

# From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem: Jewish Perspectives and Jewish/Christian Polemics

Hagith Sivan

WITHIN the so-called Christian-Jewish polemics of late antiquity, the absence of direct Jewish responses to the numerous *contra-Judaeos* treatises renders the debate singularly one-sided.<sup>1</sup> This apparent lack of Jewish participation in the reported and often acrimonious debates is all the more striking in view of the sharpening of Christian pens as control over the Holy Land shifted from Byzantine to Sasanian hands and back before the territory fell to the Moslems in 636–638 C.E.<sup>2</sup> This silence also supports, indirectly, the assumption

<sup>1</sup> See generally H. Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld I* (Frankfurt 1982); G. Dagron and V. Déroche, "Juifs et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *TravMém* 11 (1991) 17–46, listing late ancient, mostly eastern works; O. Limor and G. Stroumsa, edd., *Contra Judaeos* (Tübingen 1996); Av. Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion in the Early Byzantine Period," in G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, edd., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East* (OrientLovanAnal 42 [1991]) 91–108; S. Krauss, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy I*, ed. and revised by W. Horbury (Tübingen 1996), esp. 61–63 (hereafter KRAUSS/HORBURY), and W. Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The first surviving direct rebuttal of Christianity apparently belongs to the ninth century, D. J. Lasker and S. Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor II* (Jerusalem 1996) 7. It is perhaps significant that this encounter took place in Islamic territory (see also *Pe'amin* 75 [1998] with articles relating to Lasker/Stroumsa's work). The attempt to elicit the Jewish side from Aphraat's anti-Jewish compositions has not been very successful; N. Koltun, *Jewish-Christian Polemics in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia. A Reconstructed Conversation* (diss. Stanford 1994), assumes Aphraat's familiarity with rabbinic texts but does not explain how these circulated in Mesopotamia, particularly before the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. On rabbinic lack of interest in Jewish-Christian debates and in the arguments against Judaism, D. Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict* (Jerusalem 1982 [Heb.]). On the dubious his-

that such Christian anti-Jewish polemics were largely aimed at a Christian audience rather than a Jewish one.<sup>3</sup> Yet Jewish awareness of both anti-Jewish attitudes on the part of government and church and of contemporary events was certainly present.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty is that Jewish reactions to the critical events of the seventh century are encoded in literary compositions that require careful deciphering. These include apocalyptic visions in prose, exegetical works (*midrashim*), and synagogal poetry (*piyyut*).<sup>5</sup> All three genres have remained largely outside the scope of the renewed scholarly interest in the seventh century in general and in Jewish-Christian-Moslem relations in particular.

toricity of the debates and their prime audience (Christian and not Jewish), V. Déroche, "L'authenticité de l'apologie contre les juifs de Léontius de Néapolis," *BCH* 110 (1986) 655–669.

One must distinguish between purely theoretical works set in a fictitious context and actual debates for which we have no detailed record in late antiquity other than occasional references in Christian sources, such as Greg. Tur. *HF* 6.5, 17. For a list of these presumed debates see Krauss/Horbury 44–51. What is still missing is a discussion of the general late ancient context of the Christian-Jewish disputations, such as R. Lim, *Public Disputations, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1995).

<sup>3</sup>See D. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia 1994), with Av. Cameron, "Byzantines and Jews: Some Recent Work on Early Byzantium," *BMGS* 20 (1996) 249–274, on Christian attitudes; cf. E. Horowitz, "The Vengeance of the Jews was Stronger than their Avarice. Modern Historians and the Persian Conquest of Jerusalem in CE 614," *Jewish Social Studies* 4 (1998) 1–39.

<sup>4</sup>W. J. Van Bakkum, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (*piyyut*) of the Sixth and Seventh Century," in J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst, edd., *Early Christian Poetry* (Leiden 1991) 297–308. Rabbinic polemics are briefly mentioned in Krauss/Horbury 5–13, and Horbury (*supra* n.1) *passim*, esp. 214 n.37. The target of the "Benediction of the Sectarials" is too controversial and has been too often discussed to be dealt with here, but it may have been the Jewish-Christians. The claim (Krauss/Horbury 12) that *Toledot Yeshu* is the sole testimony to Jewish response to Christianity between the sixth and ninth century requires modification, likewise that "there was no real change in anti-Jewish polemic after Constantine" (18). Late Roman legislation clearly shows a significant change of emphasis if not of attitude: A. Linder, *Roman Imperial Legislation and the Jews* (Detroit 1987).

<sup>5</sup>Many of the apocalyptic works were gathered by Y. Even Shmuel, *Sermons of Redemption (Midrashe Geulah)* (Jerusalem 1954), including several *piyyutim*. On midrashic material see B. L. Visotzky, "Anti-Christian Polemic in Leviticus Rabbah," *ProcAmerAcJewishResearch* 56 (1990) 83–100. The important series, Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam (The Byzantine and the Early Islamic Near East), edd. Av. Cameron and L. Conrad (Princeton 1992–), has not so far addressed the vast Hebrew output of the period.

