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Stefan C. Relf

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

On Jewish liturgical research

Research into the history of daily Hebrew prayers may justifiably be said to warrant total scholarly attention or none at all. With a presence in each period of Jewish history, a relationship with almost every area of scientific as well as traditional Hebrew and Jewish studies, and a relevance to the wider analysis of religion and religions, it may be argued that the liturgy of the Jews, in its various forms, deserves the closest scrutiny on the part of students of all these disciplines. On the other hand, it is easily understood why the very comprehensive nature of the subject might lead to its neglect as an independent topic. Given that it occurs within so many areas of research, it is a simple matter to restrict it to such contexts and deny it any specific, critical treatment. This latter policy is clearly not one that commends itself to the author of this book but it may not be obvious how a need for the present study has emerged in recent years, in which ways it relates to other overall examinations of the subject, and what ground it expects to cover. It is to be hoped that as the reader becomes acquainted with the volume such matters will become clear. In the mean time the purpose of this introductory chapter is to set the tone for the remainder of the book by referring briefly to major developments in the Jewish liturgical research of the modern and contemporary periods and by offering a summary of the methodology and theory that underlie the eight chapters that follow it. It is divided into five parts: (i) Zunz and Elbogen; (ii) Later work; (iii) Some problems; (iv) The way forward; (v) Methodology and theory.

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ZUNZ AND ELBOGEN

Although there are some respects in which Leopold Zunz (1794–1886) benefited from earlier efforts at arriving at a systematic, if not critical study of Jewish liturgy, he may still justifiably be described as the father of all modern research in this field. He bequeathed to his scholarly heirs a wealth of material and a scientific method that continue to influence contemporary work and his bibliographical study of the prayer-book remains seminal. As well as tracing the central role played by Torah-study in the history of Jewish worship, he analysed the historical development of specific prayers and of the rites in which they occurred. His work also covered the adjustments made in liturgical language, form and content, and in synagogal customs, as a result of internal and external factors.

Yet there was undoubtedly a *tendenz* in that work. Behind his early studies lay the desire for liturgical reform in the Germany of his day and the interest in presenting Judaism to liberal Europeans as a respectable culture. He consequently contrasted the lateness of *piyyut* (liturgical poetry) with the antiquity of the fixed daily prayers and stressed the centrality of the homily. At a later stage of his work, however, he acknowledged the cultural value of these poems and viewed them as a mutation of the original homily form. He saw the differences in rites in terms of poetic additions and paid a growing degree of attention to the personalities of the poets and their influence on the literary genre. What he never did was to develop his basic idea about the regular prayers into either a history of the prayer-book or an analysis of its concepts, or to distinguish between the citation of a prayer and its exact wording. The study of poetry thus became an independent and fruitful subject of research while the history of the major prayers was relatively neglected.¹

Ismar Elbogen (1874–1943) redressed the balance between prayer and poetry in the comprehensive German work, published in its final form in 1931, which built on the theories of his teacher, Israel Lewy, as well as expanding and refining

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Zunz's basic treatment of Torah, *tefillah* and synagogue, but was stylistically accessible to both layman and scholar.² Starting out from linguistic definitions of liturgical terms, he detailed the major debts owed by Jewish liturgy to biblical precedent, Temple practice and sectarian tendencies, and acknowledged that it was only slowly that a fixed liturgy developed in the talmudic and post-talmudic periods. He pointed to divergencies between Babylonian and Palestinian practice and followed Solomon Schechter in making significant use of Genizah material for the history of rites and texts. Forty years after its appearance, the work was still important enough (or progress in the wider field unimpressive enough) to warrant a Hebrew translation of the German, albeit with corrections and updated annotations.³

On the less creditable side, Elbogen was still biased towards liturgical reform, negative about mysticism and tending towards the devotional. The Ashkenazi rite is too central for historical comfort and little treatment is offered of theology, *halakhah* and vestigial cultic elements. Principal aspects of the major prayers are historically analysed but little attention is paid to the textual, linguistic and literary development of the remainder of such prayers and to more minor compositions. Elbogen acknowledges the existence of more than one 'Ur-type' but nevertheless oversimplifies and exaggerates the talmudic trend towards a fixed formal liturgy. What particularly attracts contemporary criticism are his claims that Jewish prayer was innovative only in the first and third periods of its existence, namely before 600 and after 1800 CE, and that in the intermediate period that innovative ability moved from prayer to *piyyut*.⁴

LATER WORK

In spite of Elbogen's provision of a more comprehensive treatment of Jewish liturgy, or perhaps because of the way in which his treatment was widely regarded as definitive, further research over the next forty years was predominantly of the highly specialised and individual variety.

