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Ritual and Rhetoric among Jews, Christians, and Samaritans: Two Comparative Observations

Tzvi Novick

In my recent book, *Piyyuṭ and Midrash: Form, Genre, and History*, I put forward elements of a framework for examining the relationship between, on the one hand, classical *piyyuṭ*—Jewish liturgical poetry from roughly the 5th to the 8th centuries—and, on the other, the rabbinic exegetical corpus that both served as a source for classical *piyyuṭ* and continued to grow alongside it.¹ The book attends only sporadically to contemporaneous points of comparison beyond rabbinic and para-rabbinic literature, or in other words, to the world of Christian and Samaritan prayer, rhetoric, and exegesis. My aim in this brief article is further to develop two arguments in the book in relation to phenomena in early Christian literature in Syriac.

Descent of the Divine Fire

The first concerns the fast day liturgy, intended most importantly for circumstances of drought, that is detailed in the second chapter of Mishnah tractate *Ta'anit*.² The Mishnah specifies that six supplementary blessings be introduced into the recitation of the *Amidah* prayer. These six additional blessings, along with the blessing that immediately precedes them from the standard *Amidah* (revised), are marked by a penultimate phrase that recalls a past instance of divine intervention, and

1 See Tzvi Novick, *Piyyuṭ and Midrash: Form, Genre, and History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019).

2 For my discussion see *ibid.*, 178-80.

that leads into the blessing conclusion (the “seal” or חתומה). In the first of the seven instances, the penultimate phrase runs as follows.³

He who answered (ענה) Abraham on Mount Moriah, may he answer (יענה) you and heed the voice of your crying.

The other six instances match the first, save that they introduce another biblical figure and a different location: “our fathers at the Red Sea”; “Joshua at Gilgal”; “Samuel at Mišpah”; “Elijah at Mount Carmel”; “Jonah from the belly of the fish”; “David and his son Solomon in Jerusalem.”

The obvious problem with this sequence is the occurrence of David and Solomon at the end, in violation of the chronological order to which the other six instances adhere; David and Solomon ought instead to precede Elijah. The Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds raise the question, and reply, rather unsatisfactorily, that the anomaly arises because the Mishnah wishes to conclude the liturgy with the blessing “seal” that happens to be linked to the reference to David and Solomon.

In the book I offer a different solution, one that begins with the observation that the instance concerning Elijah may have played an especially significant role in the genesis of the penultimate phrases. The formulation “He who answered ..., may he answer” can be construed as an expanded revocalization of Elijah’s prayer on Mount Carmel, ענני ה' ענני “Answer me, O Lord, answer me!” (1 Kgs 18:37). To a rabbinical mind, the doubled imperative is superfluous, but if the first ענני *‘ānēnī* “answer me” is revocalized ענני *‘ānānī* “He answered me,” then Elijah’s prayer yields the germ of the Mishnah’s fixed phrase: “The Lord answered me [before]; [likewise] answer me [now]!”⁴

3 The text is from MS Kaufmann, as transcribed in the online Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language (Maagarim).

4 Cf. the question raised in *b. Ber.* 9b, and attributed in many manuscripts to the third-generation Palestinian *amora* R. Ami: “Why did Elijah say ‘Answer me!’ twice?” Notably, in the preceding passage, evidently belonging to the same collection, the repetition of “I shall be” in Ex 3:14 (“I shall be what I shall be”) is interpreted along the same lines that I propose for Elijah’s doubled “Answer me!”:

Whether the fixed form of the penultimate phrase originated in a revocalization of Elijah's plea in 1 Kgs 18:37, close attention to the case of Elijah allows us to perceive a novel solution to the problem of the position of the reference to David and Solomon. Commentators on the Mishnah typically suppose that the last blessing refers to David's interventions in 2 Samuel 21 (concerning the famine occasioned by Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites) or 2 Samuel 24 (concerning David's census), and to Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 (at the dedication of the temple), because all of these passages concern or make reference to a famine or the threat of famine (1 Sam 21:1; 2 Sam 24:13; 1 Kgs 8:35, 37).⁵ While these identifications are plausible, they are hardly compelling, both because God's response to Solomon's prayer is somewhat abstract—in 1 Kgs 9:3 God says that, having heard Solomon's prayer, he has "sanctified this house"—and because they provide no answer to the aforementioned chronological problem.