I address here the least known of these, the *piyyut*, or liturgical poetry or verse compositions that accompany the divine service in the synagogue.<sup>6</sup> Several will be seen to incorporate clues that can shed light on two historical enigmas linked with the capture of Jerusalem by the Sasanian Persians in 614: the alliance between the Jews and the Sasanians, and the plans to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. The problematic of *piyyut*

The origins of the genre of *piyyut* remain controversial. Already in antiquity it was possible to discern two distinct traditions, one aspiring to date its birth to specific historical events, the other associating it with a literary-historical evolution. The first tradition ascribed the appearance of verse in the synagogue to external pressure in the form of persecution (either Byzantine or Sasanian); the second ascribed it to popular demand to enliven the service.<sup>8</sup> Scholars espousing the latter view point to a long tradition of Hebrew poetry from biblical days to late antiquity. Others have discerned influences of Christian, and particularly Syriac, hymnology on the birth (or rebirth?) of synagogal poetry in late antiquity.<sup>9</sup> To compound the problem of the birth of the *piyyut*, its creators and most famous representatives, poets (*paytanim*) such as Yossé ben Yossé,

<sup>6</sup>M. Zulai, *Eretz Israel and its Poetry* (Jerusalem 1995 [Heb.]) 35, asserts, perhaps with some exaggeration, that there can be no history of Palestinian Jewry between the redaction of the Palestinian Talmud and the Crusades without the *piyyut*. E. Fleischer, "Studies in *Piyyut* and Medieval Jewish Poetry," *Tarbiz* 39 (1969 [Heb.]; hereafter FLEISCHER) 19–38, disagrees, as does Y. Yahalom, *Cathedra* 11 (1979) 130–133, and "The Transition of Kingdoms in Eretz Israel as Conceived by Poets and Homilists," *Shalem* 6 (1992) 1–22.

<sup>7</sup>C. Mango, "The Temple Mount in AD 614–638," in J. Raby and J. Johns, edd., *Bayt al-Maqdis I* (Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 9 [1992]) 1–16, esp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup>J. Mann, "Changes in the Divine Service of the Synagogue due to Religious Persecutions," *HebrUCA* 4 (1927) 241–310.

<sup>9</sup>H. Schirmann, "Hebrew Literary Poetry and Christian Hymnology," *JQR* 44 (1953–54) 123–161 (repr. *Studies in the History of Hebrew Poetry and Drama* [Jerusalem 1979] 16–40); Z. Malachi, "Jewish and Christian Liturgical Poetry: Mutual Influences in the First Four Centuries," *Augustinianum* 28 (1988) 237–248. See also I. Davidson, *Mahazor Yannai* (New York 1919) xvi.

Yannai, and Cyril (or Killir or Kallir), have so far eluded precise dating.

What we do know is that the land that witnessed the earliest flowering of this genre was Palestine during the last two centuries of Byzantine rule, the fifth to early seventh century. We also know that the piyyutim acquired such popularity that they were copied and recopied, and often altered, which renders the task of the historian rather complicated. Popular piyyutim have been transmitted in various versions that attest the flexibility of their imagery. Their significance in the liturgical life of the Jewish communities in late antiquity cannot be overestimated. They performed "an extraordinarily valuable service as the medium for dissemination of religious ideas, and the consolatory promises of the aggadah among the widest possible circles of the community."<sup>10</sup>

Nor should the sheer literary achievement of the paytanim be underrated. They composed their poems in a language that had apparently ceased to be in daily use centuries earlier.<sup>11</sup> The number of the surviving piyyutim is vast. Many have been edited, and here one must acknowledge a lasting debt to the great Israeli scholars of the piyyut (Zulai, Mirski, Fleischer, Yahalom, Elizur, to mention but a few) and to the Institute for Research on Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem. Many more await publication. The number of piyyutim that have been translated into any modern language is minuscule.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the substantial body of modern literature on piyyutim is almost exclusively in

<sup>10</sup>I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy. A Comprehensive History*, transl./rev. R. P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia/Jerusalem 1993) 227.

<sup>11</sup>Elbogen (*supra* n.10) 233. This also raises the question of the audience of the piyyutim. S. Elizur, "The Congregation in the Synagogue and the Ancient Qedusta," in S. Elizur *et al.*, edd., *Knesset Ezra. Literature and Life in the Synagogue. Studies in Honor of Ezra Fleischer* (Jerusalem 1994 [Heb.]) 171–190, has discerned several levels of referential relations.

<sup>12</sup>T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York 1981), has a few; M. Wallenstein, *Some Unpublished Piyyutim from the Cairo Genizah* (Manchester 1956), contains a few more; but these are a drop in the ocean.

Hebrew and has dealt primarily with literary aspects of this genre.<sup>13</sup> Of the two general and still magisterial introductions to the piyyut, one was written over a century ago and well before the discovery of the Genizah; the other has been recently updated.<sup>14</sup>

A major difficulty for the historian who ventures into this poetic realm is its language. Piyyutim are written (mostly) in Hebrew. But it is a highly complex, allusive, and not immediately accessible language. Besides numerous biblical quotations, piyyutim incorporate references to halakhic (legal) and aggadic (folkloristic) sources.<sup>15</sup> Another obstacle is the state of preservation of many piyyutim. Scholars of piyyut often have to combine diverse fragments to recreate one poem. Nor is it possible, in many cases, to identify their authors with precision, if at all. Even when a poet discloses his name through a clever use of acrostics, nothing further is divulged in the poem or in other sources.