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Jacob Mann and, to a lesser extent, Simḥa Assaf illuminated the Jewish liturgical developments of the geonic and post-geonic periods in Palestine and Babylon by their discovery and publication of numerous Genizah texts.⁵ Daniel Goldschmidt described little-known manuscripts, editions, rites and personalities and produced critical editions of major works.⁶ Naphtali Wieder, to whom the writer owes his training in liturgical research, devoted his earliest work to Islamic influences on Jewish worship and to the reconstruction of Saadya's prayer-book and has more recently traced the detailed textual history of expressions and formulations, the basic sense and origin of which have long been forgotten.⁷

Much as these excellent researches were appreciated by the few experts in the field they did little to advance the general history of Jewish liturgy beyond the stage reached by Elbogen or to force the subject back into the centre of the Jewish academic scene. Educational and devotional literature gradually came to an awareness of Elbogen's findings but there was little additional work of the comprehensive type to offer further guidance for those in search of the historical prayer-book.⁸

The pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction about a quarter of a century ago and there have been signs since then of an interest in intensively analysing the subject in whole or in part, establishing how it is to be studied and following Elbogen's lead in widening its scope. At that time Goldschmidt and Joseph Heinemann began a lively exchange of views about the nature of liturgical research the significance of which remains major in spite of the deaths of both scholars. Goldschmidt continued to stress the need for thorough manuscript research, the importance of sound philological method and the close study of the various rites. Heinemann followed Arthur Spanier and argued that the philological approach was out of date and should be replaced by the form-critical method which had been so useful to biblical research and was now being applied to rabbinic texts. For him the only remaining function of the philological approach was in the completion of some outstanding points of detail. His own form-critical studies led him to the conclusion that there were equally valid variations,

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rather than a correct 'Ur-text', from the very beginning of rabbinic prayer, and he devoted his efforts to identifying the *Gattungen* (types) of prayer and their *Sitz im Leben* (original context).⁹

Heinemann's views gradually came to dominate in Israel and no major challenge to their whole essence was issued until the recent Hebrew article by Ezra Fleischer 'On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer'.¹⁰ Fleischer, whose major work had been primarily in the field of mediaeval Hebrew poetry, increased his research interest in the history of the prayer-book itself in the 1980s and published an excellent description of the Palestinian rite as discovered in the Genizah manuscripts.¹¹ Now arguing that obligatory worship was a Temple activity and that there was no communal prayer in the synagogue before the destruction of the Jerusalem shrine, he placed the whole responsibility for the change on Rabban Gamliel as the innovator and fashioner of statutory rabbinic prayer. Taking issue with Heinemann's view that alternative texts, as found in the Genizah, reflected equally valid versions that had been orally transmitted, he argued for an early commitment to writing and fixed form and explained the alternatives as the result of cantorial and poetic expansions in the post-talmudic period. Fleischer's forceful expression of opinion reopened the debate about the general origin and history of rabbinic prayers and amounted to a rejection of the many moves around the world to build on Heinemann's theories.¹²

In the USA, Jakob Petuchowski took a similar position to that of Heinemann and co-operated with him in a number of projects. He did much to encourage the study of liturgy, at both the scholarly and popular levels, by his publications¹³ and the postgraduate researches of his students. One of these students, Richard Sarason, in a most useful summary of the history of Jewish liturgical scholarship published fourteen years ago,¹⁴ made a clear-cut distinction between traditional philologists and form-critics, and seemed to favour the view that the latter held the key to future developments. Indeed, the fact that his article made no mention of Wieder in seventy-six pages of printed text and had only two references to Mann and one for

