to date, as may be seen from a more recent treatment of the matter by Wout van Bekkum: “At first glance [*Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*] seems to represent a strong polemic against Christianity, but after close study of its characterization many questions remain open.”¹²

האומרים אב ובן ורוח שלישי *Avitur's Piyyut*

Whereas a certain degree of doubt may be entertained with regard to the sorts of heterodoxy that are meant in the two *piyyutim* discussed above, no such doubts attach to the *piyyut שלישי אב ובן ורוח*, “Those who say: Father and Son and Spirit, the third.” As is evident already from the *incipit*, here the object is unambiguously Christianity.

Like its two predecessors, *Ha-omrim av u-ven* is composed of a series of lines, each of which constitutes a participial phrase. Each line opens

¹⁰ It is worth noting in this context that the participle האומרים, with which *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* opens, appears in the *alef*-line (i.e., the last line) of *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*. As will be seen below, *Avitur's piyyut* opens with the same word, so that it seems to have become characteristic of the type. If that is the case, then it is reasonable to suppose that the prototype is the *piyyut* that opens with this word.

¹¹ Johann Maier, “Ha-piyyut *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* ve-ha-pulmus ha-anti-notsri,” in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. Jacob Josef Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981): 100–110. For references to earlier discussions, see p.100, notes 3–8.

¹² Wout Jac. van Bekkum, “Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (*Piyyut*) of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,” *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Jan den Boeft and Antonius Hilhorst (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1993), 306. The lack of a scholarly *communis opinio* with regard to the object(s) of the polemic is likewise expressed by Ophir Münz-Manor, “Notsrim ve-notsrut be-sifrut ha-piyyut: ben yitsugim tipologi'im le-hityahasuyot konkretiyot,” in *Ot Le-tova—Pirke mehkar mugashim le-Profesor Tova Rozen*, eds. Eli Yassif, Haviva Ishay and Uriah Kfir (Ben Gurion University: Ben Gurion University Press, 2012), 43–56.

with a participle governed by a definite article. Unlike them, however, the lines of the *piyyut* are arranged in accordance with a name acrostic: אָנִי הַקָּטָן יוֹסֵף (the *yod* is shared by the first two elements of the acrostic, and the *he* is provided by the definite article governing the *qof*-line). A further difference is constituted by the fact that *Ha-omrim av u-ven* is divided by virtue of rhyme into strophes of two lines each. Also like its two predecessors, *Av u-ven* belongs to the group of *piyyutim* that are to be recited in the Yom Kippur *qedushta* after the *trishagion*. The attribution of the *piyyut* to Yosef ibn Avitur rests on the name acrostic, and is made already by Fleischer.¹³ Avitur is a *payyetan* who flourished at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries. A native of Spain, he spent the majority of his adult life in the countries of the east, particularly in Egypt. His *oeuvre* is considered to constitute a bridge between the eastern tradition of *piyyut* composition and the tradition of Spanish poetry that was emergent in his day.¹⁴ *Ha-omrim av u-ven* was probably composed by him as part of his extensive *ma'amad* for Yom Kippur, which originally comprised all of the *piyyutim* that were to be incorporated into the day's liturgical program.¹⁵

Besides its specific content, to be discussed below, Avitur's *piyyut* is significant on account of the fact that it indicates that *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* had come to be seen by *payyetanim* as an identifiable type, whose position within the Yom Kippur *qedushta* was fixed by genre-specific compositional rules. Once associated with a fixed position and identifiable structural/thematic parameters, the *piyyut* could be imitated (re-worked) while keeping these two elements constant.¹⁶ That *Ha-omrim*

¹³ See Ezra Fleischer, *Yetsirato shel Yosef ibn Avitur—Sugim ve-tavniyot be-fyyutav*, vol. 1 (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1969), 278. There, the *piyyut* is listed among the *piyyutim* belonging to the *ma'amad* for Yom Kippur (see note 15).

¹⁴ For Avitur see Jefim Schirmann, *Toldot ha-shira ha-ivrit bi-sfarad ha-muslemim*, ed. Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes/Ben-Zvi Institute, 1995), 150–173 and Schirmann, *Ha-shira ha-ivrit bi-sfarad u-ve-provans*, vol. 1.1 (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Bialik/Dvir, 1959), 53–65.

