

# The Poet and the World

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## El‘azar berabbi Qillir: A Late Antique Poet and his Cultural Legacy

The article focuses on El‘azar berabbi Qillir, the iconic *payṭan* of all ages, and explores several aspects of his work, heritage and cultural significance. The various parts of the article do not present a cohesive image of the life and work of the Qilliri. Rather, they present a mosaic of different outlooks on his image as well as scholarly reflections on some of his major contributions to Jewish literary culture.

The opening part of the article explores historical facts concerning the life and work of the Qilliri although very little is known for certain. The second part of the article explores the rise of *payṭanic* authorship, an important development in early medieval Jewish literary culture, in which the Qilliri played a pivotal role. The next two parts examines ways in which medieval authors imagined the life and work of the Qilliri. Interestingly, in both cases the medieval accounts relate to contemporary Christian culture and literature. The article concludes with an intriguing presentation of the figure of the Qilliri in the writings of the modern Israeli author S. Y. Agnon. Agnon frequently connects ancient and modern Hebrew literature and his usage of the figure of the Qilliri is in many ways a continuation of the medieval traditions that are discussed in the article. All in all, the study of the figure of El‘azar berabbi Qillir and his literary heritage promises to fill a gap in the history of Hebrew poets as cultural heroes in Jewish culture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar scholarly treatment of a medieval *payṭan*, see Lucia Raspe, “Payyetanim as Heroes of Medieval Folk Narrative: The Case of R. Shim‘on ben Yisḥaq of Mainz,” in *Jewish Studies Between the Disciplines. Judaistik zwischen den Disziplinen: Papers in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Klaus Hermann, Margarete Schlüter, and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), 354–69.

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## 1 What Do We Know (and What Do We Not Know) about El‘azar berabbi Qillir<sup>2</sup>

The historical uncertainties concerning to the Qilliri and the difficulty to precisely define the scope of his oeuvre gave rise to various suggestions and traditions concerning his life and work. One of the earliest examples of the high esteem of the Qilliri by medieval sages, as well as their imaginative traditions concerning him, appears in a *piyyuṭ* commentary by Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn (1133–ca. 1197). According to him:

The *piyyuṭ* אָוִי פֶּטֶרִי רַחֲמַתִּים (The firstborn who opened each womb) is the work of R. Yannai, the teacher of Rav Elazar bar Qallir. But no one in the land of Lombardia recites it [as part of their liturgy], because they say that he became jealous of R. Elazar, his student, so he put a scorpion in his shoe and killed him. May the LORD forgive everyone who tells this [report] about him, if it did not happen this way.<sup>3</sup>

This unusual tradition about the jealousy of Yannai to his pupil El‘azar berabbi Qillir, which led the former to kill the latter, reflects an attempt by Ephraim ben Jacob to explain a liturgical practice in Lombardy. As Elisabeth Hollender rightly claimed: “Ephraim is cognizant of the dearth of reliable sources for this anecdote. This knowledge prompts him to ask forgiveness from heaven, as a precaution if indeed he is unwittingly spreading malicious gossip.”<sup>4</sup> Other prominent medieval sages, such as Rabbeinu Gershom Me’or ha-Gola (ca. 960–1040) or Rabbeinu Tam (ca. 1100–1171) praised the Qilliri’s poetic talent, midrashic rigorosity and divine inspiration. At the same time, other sages, not less promi-