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Assaf in 370 footnotes, could in itself have been seen as an indication of such a preference on the part of the author. In two later articles, however,¹⁵ he moved away from such a polarised presentation of future developments and argued for a more comprehensive approach to the study of the subject. In addition, he demonstrated convincingly the complex and multifarious nature of Jewish worship by pointing to the liturgical aspects of traditional Jewish study, practice and mystical pietism. Interestingly, the writer's own thoughts on the future of Jewish liturgical research, as expressed in a Hebrew lecture given at the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies held in Jerusalem in 1981, also tallied with the promotion of the comprehensive approach, and a paper first delivered to the Cambridge Theological Society in 1977, and later published in *Studia Liturgica*, independently paralleled Sarason's definitions of Jewish worship.¹⁶

Another student of Pétuchowski, Lawrence Hoffman, analysed fifty-nine liturgical controversies among the geonim in order to reconstruct the history of the move towards standardisation of the prayers.¹⁷ He rightly pointed to the differences between Eretz Yisrael and Babylon at that time, and to the tensions and disagreements within Babylon itself, but his neat packaging of the liturgical history of geonic Babylon into three distinct periods was perhaps a trifle too simple a solution. Whatever his attitude to the traditional, philological approach, and *pace* the view of Sarason about the 'freshness' of his thesis,¹⁸ Hoffman was substantially indebted to scholars such as Mann and Wieder for the basic research on which he built his theories. Five years ago Hoffman produced a more general study of Jewish liturgy, more indebted to social studies and religious phenomenology, and identifying the 'sacred myths' to be traced through its history. Among the prayers and patterns analysed were *havdalah*, 'avodah, mysticism, American Reform liturgy and the 'chavurot' (prayer groups) phenomenon, and the theories, though intriguing, were by definition somewhat speculative.¹⁹

One has come to expect the encouragement and promotion of novel approaches to various aspects of Jewish studies from

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Jacob Neusner and his school, and in the liturgical field too a thought-provoking piece was produced by Tzvee Zahavy in 1980.²⁰ Zahavy's article sets out clearly the new directions in which he believes the study of early Jewish prayer should proceed and, interestingly enough, no mention is made of form-criticism, but a wide, interdisciplinary approach to the problem is proposed. The prayer-texts themselves should be studied without preconceived notions about their accurate transmission, early standardisation and historical background. The evidence from material remains is to be given a central place in reconstructing the nature of rabbinic acts of prayer and must be cautiously correlated with the evolution of literary traditions dealing with liturgical subjects. A clear distinction requires to be made between the religious theory and legal philosophy underlying rabbinic prayer on the one hand, and the rites and practices recorded in the talmudic–midrashic literature on the other. Once again there are interesting parallels with the writer's own notions.²¹ In connection with such matters as the early intent of the *shema'*, the structure of some synagogues in Roman Palestine and the search for original prayers, Zahavy seems to err on the side of iconoclasm rather than caution. Similarly, there is no doubt that forms of Jewish law other than the rabbinic existed in Roman Palestine, but his implication that no overriding importance may be attached to talmudic traditions in the analysis of rabbinic prayer must be open to question. It should also be noted that he has restricted his remarks to early Jewish prayer and offered no comment on the remaining fifteen centuries of development. Nevertheless, Zahavy's emphasis on the 'interdisciplinary nature of this problem' and his call for the integrated use of 'philological study, literary criticism, archaeology, art history, history of religions, and the history of law' represented a sensible and welcome development in the field. Since penning that general article he has produced a study of the mishnaic tractate *Berakhoth* and some thought-provoking (though not necessarily convincing) theories of the original provenances of the *shema'* and the *'amidah*.²² There is also cause for satisfaction in the fact that the subject of 'prayers and blessings' in the

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Encyclopedia Hebraica was treated in a similarly variegated fashion rather than in the narrow way characteristic of many earlier Jewish encyclopaedias.²³

SOME PROBLEMS

A researcher into the origins of the Christian daily office made the following comment some ten years ago:

Such work as has been done has on the whole been pursued in separate, seemingly watertight, compartments: Jewish scholars have worked largely in isolation from New Testament scholars, New Testament scholars largely in isolation from liturgical scholars, and so on, with the result that hardly at all have the findings in one area been related to those in another. Even among liturgical scholars study has tended to be restricted to small areas of the subject, and the effects of new perspectives and discoveries in one historical period or geographical area upon the understanding of the office at other times and in other places have rarely been considered or worked out in full.²⁴