¹⁵ The *ma'amad*, an all-encompassing suite of poems for Yom Kippur, is an innovation of the Spanish poets, all of whom follow the model first created by Avitur. For the *ma'amad* in general, see Fleischer, *Shirat ha-kodesh*, 377–383. For Avitur's *ma'amad*, which has not come down to us in its entirety, but many of whose *piyyutim* have been preserved, see Schirmann, *Toldot*, 157, note 69 and Fleischer, *Avitur*, 1,272–1,283. Fleischer assigns *Ha-omrim av u-ven* to the *qedushta* for the Additional Service, but it is just as likely to have belonged to the *qedushta* for the Morning Service.

¹⁶ In this regard, the *piyyut* type derived from *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* is similar to certain types of *rahit* that are characteristic of the *qedushta* for Yom Kippur, such as *rahitim* of the *imru l-elohim* type, etc.—see Fleischer, *Shirat ha-kodesh*, 167–172. In order to avoid ambiguity, it should be stressed that in speaking of an “identifiable type,” I am not necessarily implying that the type had come to be seen as a distinct genre. All that may be

le-khilay shoa had become a prototype may of course already be established on the basis of its juxtaposition with *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*.¹⁷ However, the addition of Avitur's *piyyut* to the chain of re-workings¹⁸ precludes the possibility that the imitation of *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* by *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* was a nonce event in the history of *piyyut* composition. Furthermore, the presence of Avitur's *piyyut* within the group indicates that the theme of anti-Christian polemic inherent in the prototype remained vital even after the Byzantine Christian political context in which the prototype was composed had passed into history, to be replaced by the reality of Muslim hegemony.¹⁹

Text and Translation

Manuscripts

- Ox. 2727/8 = Heb. f. 21 fol. 59 / lines 1–12 / א = Base text
- Ox. 2846/9 = Heb. d. 60 fol. 52 / lines 1–12 / ב
- T-S H 5.63 / lines 1–12 / ג
- T-S H 5a.20 / lines 1–12 / ד
- T-S H 6.58 / lines 1–12 / ה
- T-S Misc. 10.138 / lines 1–3 / ו
- T-S NS 198.52 / lines 1–12 / ז

asserted with certainty is that *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* was imitated (at least) twice in the history of eastern *piyyut*.

¹⁷ And it is precisely on these grounds that Zulay published the second *piyyut* in his edition (see note 9). In Zulay's view, however, it may have been Yannai who imitated his own prototype.

¹⁸ In the Genizah manuscripts, the typological relationship between *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* and *Ha-omrim av u-ven* is underscored by the fact that the two *piyyutim* are frequently copied near one another within the framework of the same *qedushta*. Thus in the following manuscripts employed in the edition given below: ז ו ה ד ב א (in the case of א *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* is attested in T-S NS 116.169, which belongs to the same quire).

¹⁹ That the anti-Christian theme is a reflection of Christian political hegemony is generally assumed—see for example the articles cited in note 12. For anti-Christian polemic in a Muslim political context, see Miriam Goldstein, "Judeo-Arabic Versions of *Toledot Yeshu*," *Ginzei Qedem* 6 (2010): 32*–38* and Philip Alexander, "The *Toledot Yeshu* in the Context of Jewish-Muslim Debate," *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited—A Princeton Conference*, eds. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson and Yaacov Deutsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 137–158.

ובכנ ת[אבד] זרים מן הא[רץ]
האומרים אב ובן ורוח שלישי
הנועדים ראשון וגם נוצרי ששי
היוצרים צורת טיט לעבוד
הנועדים להמיר קלון בכבוד
5 השוהדים לנתלה נגד השמש
הסוגדים מסגוד ומשקרים חמש
הפושעים באל חי ועובדים מת
הפוצים שקר ועוזבים אמת
הקוראים אלוה ממזר ובן נדה
10 הטופלים שקר בלי מדה
הנשבעים בתלוי על קלח כרוב
הנדבקים ברחוק ועוזבים קרוב