In the book, I directed attention instead to the version of Solomon's dedicatory prayer in 2 Chronicles 7. In this version, God responds to Solomon's prayer by sending a fire from heaven that consumes the sacrifices (2 Chr 7:1), to which the assembled crowd responds by prostrating themselves and praising God. This incident closely tracks that of Elijah on Mount Carmel, where God responds to Elijah's prayer with a consuming fire from heaven, and the people bow and praise (1 Kgs 18:38-39). Here I add to the argument in the book that in the case of David, too, Chronicles reports on a similar fire from heaven in Jerusalem. According to 1 Chr 21:26, David builds an altar to God on the threshing

"I have been with you in this servitude; I will also be with you in the servitudes of the kingdoms." (I render the text in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 366, as transcribed in Maagarim.)

- 5 The Palestinian Talmud (y. *Ta'an.* 2:10 [65d]) refers to 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Kings 8. Hanoch Albeck, *The Mishna: Seder Moed* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1952), 33; David Levine, *Communal Fasts and Rabbinic Sermons: Theory and Practice in the Talmudic Period* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 86, and Shmuel Safrai et al., *Mishnat Eretz Israel: Tractate Ta'anit – Megila* (Jerusalem: E.M. Liphshitz Publishing House College, 2010), 69, all favor 2 Samuel 21 over 2 Samuel 24.

floor of Ornan the Jebusite, and offers animals upon it. He then calls out to God, and God “answered him” (ויענהו) with a fire from heaven that consumes the animals. It seems clear, then, that the penultimate phrase in the seventh blessing refers to the fires from heaven in 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Chronicles 7, and that the reason that David and Solomon occur at the end of the liturgy is that the events to which the liturgy refers are mentioned in the last book of the biblical canon. Or in other words, the Mishnah’s rite follows the canonical rather than the historical order.

We may note, too, that the case of Saul at Mišpah (1 Samuel 7) also involves a prayer offered in connection with a sacrifice, in circumstances that evoke the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Samuel, like Elijah, but in the face not of drought but of war, calls upon the people to cease from worship of Baal (1 Sam 7:3-4; cf. 1 Kgs 18:21-22). Likewise, there is pouring of water (1 Sam 7:6; cf. 1 Kgs 18:34-35). Samuel offers a sacrifice and calls out to God, “and the Lord answered him” (ויענהו) (1 Sam 7:9). It is not unlikely that the Mishnah assumes a link between Saul’s sacrifice and Elijah’s, and implicitly supposes (like the medieval Jewish commentator *Radaq ad loc.*) that God’s “answer” to Samuel comes in the form of a fire from heaven that consumes the sacrificial animal.

To a heretofore unappreciated degree, then, it is possible to say that the fast day liturgy in *m. Ta’anit* 2 depends on an exegetical nexus centered on the descent of the divine fire. The link between the descent of the divine fire in 1 Kgs 18:38 with Elijah’s declaration of the end of the drought immediately afterward, in 1 Kgs 18:41, evidently led—no doubt under the influence, in part, of the widespread phenomenon in the late Second Temple period and for centuries afterward of having Elijah-like holy men call upon God for rain—to the development of the rabbinic drought liturgy around passages in which the divine fire descends by way of answer to a prayer: the case of Elijah, first and foremost, and also those of David and Solomon, and probably Samuel.⁶ To these were added

6 On Elijah and the late antique holy man, and the holy man as rain bringer, see Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 184-214, and the vast literature on Honi the Circle-

other cases of divine response that themselves share certain similarities with the fast day liturgy and with each other.⁷