The criticism was as applicable to the study of Jewish prayer as it was to researches in Christian liturgy. The high degree of specialisation in certain areas, the failure to approach the subject as a whole or in all its aspects, and the tendency to follow one fashionable approach and to regard others as outdated, have all led to an unacceptable degree of fragmentation. Perhaps the potential student is discouraged by the fact that Jewish liturgical scholarship touches on so many aspects of Jewish and related studies that it demands, for coping with it, an education that is at once both intense and broad. The answer to the problem is not to treat the subject in a piecemeal fashion but either to train specifically for it or to conduct the research by way of teams and projects. At least there have been some hopeful developments during the last decade in the matter of the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Jewish and Christian scholars have begun to make greater use of each other's research and to benefit from scholarly dialogue and liturgists have been looking wider than the texts of the prayers for explanations. Paul Bradshaw, who made the remark, arranged a highly successful conference on Jewish and Christian worship

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at Notre Dame in 1988 and two volumes of essays have been published as a result.²⁵

As far as the intensive study of Jewish liturgy is concerned, it is still not taken sufficiently seriously in the wider academic community. In Israeli universities there appears to be some doubt whether the subject is entitled to an independent existence and scholarly respectability and, if so, where it truly belongs. To the extent that it receives attention, this is provided in the context of related disciplines and not as an independent academic entity, or with distinctly traditional overtones and intentions. In the many university departments teaching Hebrew and Jewish studies outside Israel, little or no time or effort is devoted to the subject. The rabbinical seminaries have a practical interest in providing an adequate training in the field, and yet there are at the moment perhaps only two or three of those institutions that could justifiably claim to be providing satisfactory encouragement for the serious and advanced study of Jewish prayer. It is not therefore surprising that in comparison with similar areas of study, the number of articles and books on the subject as a whole is few, courses are rare, progress in research is slow and spasmodic, and the interest of learned societies and academic conferences is distinctly limited.²⁶ Given, in addition, the current financial crisis in which all these centres of learning find themselves, the prospect of a significant expansion of this branch of scholarship in the near future does not appear likely.

The close association of study and practice has also proved a stumbling-block to the acceptance of the subject as a serious academic discipline. It has been too closely connected with traditional observance of Jewish religious customs for it to be above suspicion among academics who take a pride in their espousal of freedom of enquiry and their advocacy of objective judgement. The problem is not unique to Judaism. It has been written of the North American Academy of Liturgy that it 'represents a tension between the two end-points of the spectrum, for according to its constitution, while it hopes its work redounds to the good of the churches, the NAAL is an independent scholarly and professional organization and it

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does not take on its research for the sake of the churches'.²⁷ Even those interested in praying, and in providing spiritual guidance for those who would make most of their prayers, have not necessarily been interested in the serious study of prayer. A Dean of St Paul's Cathedral was once asked if he studied liturgiology: 'No, he did not, nor did he collect postage stamps.'²⁸ But then it should be said, however flippant it sounds, that the critical study of Jewish liturgy is in any case too important to be left exclusively to the 'daveners'!

Researchers must always face the problem of the assumption that has become almost axiomatic, and the long history of Jewish prayer has attracted more than its fair share of unjustified generalisations. When one such cherished supposition concerns the origins of a major world faith and the significant development of its mother religion, it is not so easily refuted. It is often claimed that the earliest Christian liturgy was based on Jewish forms of prayer as preserved in the rabbinic tradition; and yet serious questions are now being raised about the basic and relative natures of Jewish and Christian worship that may ultimately lead to a complete reappraisal of this particular sacred cow, and a consequent revision of an important aspect of Jewish and Christian religious history.²⁹ A good example is Arnold Goldberg's brief but important article in which he argues that rabbinic and synagogal worship is not liturgy in the Christian sense. It is a substitute for the suspended Temple liturgy which 'shows liturgical aspects, but it is . . . not a liturgy but rather a worship of the heart'.³⁰ Goldberg is not justified in regarding this view as characteristic of the rabbis in general, but there is no doubt that it was of major significance in the evolution of the standard rabbinic theology about prayer. Suddenly it becomes clear that the basic work in Jewish liturgy has, after all, not been definitively completed. *Au contraire*, even the most basic facts about the early liturgical relationship between Jews and Christians must be rethought.

THE WAY FORWARD

The search for the solution to the subject's problems must surely be by way of the comprehensive approach. All the