Variant Readings

כותרת: ובכנ תאבד [תאביד ב] זרים מן הארץ ב ג ד ה ז תאב[ד] זרים מן
הארץ ו 1 שלישי[שליש ב 2 הנועדים] הנוצרים ב ד ו / נוצרי[נוצר ב
נוצרים ו / ששי[שיש ג 3 לעבוד] לעבוד ב 4 הועודים] הוועודים ד ה
ז היועודים ב 5 לנתלה] לתלוי ג ד ה ז לתלוי ב 6 הסוגדים] הסוגדים א
השגדים ב הסוגרים ד / מסגוד] מסגד ב מסגור ד / ומשקרים חמש] ומשר
ומשקרים חמשה ב 7 הפושעים] פושעים ב 8 ועוזבים אמת] ועוזבים אמת
שקר ב 9 ממזר] ל בשוליים לציון תיקון ל-לממזר א / ובן] בן ב ד ה ז 10
הטופלים] הטפלים ב / שקר] כזב ג ד ה ז חסר ב 11 בתלוי] בתלי ד בשוליים
ז חסר ה / קלח] קלה ב

And so: You will destroy aliens from the Earth

- Those who say: Father and Son and Spirit, the third
Those who gather on Sunday and also observe Friday
Those who create a form of clay to worship
Those who are gathered to replace dignity by ignominy
5 Those who bear witness the one hanged before the sun
Those who bow to the bowed one and [to] five liars
Those who sin against the Living God and worship a dead one
Those who utter falsehood and abandon the truth
Those who call God a bastard and son of a menstruant
10 Those who pile up lies without measure
Those who swear by one hanged on a cabbage stalk
Those who cleave to the far and abandon the near

Commentary

Line 1: **אב ובן ורוח שלישי**. This reference to the Trinity is polemical only in the context of an implied comparison to the Jewish belief in the unity of God. The polemical aspect is underscored here by the word **שלישי**—cf., for example the line **והוא אחד ואין שני** “Now He is One, and there is no second” in the Jewish liturgical hymn **אדון עולם**.

Line 2: **הנועדים ראשון**. A reference to the Christian observance of Sunday, also polemical only by implication.

וגם נוצרי ששי. The verb **נצר** is a pun on **נוצרים**/Christians. Avitur probably refers here to the widespread Christian practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays as a commemoration of the Passion (see John 19:31). It is furthermore possible, though by no means necessary, that this is the first of several instances in which his *piyyut* draws on the *Toledot Yeshu* (henceforth TY) literature—cf. the account of the ministry of the Jewish apostle Simon (Peter), in which Simon declares to his Christian flock: **אני מצוה אתכם ומקבל עלי לנדר כי בכל חיי לא אוכל בשר ביום ששי כי ביום שו ההוא נהרג ישו** “I command you and take upon myself a vow that all my life I will not eat meat on Fridays, as that is the day on which Yeshu was killed.”²⁰

Line 3: **היוצרים צורת טיט לעבוד**. The polemical assertion that non-Israelites, and later non-Jews, worship the inert and useless products of their own hands is a commonplace rooted in biblical rhetoric (cf. Isa. 44:9–20). The theme is paralleled in *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*: **הגוחנים למעשה ידיהם** “Those who belly-crawl before the work of their hands.” In the present case, the specification that the image is made of **טיט** seems to echo TY’s description of Yeshu’s ministry in the Upper Galilee, in accordance with which he animated clay figures of birds: **תביאו לי צפורים של טיט וכן עשו והזכיר עליהם את השם המפורש וחיו** “[He said to them,] ‘Bring me birds of clay,’ and they did so. And he pronounced the Ineffable Name over them and they came to life.”²¹ The suggested parallel acquires further force in light of the consideration that in the Bible, which

²⁰ The Hebrew text is quoted from Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902), 87. For an annotated English translation of the entire pericope from which this passage is drawn, see Wout van Bekkum, “The Rock on Which the Church Is Founded’: Simon Peter in Jewish Folktales,” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Joshua Schwartz and Marcel Poorthuis (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 297–301. The translation given above is mine.

²¹ Krauss, *Leben*, 72. The story of Yeshu’s having animated clay birds is rooted in a similar episode found in the apocryphal (Greek) Infancy Gospel of Thomas—see James Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 75–76, 81.

serves as a major source of language and imagery for the present poem as well as for its two predecessors, the word טיט is never employed in connection with idol-making. Neither does it appear to be employed in this way in post-biblical Hebrew literature (cf., for example, the items quoted in Ben Yehuda, מילון הלשון העברית, s.v. טיט, and the occurrences of this lemma in *Ma'agarim*, the lexical database of the Academy of the Hebrew Language).

Line 4: להמיר קלון בכבוד. Based on Hos. 4:7.