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- Drawer, most recently Isaiah Ben-Pazi, “Honi the Circle-Drawer: ‘A Member of the Household’ or ‘A Son Who Implores His Father’?” *JSJ* 48 (2017), 551-63.
- 7 “Joshua at Gilgal” probably refers to Josh 7:6-10. (But see the reconstruction of the fast day rite offered in a geonic responsum in Zev Wolf Wolfenson and Shneer Zalman Shneerson, eds., *Hemdah Genuzah* [Jerusalem, 1863], 28a, which assumes that the allusion is to Josh 5:13 ff. For a link between this responsum and a late pre-classical or early classical *piyyut* for the fast day liturgy see Shulamit Elizur, “The Ancient Liturgy for Fast Days in ‘Eretz Israel,’” *Tarbiz* 75 [2006], 175-84.) In Josh 7:6, in the aftermath of the loss against the city of Ai, Joshua tears his clothing and falls before the ark until evening, together with the elders, and they all heap dust on “their heads” (ראשם: the heads of Joshua and the elders, presumably, but it is also possible to construe the pronoun to encompass the ark as well). The ark, the elders, and the dust—or ashes—all recur in the liturgy in *m. Ta’an.* 2:1. God responds by telling Joshua to stop praying: “Get yourself up (קום לך); why (למה) are you prostrating?” (Josh 7:10) This response resembles God’s response to Moses at the sea: “Why (מה) are you crying out to me? Speak to Israel and let them travel.” (Ex 14:15) There is also a certain resemblance to the case of Abraham at Moriah, in that in this case, too, God calls upon Abraham to stop his act of piety: “Do not send forth your hand against the boy, nor do anything to him.” (Gen 22:12) If indeed this motif of what we might call divine impatience led the designers of the fast day liturgy to incorporate these three cases into the fast day liturgy, it may be because they construed God’s impatience as an indication of the speed and urgency of God’s response, after the fashion of “Before they call, I will answer (אענה)” (Isa 65:24). In other words, the implicit plea is: God, tell us to stop praying and to await your imminent beneficence. In any case, a link between the binding of Isaac and the splitting of the sea—the first two stations in the fast day liturgy in *m. Ta’an.* 2:4—is attested in early rabbinic literature, including a passage that is discernibly poetic (on which see Novick, *Piyyut and Midrash*, 60-61, and 61 n. 27), and in a very early pre-classical *qedushta* (on which Shulamit Elizur, *Sod Meshalshei Qodesh: The Qedushta from Its Origins Until the Time of Rabbi El’azar Berabbi Qillir* [Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019], 95-96, and see 98, where Elizur cites to *m. Ta’an.* 2:4). (It seems to me not unlikely that in an early pre-classical *shiv’ata*, quoted *ibid.*, 99-100, the word אסריו “his bound ones” in the Two refers not to Isaac but to the Israelites of Egypt, and even that פתחה לו שער “you opened for him a gate” refers to the splitting of the sea. In this case, this *piyyut*, too, would attest to the same link.) The case of

This insight into the nature and development of the fast day liturgy has comparative import in light of traditions concerning the descent of the divine fire in early Christianity, especially in the East. Matthew 3:11 has John the Baptist say that Jesus will baptize with “holy spirit and fire.” The association between the Holy Spirit and the descent of fire is attested also in the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2, which has echoes in rabbinic literature.⁸ Traditions from at least the second century associate Jesus’ baptism, and baptism as an initiation ritual, with the descent of divine fire, and invocation liturgies—*epikleseis*—seek the descent of the divine fire on the prebaptismal anointing oil.⁹ Sebastian Brock has noted that

Jonah may have been included in the liturgy because of the centrality of the repentance of the Ninevites in the elder’s homily in *m. Ta’an.* 2:1, or, far more likely, because Jonah’s prayer opens with the declaration that he called out to God “and he answered me” (ויענני) (Jon 2:3), echoing the all-important terminology of answering in 1 Kgs 18:37, 1 Chr 21:26, and 1 Sam 7:9. Indeed, the opening of Jonah’s prayer is an almost verbatim match to Ps 120:1, introduced into the fast day liturgy in *m. Ta’an.* 2:3. But it is also notable that God’s first words to Jonah after his prayer, “Get up and go” (קום לך), are consonantly identical to the first words of God’s response to Joshua in Josh 7:10.