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<sup>2</sup> For the most updated bibliography on the Qilliri, see Shulamit Elizur and Michael Rand, *Liturgical Poems for Rosh Hashana: Rabbi El‘azar berabbi Qillir* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2014), 1. Throughout the essay the form *Qillir* (or the *Qilliri*) will be used, as it seems to reflect the most probable version (namely, a version of the Greek name Cyril). The different versions of this name are discussed below. I refrain from using the title *Rabbi* as it is only indicated in later medieval manuscripts and never in the acrostics of the poem. The title reflects a notion that the *payṭanim* were an inherent part of the Rabbinic movement, an assumption that can no longer be taken for granted. See Michael Swartz, “Sage, Priest, and Poet: Typologies of Religious Leadership in the Ancient Synagogues,” in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 101–17; Oded Irshai, “The Priesthood in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity” [Hebrew], in *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. Lee. Levine (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2004): 87–99.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Hollender, *Piyyut Commentary in Medieval Ashkenaz* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

ment, criticized his works quite forcefully. For example, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) found fault with the language of the Qilliri<sup>5</sup> and in modern times Mendele Mocher Sforim (S. J. Abramowitch; 1836–1917) and Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) criticized the style of the Qilliri.<sup>6</sup>

In the twentieth century the historical background of the Qilliri became clearer. We know nowadays that the Qilliri lived in Palestine, most probably in the Galilee, sometime during the seventh century.<sup>7</sup> We know that he composed *piyyuṭim* in almost any known genre, although most of his *piyyuṭim* that came down to us belong to the *qeroba* genre, namely compositions for the 'amida prayer.<sup>8</sup> Scholars also singled out the fact that the Qillirian corpus is variegated and that many of his *piyyuṭim* can be grouped according to their literary style (an obscure and a clear one), a fact that might relate to different phases of his life.<sup>9</sup> Finally, we can note that his *piyyuṭim* were transmitted throughout the medieval Jewish worlds, in the Islamic centers in the Middle East and northern Africa as well as in Christian Europe.<sup>10</sup>

That said, we can only be sure concerning the Qilliri's date and provenance, namely, seventh-century Palestine. The main challenge still relates to the scope of the Qillirian corpus. Firstly, scholars can only draw conclusions from *piyyuṭim* that came down to us, and it is quite clear that many did not. Secondly, the *piyyuṭim* that did get to us are copied in manuscripts that are at least four-hundred years later than their composition date and thus they reflect liturgical prac-

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Langer, "Kalir was a Tanna: Rabbenu Tam's Invocation of Antiquity in Defense of the Ashkenazi Payyetic Tradition," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 67 (1996): 102–6; Joseph Yahalom, "The Poetics of Spanish Piyyut in Light of Abraham Ibn Ezra's Critique of its Pre-Spanish Precedents," in *Abraham Ibn Ezra and His Age: Proceedings of the International Symposium, Madrid 1989*, ed. Fernando Díaz-Esteban (Madrid: Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1990), 387–92.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1999), 78–83.

<sup>7</sup> See Tzvi Novick, "Between First-Century Apocalyptic and Seventh-Century Liturgy: On 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and Qillir," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 44 (2013): 356–78.

<sup>8</sup> That said, quite intriguingly he did not compose *qerobot* for "ordinary" *shabbatot*, only for festivals or "special" *shabbatot*. On the genre see Laura S. Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press 2010), 35–70.

<sup>9</sup> Shulamit Elizur, "From Riddle Texts to Pure Lyrics: Explorations of R. El'azar berabbi Qillir's Poetry" [Hebrew], *Dehak: A Magazine for Good Literature* 2 (2012): 16–34.

<sup>10</sup> On the dissemination of Qillirian *piyyuṭim* and their relative absence from medieval Spain, see Michael Rand, "Surviving Fragments of the Qillirian Heritage in Provence/Catalonia and in Spain: In the Wake of New Materials from the Geniza" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 84 (2016): 417–36.