Line 5: השוהדים לנתלה נגד השמש. This line is paralleled in *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*: הפונים לנתלה עדי נשף “Those who turn to the one hanged before evening.” The Aramaic verb שהד is commonly employed in the *piyyut* literature as a synonym of העיד “to bear (religious) witness” with the community of Israel as subject, and therefore bears no specifically polemical connotations. Avitur’s epithet for Yeshu refers to והוקע אותם נגד השמש לה’ (Num. 25:4). In the Babylonian Talmud, the obscure biblical verb הוקיע is understood to refer to the mode of execution known as תליה, i.e., the one employed in Yeshu’s case: אמר רב חסדא מנין להוקעה? שהיא תלייה דכתיב והוקענום לה’ בגבעת שאול בחיר ה’ [ש”ב כא, ו] (BT *Sanh.* 34b). Other Jewish authorities understand the verb as meaning “to crucify,” pure and simple. Thus, Saadya’s *Tafsir* translates the passage from Num. 25:4 as: ואצלבהם ללה הדיא אלשמס.²² The verb also appears in II Sam. 21:6, 9 and is translated there as ונצלוּבִינון and ונצלוּבִינון, respectively, by Targum Jonathan. The phrase נגד השמש, which as we have seen is drawn directly from Num. 25:4, is paralleled in the line quoted above from *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* by the phrase עדי נשף. The latter is a clear reference to the biblical law in accordance with which the hanged corpse of an executed criminal must not be left exposed overnight, but must rather be buried on the day of execution—see Deut. 21:23.²³ Both Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neofiti, which also understand הוקיע as meaning ‘to crucify,’ interpret the passage in Num. 25:4 as presupposing this biblical law. Thus, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates: ותצלוּב יתהון קדם מימרא דה’ על קיסא קבל שימשא בקריצתא ועם מטמוע ושמשא תחית יתהון ותקברינון.²⁴ Targum Neofiti translates in a similar vein:

²² Joseph Derenbourg, *Version Arabe du Pentateuque de R. Saadya ben Josef al-Fayyumi* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1893), 233.

²³ This law constitutes the background to John 19:31.

²⁴ Moses Ginsburger, *Pseudo-Jonathan (Thargum Jonathan ben Usiel zum Pentateuch)* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1903), 277.

אשמש יתלבון יתיה על צליבה וקברין ית נבלתהון עם מטמעי שמשא.²⁵ It is therefore nearly certain that in applying the passage in Num. 25:4 to the crucifixion of Yeshu, Avitur, like the *payyetan* who composed *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*, implies that his corpse was removed from the cross towards the evening of the day of execution. In both Aramaic and Hebrew TY,²⁶ the removal of Yeshu's corpse from the cross on the day of his crucifixion in accordance with Deut. 21:23 is an integral part of the episode describing his burial and the subsequent argument between the Jews and his followers regarding his apparent resurrection. Thus, for example, in the Aramaic TY: וְלֹא הוּוּ צָבֵן לְאַחַתָּא יִתְיָה מִן צְלִיבָא אִמְ' לְהוּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּדִיל יִישׁוּ: רִשְׁעָא נִשְׁנִי אֲנַחְנָא קִיִּמָּא דְאֹרִייתָא דְכְּתִיב לֹא תִבִּית נְבִילְתִּיהָ עַל צְלִיבָא וְגו' "Now they did not want to take him down from the cross. Yehoshua said to them: Shall we, on account of the fact that Yeshu is wicked, abrogate the biblical commandment, which states 'You shall not leave his corpse on the cross overnight,' and so forth (cf. Deut. 21:23)? They took him down from the cross and buried him in a watercourse."²⁷ For Hebrew TY, see for example: שְׁלַחוּ הַזְּקֵנִים לְהוֹרִידוֹ: מִשָּׁם וְהוֹרִידוּהוּ לְקִיִּים מָה שֶׁאָמַר לֹא תִלִּין נְבִלְתוֹ עַל הָעֵץ וְכֵן עָשׂוּ וְקִבְרוּהוּ "The elders sent to have him taken down from there in order to abide by what He said, 'You shall not leave his corpse on the cross overnight' (Deut. 21:23). And they did so and buried him."²⁸ In light of the other, explicit references to TY found in Avitur's *piyyut* (see below), it is reasonable to suppose that in basing an epithet for Yeshu on Num. 25:4 he is indirectly alluding to the story of his burial as narrated in TY. *A fortiori*, this would mean that the parallel line in *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* also contains such an allusion. On the other hand, it is possible that in both cases the implied parallel to TY is fortuitous.