- 8 See Sejin Park, *Pentecost and Sinai: The Festival of Weeks as Celebration of the Sinai* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).
- 9 See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Gabriele Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and its Implications,” *Worship* 52 (1978), 24-45; *eadem*, “Further Observations in Connection with the Early Form of the Epiklesis,” in *Le Sacrement de l’Initiation: Origines et Prospective* (Lebanon: Antélias, 1996), 66-80; Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicleses in the Acts of Thomas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 125-29. Winkler’s second article and the pages from Myers’ book treat of the phenomenon of divine fire in the baptisms depicted in the Syriac *History of John, the son of Zebedee*. This work, in its depiction of the holy John, and in its central contrast between the worshippers of God and the priests of Artemis, appears to depend heavily on the Elijah paradigm and specifically on 1 Kings 18. On oil and the divine presence in early Christian ritual see also Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 66-75.

*epiklese*s in Syriac calling for divine descent upon the Eucharist sometimes begin, evidently recalling Elijah, with the imperative: “Answer me!”¹⁰ The fourth century Syriac Christian poet and exegete Ephrem is heir to this nexus of exegetical tradition and ritual practice when he writes:

Fire came down and consumed the sacrifices of Elijah.
The fire of mercy has become for us a living sacrifice.
Fire consumed the offering:
Your fire, O our Lord, we have eaten in your offering.¹¹

Ephrem’s words transform the descent of the divine fire from an event from the biblical past into a regular ritual phenomenon.

It is difficult to speak with any confidence of a genealogical link between the descent of the divine fire in the rabbinic fast day liturgy and the descent of the divine fire in early Christian ritual practice. However, insofar as the descent motif is most closely associated, in early Christian sources, with the rite of baptism, and insofar as baptism was preceded by

10 See Sebastian Brock, “Fire from Heaven: From Abel’s Sacrifice to the Eucharist, a Theme in Syriac Christianity,” *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993), 230; *idem*, “Invocations to/for the Holy Spirit in Syriac Liturgical Texts: Some Comparative Approaches,” in *Comparative Liturgy Fifty Years After Anton Baumstark (1872-1948)* (ed. Robert F. Taft and Gabriele Winkler; Rome: Pontificio Ist. Orientale, 2001), 402. Both articles are reprinted in *idem*, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Ashgate: Variorum, 2006).

11 Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, 10.13. The translation is from Jeffrey T. Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2015), 123. Gerard Rouwhorst, “The Biblical Stories about the Prophet Elijah in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity,” in Alberdina Houtman et al., *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 178, singles out this passage as “a rather original interpretation of the fire called upon the sacrifice by Elijah,” and within the attested reception history of 1 Kings 18, it appears to be, but it belongs to ritual and exegetical trajectories traced above (to the clarification of which Rouwhorst has himself made important contributions).

a fast or series of fasts, such a genealogical link is not impossible.¹² Both rites envision a sequence of fasting that culminates with a presiding elder calling upon God to send down his divine fire. Concretely, both rites yield water: the water of baptism, and the rain that will end the drought that is the paradigmatic occasion for the rabbinic fast day liturgy. In any case, the exposure of the importance of the motif of the descent of the divine fire in the Mishnah *Ta'anit* text shows that not only early—and especially Eastern—Christians, but also rabbinic Jews, conceived of this motif as a bridge between the biblical past and the liturgical present.

Elevated Prose and Repetition

Aharon Mirsky, in his work on form in *midrash* and *piyyut*, took note of the fact that both corpora employ repetition of phrases from biblical verses as a rhetorical tool.¹³ In the second chapter of my book, I describe additional instantiations of this technique in *midrash* and *piyyut*, and clarify their scope. Thus, while iterated verse headers occur as a structural feature of certain poems, especially the Six and Seven poems of Yannai's *qedushta*, repetition of verse elements in the *midrash* corpus occurs mainly in response to (or as an “interpretation” of) repetition in the lemma itself. The following passage is from *Genesis Rabbah*.

“Judah was treacherous” (Mal 2:11): He said to him: You have denied, Judah! You have been unfaithful, Judah! “And an abomination was made in Israel [and in Jerusalem,] for Judah profaned.” You have been made profane, Judah!¹⁴

12 I thank Paul Wheatley for drawing my attention to this possibility. On pre-baptismal fasting see, e.g., Ferguson, *Baptism*, 251-52; Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 42-44; Paul F. Bradshaw, “Baptismal Practice in the Alexandrian Tradition: Eastern or Western?” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (ed. Maxwell E. Johnson; Collegeville: Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 82-92.