tices of later generations.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the attribution of *piyyuṭim* to the Qilliri is still a problematic task. Scholars invest an enormous amount of time in order to assure the genuineness of the attribution to the Qilliri, but even a glimpse into these discussions reveals its inherent limitations. In most cases, attributions rely on accumulation of stylistic, linguistic and literary evidences, accompanied by acrostic signatures in certain parts of the compositions and superscripts added by later scribes.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in many cases the *piyyuṭim* are reconstructed from various copies and several discreet manuscripts, hence raise questions concerning the integrity of the materials. In fact, part of the problem relates directly to signatures in the acrostics; until today it is not clear what are the exact relations between the various spellings of the name of the father of the *payṭan*: Qallir, Qillir, Qillar<sup>13</sup> and some other variants and why do other names appear in certain *piyyuṭim*, such as *Hodaya*, or *Yehuda*.<sup>14</sup> These reservations are mentioned here as a reminder to the inherent limitations of the study of the Qillirian corpus and the works of other late antique *payṭanim*. That said, recent developments in the field of Digital Humanities and particularly in stylometry and authorship attribution could lead, in the coming years, to a better understanding and delineation of *payṭanic* authorship.<sup>15</sup>

**11** This problem is not unique, of course, to *payṭanic* texts but this time gap limits the ability of scholars to reconstruct the “original” Qillirian corpus.

**12** For a discussion of these attribution procedures, see the introduction to Elizur and Rand, *Rosh Hashana*.

**13** In fact, it is not entirely clear if ‘berabbi’ means ‘the son of’. See: Ezra Fleischer, “Solving the Qilliri Riddle” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 54 (1985): 427–383.

**14** The complexity is best exemplified by Shulamit Elizur’s conclusion that El’azar berabbi Qallir and El’azar berabbi Qillar are two different *payṭanim*; see Shulamit Elizur, *Piyyutei El’azar berabbi Qillar* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988). Elizur’s claim is sound and quite convincing, still even she maintains that certain *piyyuṭim* signed El’azar berabbi Qillar belong in fact to the corpus of El’azar berabbi Qillir. See Shulamit Elizur, “Otot Shlosha: Qillirian Qedushta for Shabbat Ḥanukkah and Rosh Ḥodesh” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 8 (1985): 71–89.

**15** Patrick Juola, “Authorship Attribution and the Digital Humanities Curriculum,” in *Literary Education and Digital Learning: Methods and Technologies for Humanities Studies*, eds. Willie van Peer, Sonia Zyngier, and Vander Viana (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2010), 1–21; Moshe Koppel, “Author Identification Using Computerized Methods: The Case of Genizat Harson” [Hebrew], *Yes-hurun* 23 (2010): 559–66. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal and Avi Shmidman, “Reconstruction of the Mekhilta Deuteronomy Using Philological and Computational Tools,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 9 (2018): 2–25.

## 2 El‘azar berabbi Qillir as Author

*Payṭanic* individual authorship is usually overlooked in discussion of contemporary rabbinic mode of collective authorship. In a recent survey on authorship in rabbinic literature, Martin Jaffee wrote the following on the collective nature of rabbinic literature: “as far as human authorship is concerned, there are no Yes-hua b. Siras or Philos in the rabbinic literary world. Rabbis would not admit to writing formative texts for the ages out of the resources of their own imaginations until the ninth century C.E., when political and cultural exigencies drew Rabbi Sa‘adia ibn Yosef of Baghdad out of the shell of anonymity.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Sacha Stern, who studied the idea of authorship in the Babylonian Talmud, concluded that “in general terms, it is of highest significance to note that unlike contemporary Graeco-Roman and Christian works, which were nearly all ascribed to their specific authors, early rabbinic works such as the Mishna, the *Talmudim*, and various *Midrashic* compilations were anonymously redacted, and hence, as whole works, basically unauthored.”<sup>17</sup> The Rabbis, then, chose a mode of collective authorship, in which individuals voices are recorded in discourse, but the output of this discourse does not result in a unified vision. Rather, the rabbinic compilation is a celebration of multivocality, of interpretations and counter-interpretations. *Payṭanic* authorship, on the other hand, is very different, both in scope and in essence. This is exemplified most clearly by the *piyyuṭim* of the Qilliri, who inscribed his name in various sections of his *piyyuṭim* by using the technique of the acrostic. To be sure, the Qilliri was not the first one to use this technique (Yannai already used it) nonetheless he is arguably the most famous *payṭanic* author as the discussions in the following part of the article exemplify.