Line 6: הַסּוֹגְדִים מִסּוֹגֵד. This phrase seems to be a syntactic and semantic parallel to a line in *Ha-omrim le-khulay shoa*: הַכּוֹרְעִים וְשָׁחִים לְשָׁח: "Those who prostrate themselves and are bowed to one who is [himself] bowed and prostrate." In both *piyyutim*, an active participle is juxtaposed with a passive participle (in the case of שָׁח ~ שָׁחִים, the participles are both stative) in order to underscore the irony of worshipping a helpless, lifeless corpse. If this is the correct interpretation, then the use

²⁵ Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti 1—Targum Palestinense Ms de la Biblioteca Vaticana: Tomo IV Números* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1974), 245.

²⁶ By 'Hebrew TY,' I refer to the so-called 'Helena' group of texts, i.e., the bulk of Hebrew texts with the exception of the Huldreich edition.

²⁷ The Aramaic text is quoted from Yaacov Deutsch, "Eduyot al nusah kadum shel 'Toldot Yeshu'," *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 194.

²⁸ Krauss, *Leben*, 80.

of the preposition מן in Avitur's *piyyut* is surprising, as we would have expected ל-.

ומשקרים חמש. Following my interpretation of the first part of the line, I understand the words to mean 'five liars,' and see in them a reference to the five disciples of Yeshu. The five disciples, named Mattai, Naqqai, Netzer, Buni and Todah are mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (BT *Sanh.* 43; censored in the Vilna edition).²⁹ The same tradition about these disciples is attested in at least one manuscript of Hebrew TY, though in this source Toda has fallen out of the list.³⁰ In the Aramaic TY, the original list of five is expanded to eleven.³¹

Line 7: הפושעים באל חי ועובדים מת. The juxtaposition between the Living God of Israel and the dead god of the Christians is paralleled in *Ha-omrim le-khilya shoa*: [הדב]קים במת לפני חי, "Those who cleave to the dead before the Living."

Line 9: ממזר ובן נדה. This binomial epithet for Yeshu is typical of the Hebrew TY tradition, in which it reflects the story of his having been conceived adulterously, while Miriam was in a state of menstrual impurity.³² As pointed out by Deutsch, the same phrase occurs in a midrashic context unrelated to Yeshu in Tractates *Kalla* 16 and *Kalla Rabbati* 2:1–2.³³ He moreover convincingly surmises that the story in Tractates *Kalla* is the source for the episode narrated in TY. However, the application of the epithet, along with the story, to Yeshu is a characteristic of Hebrew TY.

Line 10: הטופלים שקר. Based on Ps. 119:69, Job 13:4.

Line 11: בתלוי על קלח כרוב. The story of Yeshu's crucifixion on a cabbage stalk belongs to both Aramaic and Hebrew TY. For Aramaic TY, see: וצלבוהי על כנא דכרובא, "And they crucified him on a cabbage stalk."³⁴ In the Hebrew textual tradition, the story itself is common, but of the texts published by Krauss the phrase קלח (של) כרוב is attested only in ms. Leiden: ויברות קלח של כרוב... ויתלו אותו עליו והקלח קיבלו, "And he

²⁹ See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 75–81.

³⁰ See Kraus, *Leben*, 45.

³¹ In the Hebrew translation of Aramaic TY (ms. Firkovitch Evr. I 274; see note 37) the number has grown to twelve, presumably to more accurately to reflect the twelve disciples of the New Testament. For both the Aramaic as well as the Hebrew translation, see Deutsch, "Eduyot," 186–87.

³² See, for example, Krauss, *Leben*, 66, where the phrase occurs three times.

³³ Deutsch, "Eduyot," 182. For the text, see Michael Higger, *Massekhtot Kalla* (New York: Moinester Publishing Co., 1936), 146–149, 190–193.

³⁴ Deutsch, "Eduyot," 194. The Hebrew translation of Aramaic TY (see note 37) renders: על העץ שורש הכרוב (ibid.).

cut down a cabbage stalk . . . and they hanged him on it, and the stalk received him."³⁵

Line 12: קרוב. For the true God as being close, see Ps. 119:151.