13 Aharon Mirsky, *The Origin of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985).

14 *Gen. Rab.* 85:1 (Theodor-Albeck ed., 1029).

The verse twice names Judah as the subject of a perfect verb (“was treacherous”; “profaned”), The homilist, following the lead of the verse, hurls three accusations against Judah, each using “Judah” in the vocative and employing a perfect verb: “You have denied, Judah! You have been unfaithful, Judah! ... You have been made profane, Judah!”

The next passage is from a Six poem by Yannai from a *qedushta* for the lection beginning with Gen 31:3, which has God enjoin Jacob: “Return to the land of your fathers.” Each strophe of the Six begins with the imperative “Return to the land [of],” but substitutes different words for the continuation. The first lines of the first two strophes run as follows.

Return to the land of holy and sanctified soil //, and of all lands sanctified. ...

Return to the land of the bounded lot of seven nations, // about which I raised my hand in oath ...¹⁵

Both the *midrash* text and the *piyyuṭ* deploy elements of the verse in iterative structures, but Yannai does not rely on any iteration in the verse itself; or in other words, the fact of iteration in the *piyyuṭ* is not exegetically conditioned.

It is likely that the general absence of exegetically unconditioned iterations in the rabbinic corpus reflects the distance of this corpus, in origin or as a result of editing, from performed homilies, and that performed homilies in fact integrated verses into iterative structures in exegetically unconditioned ways. This assumption gains support from the main contribution of the book’s second chapter, which sets Mirsky’s study of verse headers in *midrash* and *piyyuṭ* on a broader footing by

15 Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, ed., *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai According to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentateuch and the Holidays: Critical Edition with Introductions and Commentary* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1985), 1.186.

bringing a third corpus into the mix: the “book of wonders,” by the fourth century Samaritan figure, Marqe.¹⁶

Marqe’s book, which constitutes the first part of the larger composition *Tibat Marqe*, comments on the exodus story from the scene at the burning bush to the crossing of the sea. The “book of wonders” is written in an elevated prose that makes frequent use of repetition, in general and specifically of verses. In light of Marqe’s work, we appreciate that the verse repetitions in rabbinic *midrash* likely represent pale reflections of a homiletical rhetoric that did not survive the editorial process that produced the *midrash* corpus. This broad rhetorical *Sitz im Leben* probably lies at the background of the verse repetitions that structure various compositions in classical *piyyuṭ*, like the Six poem excerpted above.

We can gain further purchase on the contours of this *Sitz im Leben* by turning attention to yet another composition, roughly contemporaneous with Marqe: the “*memra* on the signs Moses performed in Egypt.” This work, in Syriac, was probably composed, according to a recent article by Blake Hartung, in the fourth or early fifth century, by an author close to the circle of Ephrem. Hartung’s article also provides the first translation of the work into English.¹⁷

Unlike most of the works produced by Ephrem and his circle, which are metrical in form, this work is an exegetical homily (a *turgama*)

16 Novick, *Piyyuṭ and Midrash*, 62-75. For other studies that have advanced our understanding of the relationship between *piyyuṭ* and contemporary Samaritan literature see Laura S. Lieber, “Forever Let It Be Said: Issues of Authorial Multivocality in a Samaritan Hymn,” *JAJ* 7 (2016), 249-68; Ophir Münz-Manor, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach,” *JAJ* 1 (2010), 336-61. These studies build on the foundational contributions to the comparative study of *piyyuṭ* by Joseph Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), and earlier, Jefim Schirmann, “Hebrew Liturgical Poetry and Christian Hymnology,” *JQR* 44 (1953), 123-61.