Name acrostics, as Derek Krueger demonstrated in his study of the celebrated Byzantine poet Romanos the Melode, “are a technique for attaching identity to output, linking signature to authorial identity and authorial control. Romanos’ use of his name in the genitive case asserts ownership as well as responsibility for composition.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the numerous medieval manuscripts—from the Cairo Geniza and from Europe—attest to authorial status of the Qilliri, most no-

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Jaffee, “Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Sacha Stern, “Attribution and Authorship in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 45 (1994): 49.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004), 169.

tably by superscripts that are copied before the composition and state that it is by the Qilliri. And, as was previously mentioned, the status of the Qilliri as a prominent individual author is also expressed in writing of later sages who admired his work. In fact, it is precisely Sa'adya Gaon (882–942), who is frequently singled out as the first Jewish author in the first millennium, who praised the early *payṭanim* in general, and the Qilliri in particular.

The individual mode of authorship practiced by the *payṭanim* sheds also fresh light on the interrelations between *piyyuṭ* and rabbinic literature. Scholars have pointed out from the outset that rabbinic and *payṭanic* literatures are related but stressed at the same time that the latter is secondary to the former. According to this hierarchical view, rabbinic literature is the source of exegetical and homiletic traditions and the *payṭanim* merely bring versified versions of them.<sup>19</sup> However, in the last two decades scholars began to challenge—to this extent or other—these assumptions and exemplified that *payṭanim* are frequently the creators of exegetical traditions and that the interplay between *piyyuṭ* and rabbinic literature is more complex. As Laura Lieber wrote: “it is important to understand that now-familiar texts were still likely in a fluid state. The poet was not necessarily citing texts but may have been actively participating in—and contributing to—traditions of interpretation that subsequently crystallized into the now more familiar (prose) compositions.”<sup>20</sup>

But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that the Qilliri based his *piyyuṭim* solely on materials from rabbinic literature, they are still the outcome of an intense and creative literary process. First and foremost, the Qilliri crafted lengthy, continuous narratives that relate biblical episodes that are self-sufficient. Moreover, he did not only sign his name in the acrostic but also erased the names of the rabbis that appear in the original rabbinic text. So even if there is nothing “original” in the *piyyuṭim* (and anyway the notion of originality is a modern one) the Qilliri still omitted the names of the rabbis, the original authors, as it were, and claimed authority over it. So, the point is not whether the *payṭanim* created their own exegetical interpretations to the biblical narrative. Their act of composing a self-contained, continuous narrative with their name on it marked them as individual authors.

<sup>19</sup> The classical study is by Saul Lieberman, “Ḥazzanut Yannai,” *Sinai* 4 (1939): 221–50. The most comprehensive study is by Zvi M. Rabinowitz, *Halakha and Aggada in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai: The Sources, Language and Period of the Payyetaṅ* [Hebrew] (New York: Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1965).

<sup>20</sup> Lieber, *Yannai*, 187. See now: Tzvi Novick, *Piyyut and Midrash: Form, Genre, History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2018).

This relates to another meaningful difference between rabbinic and *payṭanic* texts. While the former almost always dealt with themes by discussing small hermeneutical or exegetical units, the latter tended to present sustained narratives. Furthermore, unlike many rabbinic texts that offered often multiple readings, the interpretive line of the *payṭanic* texts is much more coherent. So, the outcome is that if we read the *payṭanic* corpus without knowing the rabbinical corpus, it would be very hard to surmise that such literature ever existed. The point is not that the *payṭanim* were hostile towards the rabbis, indeed the opposite is much closer to the truth. At the same time, they were not “singing rabbis” who preferred verse to prose. This might also explain why some early Babylonian sages opposed *piyyuṭ* on halakhic and historical grounds.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately these anti-*payṭanic* and anti-Palestinian sentiments did not prevail as far as *piyyuṭ* is concerned, thanks mostly to Sa‘adya Gaon’s prominence and the fact that he himself was a talented *payṭan*.