The Significance of References to TY in Ha-omrim av u-ven

As we have seen in the commentary, in a number of cases, Avitur's *piyyut* refers to motifs found in TY. Two of these references are explicit: the epithet *נדה ובן נדה* (line 9) and the motif of crucifixion on a cabbage stalk (line 11). Of these two, the second presents the strongest argument in favor of the contention that the *piyyut* reflects a familiarity with TY, as—to the best of my knowledge—this motif is unique to the TY corpus. In other cases, it is difficult to be sure that the source for the reference is TY: cf. the Christian observance of Friday (line 2), which may simply reflect the poet's knowledge of this widespread Christian custom; the use of the word *טיט* (line 3), which at best is merely a lexical hint at an unrelated episode in TY; the implied reference to the removal of Yeshu's body from the cross on the day of his crucifixion (line 5), in which we may plausibly see the reflex of a Jewish hermeneutic tradition associated with Num. 25:4; and the apparent reference to Yeshu's five disciples (line 6), which may be drawing on the Babylonian Talmud rather than on TY. However, despite the reasonable doubt that may arise with regard to whether or not a certain apparent reference to TY is in fact such a one, it is the concatenation of all of them, certain and doubtful, that in my view justifies the conclusion that one of the sources underlying our *piyyut* is some version of a unified work that resembles what is known to us as TY in its various (Hebrew and Aramaic) textual forms. In other words, it is unlikely that before us is an independent assemblage of several anti-Christian polemical motifs that have, by virtue of unrelated processes, also found their way into the TY tradition.

As it is clear enough that TY is more a fluid gathering of motifs and short narrative units and less a textual tradition in the process of unilinear evolution,³⁶ it is useless to attempt to guess at which version of

³⁵ Krauss, *Leben*, 128. For an examination of the motif of the cabbage stalk, see Hillel Newman, "The Death of Jesus in the *Toledot Yeshu* Literature," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 50 (1999): 59–79 and Michael Meerson, "Meaningful Nonsense: A Study of Details in *Toledot Yeshu*," in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus")*, 186–191.

³⁶ See Peter Schäfer's Introduction in *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus")*, 3: "[T]here may well have been *different* nuclei representing *different* macroforms of *Toledot Yeshu* at *different* times and places."

TY underlies Avitur's *piyyut*. However, even as they stand before us, the references to TY in *Ha-omrim av u-ven* represent a contribution, albeit modest, to the study of the evolution of this corpus. The reason for this is that the *piyyut* can be approximately dated to the late tenth, early eleventh centuries, so that as a witness it is roughly contemporaneous with the Genizah fragments in which the Aramaic TY—considered to be the earliest version—and the Hebrew translation made from it are attested.³⁷ Deutsch has argued that the motif of Miriam's menstrual impurity, which is absent from the Aramaic TY as well as from the Hebrew translation of Aramaic TY found in ms. Firkovitch Evr. I 274, may be a late addition to the Hebrew TY tradition: "If one accepts my contention that this ms. [i.e., Firk. Evr. I 274] is one of the earliest versions [of TY], the question naturally arises as to whether or not TY is the source for the claim that Yeshu was the son of a menstrually impure woman, or whether perhaps this motif is a late addition, [made] under the influence of other, earlier works, since witnesses to a Hebrew version of TY that includes a reference to Yeshu's being the son of a menstrually impure woman are known only from the fifteenth century, in a Latin translation that was made by . . . Thomas Ebendorfer (1388–1464), and in the work of Petrus Schwartz (died 1483)."³⁸ We have seen, however, that in our *piyyut* Yeshu is referred to as *בן הנדה ובן המזור*, which—if the thesis that it employs some version of TY is accepted—necessarily means that this version included the theme of Miriam's menstrual impurity. It appears, therefore, that this element also belongs to the earliest attested (Jewish) stratum of TY.

Conclusion

One of the factors that originally aroused scholarly interest in *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa* and its twin *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil* was the possibility that it seemed to offer of catching a glimpse, through Jewish eyes, of the reality of Christian worship. Thus Zulay, who believed these *piyyutim* to refer to Christians, wrote on the occasion of their original publication:

³⁷ For the antiquity and primacy of the Aramaic TY and the Hebrew translation that is based on it, see Deutsch, "Eduyot," 177–179. These Jewish witnesses to TY are preceded in time by references made to it in the ninth century by Agobard, Bishop of Lyons and his successor Amulo—see Peter Schäfer, "Agobard's and Amulo's *Toledot Yeshu*," in Toldeot Yeshu (*The Life Story of Jesus*), 27–48.