17 Blake Hartung, “The *Mêmra* on the Signs Moses Performed in Egypt: An Exegetical Homily of the ‘School’ of Ephrem,” *Hugoye* 21 (2018), 319-56. My translations below follow Hartung, with occasional minor modifications.

written in what Hartung, borrowing from Sebastian Brock, calls “artistic prose,” characterized by repetition and personification.¹⁸ Like the first book of *Tibat Marqe*, it concerns the career of Moses in Egypt, and focuses on the wonders that he performs. The Syriac homily begins with Moses’ arrival before Pharaoh, when, “like a divine general, [he] put on hidden armor and entered to wage war against Pharaoh and his hosts.”¹⁹ Marqe, as noted above, takes up the plot thread at an earlier point, with the theophany at the burning bush, but when he comes to Moses’ journey back to Egypt, he offers a series of similes to describe the returning Moses, the first of which is that of “a victor going to go out to war.”²⁰ The terminology of battle and victory recurs numerous times in both compositions.²¹

Marqe’s composition is much more ambitious than the Syriac homily in scope and detail, and the concern, central to the latter, to distinguish the true miracles of God from the tricks of Pharaoh’s sorcerers, is largely absent from Marqe’s work. Nevertheless, the two works closely resemble each other in form, most importantly in the prevalence of repetition, including in relation to verses. The following example from the Syriac homily represents the beginning of Moses’ speech before Pharaoh.

The Lord has sent me to tell you:

1. Release my firstborn son Israel, whom you have enslaved for yourself [as] a humble slave.
2. Remove your authority from him! He is freeborn. For too long you have subjugated him under [your] authority. He is my own inheritance, but you have received him in slavery as if [he is] part of [your] inheritance.

18 *Ibid.*, 333 and n. 48.

19 *Ibid.*, 342 sec. 1.

20 Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, ed. *Tibat Marqe: A Collection of Samaritan Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1988), 61 sec. 24.

21 Note likewise that in both works, after Moses’ staff transforms into a serpent, the serpent is said to look at Pharaoh and terrify him. See Hartung, *Mêmra*, 344 sec. 5; Ben-Ḥayyim, *Tibât Mârqe*, 71 sec. 40.

3. Loosen your yoke from his neck! For too long you have worked him harshly.
4. Break your shackles off his neck! For too long you have tormented him without compassion.
5. Keep your blade from his children! For too long you have made his mothers bereft [of their children].
6. Hold back your sword from murder! For too long you have increased his destruction.
7. Let my son go and let him serve me! If not, I will kill your firstborn son.²²

This passage is based on Ex 4:22-23, where God directs Moses to say to Pharaoh: “Israel is my firstborn son. And I have said to you: Send out my son, that he may serve me. And should you refuse to send him out, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” Line 7 is a near-quotation of this passage, and line 1 is an exegetical paraphrase thereof that contrasts Israel’s true status, as God’s firstborn son (“Israel is my firstborn son”), and thus properly the servant (or slave) of God (“that he may serve me”), to their current status as servants (or slaves) of Pharaoh.

Line 2 is something of an expansive paraphrase of the paraphrase in line 1, and it introduces, with additional padding, the basic structures that repeat in lines 3 through 6: an initial imperative, traceable to the biblical passage itself, then a supporting “for too long” statement. The content of line 2 is largely determined by the verse. Lines 3 through 6 depart further from the verse, and involve dense repetition. These four lines in fact divide into two pairs: Lines 3 and 4 concern the neck, while lines 5 and 6 concern killing and killing implements.

A similar pattern of repetition occurs later in the Syriac homily, in connection with Ex 7:13. Even though Pharaoh sees that Moses’ serpent swallowed those of the Egyptians, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had spoken.” The homilist reflects on this turn of events as follows.²³

22 Hartung, *Mêmrâ*, 342-43, sec. 2.

23 *Ibid.*, 345, sec. 5.

1. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, so that his scourging would increase.
2. And his mind became unbending, so that his end would be evil.
3. He was led astray by the illusions of the magicians, so that he would drown in the sea.
4. And he put his trust in an erroneous shadow, so that he would seek out those things which he owed the judgment of [divine] justice.

As in the first case, this passage represents a fourfold repetition that is in fact a combination of two parallel lines, lines 1 and 2 (matching “heart” to “mind”), and lines 3 and 4 (matching “the illusions of the magicians” with “an erroneous shadow”). The homilist cites the verse in the first half of line 1, then fills it out with the consequence. Line 2 is patterned after line 1, with the substitution of a different body part. Lines 3 and 4 likewise describe Pharaoh’s obstinacy and its dire consequences, but in a different way from lines 1-2.