### 3 Qillir’s Divine Inspiration in a Comparative Outlook

As noted above the exact meaning of the name Qillir (or Qallir) is one of the biggest mysteries surrounding the famous *payṭan*. The earliest author to explore the meaning of the peculiar name was Rabbi Nathan bar Yehiel of Rome (ca. 1035–1106) in his Hebrew dictionary, the *‘arukh*. In the entry קליר he wrote: “We have heard that there is a place in which they call a cake Qallir (κολλύρα) and therefore he is called Rabbi Eliezer [sic] the Qallir, since he ate a cake with an amulet and was enlightened.” The etymological explanation in itself seems rather dubious, however it is interesting to see that Nathan bar Yehiel connects the Qilliri’s rise to fame with a magical practice, similar to many other such practices known from late antique and medieval Jewish societies.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, other medieval authors connected the Qilliri’s composition and recitation of his *piyyuṭim* with related mystic practices. For example, Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi’s famous grandson, maintained that the Qilliri was chanting a well-known Rosh ha-Shana *piyyuṭ*

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Customs and Halacha in Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), 110–130.

<sup>22</sup> See Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).



while surrounded by fire.<sup>23</sup> The connection between human speech and divine inspiration is well established already in antiquity and it finds an interesting parallel in the Book of Ezekiel: “... open your mouth, and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it... And he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.’” (Ezek 2:8–3:1)

Nathan bar Yehiel’s depiction of the Qilliri as someone who was blessed by a mystical or magical inspiration fits very well with contemporary tradition about the beginning of the famous Byzantine poet Romanos the Melode (ca. 485–561):

The venerable Romanos was from Syria and became a deacon of the holy church of Beirut. Arriving in Constantinople in the reign of the emperor Anastasius, Romanos went and settled in the Church of the Most Holy Theotokos in the Kyrou district, where he received the gift of the kontakia.... Then on one of these nights, the most holy Theotokos appeared to him while he was asleep and gave him a paper scroll and said, “Take this paper and eat it.” It seems that the saint opened his mouth and swallowed the paper... And immediately awakening from his sleep he was astonished and glorified God. Thereupon he mounted on the ambo and began to chant.<sup>24</sup>

This tradition appears in the *Menologium of Basil II*, an illuminated service book that was compiled around the year 1000, namely in a similar time period to Nathan bar Yehiel. The connection of this story to the narrative from Ezekiel is straightforward but it also resonates with the tradition about the Qilliri, who also swallowed a piece of paper containing sacred texts.

Interestingly, these two traditions might be connected to an earlier tradition concerning Ephrem the Syrian, the fourth-century Syriac poet:

The day after he received the document he became filled with the Holy Spirit, and began uttering marvelous things, going about preaching and teaching many. In the morning, he heard the hermits saying: “Look, Ephrem is teaching as though a fountain were flowing from his mouth.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Langer, “Kalir was a Tanna,” 100. On the prominence of the Qilliri in medieval Ashkenaz, see also Avraham Grossman, “Shivḥe R. El’azar berabbi Qallir be-ferush ha-piyyuṭim shel R.Y. Qara,” in *Kneset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue*, eds. Shulamit Elizur, Moshe David Herr, Gershon Shaked, and Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1994), 293–308; Susan Einbinder, “Exegesis and Romance: Revisiting the Old French Translation of Kallir,” in *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth Century France*, eds. Elisheva Baumgarten and Judah Galinsky (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 235–57; Hollender, *Piyyut Commentary*, 157–60.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted and discussed in Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 189–90.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Amar, *The Syriac “Vita” Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 123.