³⁸ Deutsch, "Eduyot," 182. The translation is mine. For the two Christian authors, see Deutsch, "The Second Life of the Life of Jesus: Christian Reception of *Toledot Yeshu*," in Toldeot Yeshu (*The Life Story of Jesus*), 290–291.

“They contain interesting descriptions of cultic practice that attest to a familiarity with such matters from contemporary reality.”³⁹ Over half a century of subsequent interest in this material has undermined the positivistic unambiguousness of this initial evaluation. In fact, modern research in Classical *piyyut* has had to grapple repeatedly with the obvious lack of interest shown by this corpus in the material, historical, political, etc. realities within which those who produced and consumed it lived. A lack of interest in Christianity, the religion of the ruling Byzantine power, is but one instance of this self-contained insularity. As Münz-Manor has aptly claimed, in referring to the Christianity of Byzantium (“Edom”), Classical *piyyut* tends to fall back on typological modes of thought and representation.⁴⁰ Given such a background, Avitur’s *piyyut*, which opens so boldly with a reference to the Trinity, seems at first as though it will provide evidence of that live interest in the Christian other that is so evidently lacking in its models. As the *piyyut* unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that for the most part it too is content to deal in platitudes, be it standard antonymies such as *dignity ~ ignominy* (line 4), *living ~ dead* (line 7), *truth ~ falsehood* (line 8), *near ~ far* (line 12), or Jewish pseudo-traditions such as Yeshu’s bastardry and his conception in menstrual impurity (line 9) or his crucifixion on a cabbage stalk (line 11). In short, as an attempt to seriously grapple with the realities of Christianity, Avitur’s *piyyut* is just as “disappointing” as its predecessors. On the other hand, as a witness to TY, it provides a fixed point that helps us to fill out our picture of a relatively early state of this work.

Appendix: Translations

1. *Ha-omrim le-khilay shoa*

And so: They will be shamed and disgraced and humiliated

- Those who call a knave noble
- Those who choose revolting abominations
- Those who rejoice at a naked-bodied idol
- Those who cleave to the dead before the Living
- 5 Those who are tumultuous and follow falsehood
- Those who are experienced in the doing of evil

³⁹ Zulai, “Mehqere Yannai,” 269. The translation is mine.

⁴⁰ See Münz-Manor, “Notsrim ve-notsrut.”

- Those who are polluted with the sacrifices of the dead
 Those who dispute against Your commandment
 Those whose deeds are buried in darkness
 10 Those who grieve⁴¹ at the death of their God
 Those who prostrate themselves and are bowed to one who is bowed and
 prostrate
 Those who are aflame with the error of their ways
 Those who make the left right before a statue⁴²
 Those who are grieved for their graven image
 15 Those who burn the seers of their mysteries
 Those who set out an offering of pig's blood
 Those who are at root wanton with bastardry
 Those who fast and afflict themselves for nullity
 Those who acquire collections of bones
 20 Those who assemble themselves for their feasts
 Those who observe vain emptiness
 Those who are forever caught in their lies

2. *Ha-tomkhim mamzer le-elil*

And so: Who will not fear You, King of the nations?

- Those who promote a bastard to idol
 Those who bow down to vanity and emptiness
 Those who run after nullity
 Those who call to an ineffectual god
 5 Those who cry to one who neither speaks nor responds
 Those who turn to the one hanged before evening
 Those who are prepared to collect bones
 Those who conceal their deeds in darkness
 Those who snort, breaking the neck of a perversely-named thing
 10 Those who smite a man and slaughter and ox
 Those who set aflame the seers of their secrets
 Those who yearn to render up an offering of pig's blood
 Those who are alone in offering incense [and] blessing wickedness
 Those who paint over with a coat of filth
 15 Those who hide the one in the center
 Those who offer the sacrifices of the dead
 Those who are gathered and assembled for emptiness
 Those who muse on lies and vanity
 Those who inquire of death on behalf of the living

⁴¹ See note 6.

⁴² The text of this line in ed. Zulay is damaged: ל[...].ל[...].מינים[המא]. It has been preserved in full in JTS Ms. 8190: להמינים שמאל לסמל.

- 20 Those who belly-crawl before the work of their hands
 Those who kneel so as to awaken the inert
 Those who say "Wake up!" to wood

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