Both of the above passages in form, and the second of the two in substance, are comparable to a passage in *Tibat Marqe* that I analyzed in my book.²⁴

1. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: His heart became strong that he might be chastised.
2. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: His mind became heavy so as he might be afflicted.
3. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: He made his tongue heavy in order that he might suffer.
4. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: His mouth that abounds in anger will be given bitter waters to drink.

24 For the passage see Ben-Hayyim, *Tibat Mârqe*, 75, sec. 48. For my analysis see Novick, *Piyyut*, 73-74.

5. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: A heart germinating fire will burn in him.
6. He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them: His voice growing strong will have its memory uprooted.

Marqe's passage offers six successive restatements of Ex 7:22, where, after the magicians are able to match Moses and Aaron in transforming water into blood, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had spoken"; the biblical text precisely matches Ex 7:13, the basis for the second passage from the Syriac homily.

There are two major differences between Marqe's repetition structure and the two in the Syriac homily, and both differences are characteristic of the works. First, while the Syriac homily begins with a phrase from the verse, or a paraphrase thereof, and then drops the verse in favor of other paraphrases, Marqe repeats the verse phrase, or in this case the verse paraphrase, at the beginning of each line ("He put on airs and was not willing to listen to them"), and only afterward introduces the varying element. Second, while the repetition structures in the Syriac homily involve two pairs of two lines, Marqe's structure involves two pairs of triplets: Lines 1-3 share the same syntactic structure, and lines 4-6 share a different one. The use of triplets is very common in the "book of wonders."²⁵

25 See *ibid.*, 74 n. 59. A closer look at one repetition structure in the Syriac homily is in order in light of these differences. The beginning of the homily's account of the plague of lice runs as follows in Hartung's translation (Hartung, *Mêmrâ*, 349 sec. 9): "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Speak to Aaron and have him raise his staff over the land.' So he raised [his] staff and lice appeared in the dust of the earth. [The earth] sprouted, though there was no seed in it. It vomited forth, though it did not produce [a crop]. It sprung up, though it did not receive [seed]." This repetition structure appears to involve three lines, each defined by a main clause centered on a verb of growth ("sprouted"; "vomited forth"; "sprung up"), followed by a qualifying subordinate clause ("though, etc."). But the translation obscures the degree to which the last two lines ("It vomited forth, etc."; "It sprung up, etc.") parallel each other, and differ from the preceding line ("[The earth] sprouted, etc."). First, the main clauses of the last two lines—but not of the preceding line—

The deployment of biblical verses in rhetorical repetition was, then, a feature of a broad Semitic milieu, encompassing rabbinic homiletics, Jewish liturgical poetry, and the elevated exegetical prose of Samaritans and Syriac-speaking Christians. Marqe's "book of wonders" and the Syriac homily represent the closest comparison points, and the differences between them suggest a wide range of rhetorical possibilities, and the occurrence of consistent and strategic choices among these possibilities. The Syriac homilist appears to be more closely rooted than Marqe in the traditional parallelism of *bicola*, and when he assembles larger repetitive structures, it is by pairing *bicola*. Marqe, by contrast, favors triplets. The second difference—that, while both the Syriac homily and Marqe build repetitive structures around verses, only Marqe consistently repeats the words from the verse themselves—is probably connected with the fact that Marqe's work is much closer to commentary

feature hendiadys forms, and the word translated "produce," *šeqlat*, should in fact be rendered "accept." Thus the final two lines, rendered woodenly, run: "It vomited, gave, though it did not receive. It sprouted, exited, though it did not accept." The last two lines are so close to each other, and so different from the preceding line, that they compel us to rethink the scope of the repetition structure. In fact, most likely, this repetition structure has a fourfold character, and the first line (more woodenly rendered than in Hartung's translation) is: "And there was lice in the dust of the earth," a paraphrase of the words that follow the command to Aaron (quoted with minor differences in the homily) in Ex 8:12. Hartung's translation omits the copula that follows this line, but with it, we emerge with the following two couplets: "And there was lice in the dust of the earth; and it sprouted though there was no seeding in it. And it vomited, gave, though it did not receive; and it sprouted, exited, though it did not accept." Both lines of the first couplet (and neither line of the second couplet) feature a prepositional phrase in which "in" governs a noun or pronoun referring to the dust of the earth. Although this revision exposes the role of the verse in this repetition structure, and locates in it the homily's characteristic bicolon parallelism, I do not mean to be too dogmatic or categorical about the rhetorical differences between the Syriac homily and Marqe's work. There *is* triplet parallelism in this very case, as the qualifying subordinate clause ("though, etc.") is only present in the last three lines. And in the opposite direction, Marqe undoubtedly makes use of bicolon parallelism, as in, e.g., Ben-Ḥayyim, *Tbât Mârqe*, 47, sec. 7, ll. 100-102.