The similarities between the “hagiographic” traditions concerning the three “founding fathers” of Hebrew, Greek and Syriac hymnography provide one more example for the dynamics between Jewish and Christian liturgical poetry in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.<sup>26</sup>

## 4 El'azar berabbi Qillir and St. Peter

I turn now to an intriguing story that connects St. Peter and the Qilliri, a story that appears in several texts of the so-called *Toldot Yeshu* literature.<sup>27</sup> Scholars who examined the story focused mainly on its context within the Jewish-Christian polemics. I seek to explore here the ramifications of the text on the presentation of El'azar berabbi Qillir and *piyyuṭ* in general. First, let us look at the text:

After Rabbi Simon had strived for a long period of time among the [Christians to become] important in their eyes as a great and devout believer of their faith, he ordered a house and a tower to be built for him [on] a rock and for rooms to be carved out within the rock ... Rabbi Simon sat there in this tower all the time, every day and night. He remained alone in his abode with the Torah of Moses. Once a year he went out in front of the gate of the tower, and the Christians gathered around him and prostrated themselves before him on the ground. He proclaimed to them new ordinances and instructions. ... However, they changed the name of Rabbi Simon into *Kepha Poter* (“Cephas the liberator”) because he exempted them completely from the entire Torah of Moses because of their great number. He remained in the tower of the rock all of the time. In accordance with the name of the rock in which he had settled, the Jews called him Rabbi Simon Cephas. When he was securely locked up in the tower on the rock, Rabbi Simon worshipped God with all his soul and composed numerous *piyyuṭim*, *yotzrot*, *qerovot*, *ofanim* and *zulatot* for use during the entire year, even as Kalir had done. He also composed a few *piyyuṭim* for the New Year in the tower of the rock, and they were sent off by a man appointed for the task. He entrusted him to hand them over to the sages of Israel in Babylonia so that the *hazzanim* could recite these *piyyuṭim*. The sages handed these *piyyuṭim* over to Rabbi Nathan the Babyloni-

<sup>26</sup> Wout van Bekkum, “Jewish and Christian Hymnody in the Early Byzantine Period,” in *The Jewish-Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire*, eds. James Aitken and James Carleton Paget (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 261–78; *idem*, “Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (*Piyyuṭ*) of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,” in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, eds. Jan den Boeft and Anthony Hilhorst (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 297–308; *idem*, “Lights of Sion and Lights of Edom: Poetry Between Liturgy and Literature in Early Synagogue and Church,” *Dutch Studies* 3 (1997): 109–20; Ophir Münz-Manor, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East—A Comparative Approach,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010): 336–61; Yahalom, *Poetry and Society*, 199–200.

<sup>27</sup> 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. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 289–310.

an who was the leader of the entire Diaspora (the Exilarch). From there they were spread to all the lands of Israel's dispersion and they were received with honor. They decreed that Israel should recite these *piyyutim* in all the Diaspora because they protect and acclaim the composer, peace be upon him.<sup>28</sup>

Does the text ridicule St. Peter, provide him an alibi or perhaps a combination of both? Scholars who studied the text provided different answers but at any rate they all focused on the figure of St. Peter, the immediate protagonist of the story. In the present context I would like to read the story as having something to say also about the supporting-actor, El'azar berrabi Qillir and about *piyyuṭ* in general. I propose to read the text in a twofold way, taking into consideration both the intra- and inter-Jewish contexts and to see it as a double-mirror that reflects an ambivalent reality in which cultural and literary phenomena are “inside” and “outside” at the same time. This sort of tension seemed to surround *piyyuṭ* almost from its inception and most notably when it reached Babylonia. Some early Babylonian *ge'onim* forcefully objected to *piyyuṭ* and sought to uproot it from the Jewish canon or at the very least to limit its influence.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the text presents Simon-Peter on the one hand as a “converso”, namely a Jew who is forced to hide his identity, and at the same time it blemishes *piyyuṭ* by connecting it directly to the Christian world. The text's juxtaposition of Peter and the Qilliri creates thus a “dangerous” link between the two.