than is the Syriac homily. The “book of wonders” proceeds more or less verse by verse through a large swath of the exodus story, and typically quotes the verse before explaining and/or expanding on it.

Conclusion

The above case studies bring to the fore three important methodological considerations for comparative work between rabbinic literature and the literature of Syriac-speaking Christianity. The first concerns liturgy. Gerard Rouwhorst has noted the special significance of liturgy for comparative work, because liturgies have a “communal character” and because they are relatively stable across time. Both synchronically and diachronically, then, liturgy has a “high representative value.”²⁶ While this characterization seems to me largely correct, the above study of the Mishnah’s fast day rite warns against leaning too heavily on it. For even as it is possible to identify, at the root of the Mishnah’s rite, exegetical and perhaps ritual traditions centered on the motif of fire from heaven, the rite as it occurs in the Mishnah incorporates other, unrelated biblical references, and betrays no apparent interest in privileging the fire-from-heaven motif, except perhaps in adhering to a canonical organization that puts the fire from heaven in the days of David and Solomon in the salient final position.

Also in connection with the first case study, I note that recent scholarship has demonstrated the special significance of Syriac Christian literature for contextualizing late antique Jewish life in the East, especially as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud.²⁷ The two case studies

26 Gerard Rouwhorst, “Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity,” *VC* 51 (1997), 73. On Rouwhorst’s work in a broader comparative context see Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, “Judaism and Syriac Christianity,” in *The Syriac World* (ed. Daniel King; London: Routledge, 2019), 150-51.

27 See, e.g., Alyssa M. Gray, “The People, Not the Peoples: The Talmud Bavli’s ‘Charitable’ Contribution to the Jewish-Christian Conversation in Mesopotamia,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 20 (2017), 137-67; Adam H. Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination’ of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatsra* in Narsai’s Metrical Homilies for Lent,” *JQR* 106 (2016), 179-207; Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian*

here, and especially the first, remind us of this corpus' importance for the study of late antique Jewish literature from Roman Palestine as well. The motif of the descent of the divine fire appears to figure more prominently in Syriac literature than in Western Christian sources, and it is through sources in Syriac that the centrality of the motif in early baptismal rites comes especially to the fore.²⁸

Finally, the second case study underscores the importance, in the comparative context, of casting the net wide. Verse repetition in *midrash* and *piyyut* closely resembles verse repetition in Marqe in that in all three corpora, the verse (or a part or paraphrase thereof) recurs verbatim in the same position in each line. But there are important differences too that threaten to undermine the significance of the comparison. Verse repetition in *piyyut* occurs in the context of poetry, alongside various other formal constraints, such as meter, rhyme, and acrostic, while Marqe writes in an artistic prose. In the case of the *midrash* corpus, the process of editing has left us with little information about the full range of contexts in which verse repetition occurred. The repetition structures in the Syriac homily are more distant from those in Marqe in that the former do not involve verbatim repetition of the verse (or the relevant part or paraphrase thereof); the verse instead occurs only as the first line of the repetition structure. But the resemblances between the Syriac homily and Marqe are important for the study of rabbinic literature because they support the notion that the incorporation of verses into the rhetoric of repetition was a feature of a broad Semitic milieu, and thus that there is likely a genealogical relationship, despite the differences and gaps, that unites the verse repetitions in *midrash*, *piyyut*, and Marqe's work.

Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

- 28 Cf. Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 111-32, noting that because the linguistic continuity between the historical Jesus and Syriac Christianity is closer than that between the historical Jesus and Greek and Latin Christianity, authors writing in Syriac can offer insight into perspectives in earliest Christianity that become obscured in its later Greek and Latin trajectories.