Before anything else I wish to elaborate on some of the central motifs of the story about Rabbi Simon and how he became St. Peter. Simon, a Torah scholar and *payṭan*, is depicted as a Syrian stylite, namely a Christian ascetic who lives on a pillar, studying, praying and preaching. It is not clear from the text why and how Simon became a stylite, and why do the Christian lay-people admire him.<sup>30</sup> What the text does say is that the Christians adhered to Simon because he exempted them from Jewish law (תורת משה), in contrast to himself who day and night devoted himself to it. The exemption from fulfilling the Jewish law is asso-

<sup>28</sup> Van Bekkum, “Simon Peter,” 303–4. As discussed in this article the dating of this story, and its variants, is impossible at the current state of research. It seems to me that the text does not belong to the early (Palestinian?) stratum of the *Toldot Yeshu* literature and seems to stem from Babylonia towards the end of the first millennium. In the early 2010s a new edition of the text was published as well as collection of essays on it; see: Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch, eds., *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson, eds., *Toledot Yeshu, “The Life Story of Jesus”. Two Volumes and Database* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Langer, *To Worship God*, 110–30.

<sup>30</sup> In other versions of the story it is related that Simon became a stylite in order to defend the Jews as an undercover agent.

ciated with a pun on his Greek name *Petros*, פטר, that is—exempted. The Jews, on the other hand called him by the neutral name *Keifa*, rock, in accordance with his life on the pillar. This presentation of Simon-Peter exemplifies the text's duality that presents one leader of two distinct communities. The Jews see him as a תלמיד חכם (Torah scholar) and the Christians as a hermit, whose asceticism liberates them from living according to the laws of Moses. Obviously, there is some irony in the text regarding St. Peter and his Christian followers, however he is also depicted as someone who got caught in an awkward situation and after all, as a pious rabbi. As I have argued elsewhere, such an ambivalent attitude is present in other Jewish texts that portray Christian protagonists.<sup>31</sup>

The second part of the text is the one which mostly interests me here. Simon-Peter is said to have composed *piyyuṭim* in every known genre. Again, the text does not explain why Simon-Peter began to compose *piyyuṭim* and it even stresses that he was forced to smuggle them in order to get them to Jewish communities elsewhere. This last description colors the text with a strong medieval tone. Simon-Peter most probably dwells somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, but the text mentions explicitly a Jewish diaspora, a Babylonian exilarch and uses the medieval (and corrupted) form קרובין (instead of קרובה, namely a *payṭanic* composition for the 'amida prayer). Moreover, the text blurs time and again the differences between Simon-Peter and the Qilliri and depicts both of them as prolific and admired *payṭanim*. Indeed, the tradition concerning Simon-Peter as a pious Jew and a *payṭan* is known elsewhere in several Ashkenazic texts. In *Sefer Ḥasidim*, for instance, Simon is described as a “righteous (צדיק) whom people follow falsely” although in *Mahzor Vitry* we find an objection to the tradition that Simon-Peter was a *payṭan* who composed the famous prayer נשמה כל חי (The Soul of Every Creature).<sup>32</sup>

31 Ophir Münz-Manor, “Carnavalesque Ambivalence and the Christian *Other* in Jewish Poems from Byzantine Palestine,” in *Jews of Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, eds. Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 831–45. It is also worthwhile noting the interesting connection between the Qilliri-St. Peter tradition and the medieval tradition of the Jewish pope, in which the protagonist (namely, the Jewish kid that becomes the pope) is a son of a poet. See: Raspe, “Payyetanim as Heroes”.

32 Langer, “Kalir was a Tanna,” 101–2.

## 5 El‘azar berabbi Qillir in the Writings of S. Y. Agnon

S. Y. Agnon, arguably the most prominent Hebrew novelist in the twentieth century, was very fond of medieval Hebrew poetry. In his Nobel Prize Banquet speech delivered on December 10, 1966 in Stockholm, he famously said:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.<sup>33</sup>

In other places, Agnon explicitly mentions not only his strong ties with Biblical poetry but also with medieval *piyyuṭ*. Thus, for example, in his short story *הסימן* (The Sign) that was published in 1944, which we shall come back to later on, he wrote: “And even though I consider myself as a son of Eretz-Israel in every detail, I love the *piyyuṭim* that prepare the soul for the purpose of the Day.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Agnon disassociates *piyyuṭ* from its birthplace (that is, Eretz-Israel)—a fact that beyond any doubt was well known to him—but this relates to the liturgical present of *piyyuṭ* which in the context of Zionism became an infamous sign of “exile.” Agnon admits, then, that in spite of his Zionist inclination, he loves *piyyuṭ*.

Agnon’s affinity to *piyyuṭ*, and to particular *payṭanim*, is exemplified in two short stories that were published in the literary journal *Moznayim* in 1944. The first entitled *איברי המשיח* (The Limbs of the Messiah) features the figure of El‘azar berabbi Qillir and the second, entitled *הסימן* (The Sign) focuses on Solomon Ibn Gabirol (ca. 1020–ca. 1057). In both stories the protagonist meets the *payṭanim* and has an exchange with them concerning destruction and redemption. Inter-

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1966/agnon/speech/> (last accessed July 2018).

<sup>34</sup> On Agnon and medieval Jewish liturgy in general, see Galili Shahar, *Bodies and Names: Readings in Modern Jewish Literature* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 2016), 235–58 (Hebrew). All English translations in the article are by Ophir Münz-Manor unless otherwise noted.

estingly, *הסימן* was later expanded by Agnon, and only recently an expanded version of *איברי המשיח* was discovered by Avi Shmidman and Atara Snowbell.<sup>35</sup>

The original, short, version of the story describes the protagonist on his way back from the Western Wall on the Ninth of Av. As he walks in the streets of the Old City he sees “an elderly man running with a book of lamentations in his hand.” The protagonist tries to chase the elderly man but to no avail; even so he recognizes that it was no other than “El'azar ha-Qallir, may his soul rest in peace in Eden.” On the next morning, on his way to say the lamentations at the Western Wall, he sees him once again this time apparently without the book of lamentations. The protagonist tells him that last night he chased him but could not reach him and the Qallir replies: “it is no wonder that I ran. On that hour they started arranging the limbs of the Messiah and I ran with my book of lamentation in order to foster their hands.”

One of the striking features of the story is the notion concerning the limbs of the Messiah. The idea is rooted in two verses from the New Testament (1 Corinthians 6:15, Romans 12:5) but as Shmidman and Snowbell show, Agnon based his allusion on a Hassidic text from the nineteenth century. Shmidman and Snowbell also elaborate on the connections between *איברי המשיח* and *הסימן*. In both cases a destruction stands at the background of the stories (of the Jerusalem Temple and of Buczacz, Agnon's hometown), and in each one of them a *paytan*, the Qilliri and Solomon Ibn Gabirol, offers consolations by means of his *piyyuṭim*. In addition, those two stories take place on the eve of meaningful days: the Ninth of Av and Erev Shavuot, and in both cases destruction and redemption are part of the narrative and of its salvific qualities.

All in all, the appearance of El'azar berabbi Qillir in Agnon's *איברי המשיח*—and in some other stories—are another clear sign to the ongoing cultural prestige of El'azar berabbi Qillir.

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<sup>35</sup> According to Shmidman and Snowbell the expanded version should be dated to 1967, post the Six Days War. See Avi Shmidman and Atara Snowbell, “The Expanded Version of ‘The Limbs of the Messiah’ by S. Y. Agnon: A Critical Edition” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 24 (2018) (forthcoming). I would like to thank the authors for sharing with me the article prior to its publication. All quotations from the story are taken from this publication.