How useful, then, are piyyutim as a historical source? By their very nature, they are not intended to supply historical information. Nor do they comment directly on specific events.

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Zulai (*supra* n.6); J. Yahalom, *Priestly Palestinian Poetry. A Narrative Liturgy for the Day of Atonement* (Jerusalem 1996); A. Mirsky, *The Piyyut. The Development of Post-Biblical Poetry in Eretz-Israel and the Diaspora* (Jerusalem 1990); E. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem 1975). The considerable corpus of Fleischer's work on piyyutim is now listed in *Knesset Ezra* (*supra* n.11) 379–389; cf. S. Spiegel, *The Fathers of Piyyut* (New York/Jerusalem 1996).

<sup>14</sup>L. Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte des synagogalen Poesie* (Berlin 1865); Elbogen (*supra* n.10); see also P. Kahle, *The Cairo Genizah*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1959). For an excellent survey see now J. Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* (Tel Aviv 1999 [Heb.]).

<sup>15</sup>On the language see e.g. J. Yahalom, *Poetic Language in the Early Piyyut* (Jerusalem 1985); Z. M. Rabinowitz, *Halakha and Aggadah in the Liturgical Poetry of Yannai* (Tel Aviv 1965), on the relations between this poet and the Mishnah, Tosefta, the Talmuds, and halakhic and aggadic midrashim. It is interesting to compare the piyyutim's incorporation of Second Temple literary traditions and the reincorporation of Second Temple astrological traditions in Byzantine Jewish-Aramaic texts: J. C. Greenfield and M. Sokoloff, "Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic," *JNES* 48 (1989) 201–214, and "An Astrological Text from Qumran (4Q318) and Reflections on Some Zodiacal Names," *RevQum* 16 (1995) 507–519.

While often commemorating actualities, piyyutim blend the details into an ahistorical and atemporal frame. Nevertheless, they embed hints that enable the historian to assign to some a period, if not a precise date.<sup>16</sup> Thus a number of piyyutim unmistakably reflect Jewish-Christian polemics by providing insights into Jewish attitudes to Christianity and Christians in late antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the piyyutim's peculiar mixture of realities with fantasies, it is possible, I believe, to distinguish between historical and imaginary references.<sup>18</sup> After all, this was precisely the challenge inherent in the genre. A poet had to present verses appropriate for different liturgical occasions, as well as to reflect the mood and needs of the community addressed. Due caution, however, must be exercised. The piyyut's tendency to employ biblical phraseology requires careful consideration, as do the other characteristics of this genre. With these caveats in mind, we can see that this original creation of Byzantine Jewry enriches not only our understanding of the development of Jewish liturgy and ceremonial, but also our ability to explore historical events through their unique recording in synagogal poetry in a polemical context. Some of these poems address the events surrounding the Sasanian conquest of Palestine in the early seventh century.

<sup>16</sup>As also maintained by W. J. Van Bekkum, *Hebrew Poetry from Late Antiquity. Liturgical Poems of Yehuddah* (Leiden 1998) xv.

<sup>17</sup>See the Purim piyyutim in J. Yahalom and M. Sokoloff, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem 1999), esp. 217 (e.g. "tortured by the whip / born of a mortal woman / they call me son of God"). See also E. Fleischer, *The Pizmonim of the Anonymous* (Jerusalem 1974) index s.v., for a number of poetic denominations, including Admonim (red haired = sons of Esau the Edomite), lovers of tatooes, the cursed, God's betrayers, idolaters, chubby beauty (or pretty cow).

<sup>18</sup>See Fleischer for good examples, esp. pp.23–29 on the correctives offered by several piyyutim to the Talmudic account (BT Rosh Hashanah 31a–b) regarding the itinerary of the Sanhedrin from Jerusalem to Tiberias. Among those who deny any historical value to piyyutim, S. Klein, "Remarks on the Study of Early Paytanim for Information on the History of Palestine," *BullJPES* 7 (1939) 9–16 (Heb.), who claims that the paytanim lived in a world wholly emersed in the past.

## 2. The Sasanians in Palestine: poetic chronology

In 614 the Sasanian army captured Jerusalem. The event had, understandably, far-reaching ramifications. It changed, temporarily as it turned out, the balance of power in the region. It signaled the end of Byzantine control over the holy land and the holy city. And it inspired the Jewish communities of Palestine with long-lost hopes of restoration after centuries of being barred from Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> This change of secular regimes found echoes in synagogal liturgy as well as in many contemporary and near-contemporary Christian authors.

Nearly thirty years ago Ezra Fleischer published five piyyutim, ranging in date from the seventh to the tenth century, each offering arithmetical calculations on the cycle of the kingdoms that controlled the people of Israel.<sup>20</sup> In itself such a reckoning has little originality; but in this case the poems also share a striking feature: they all propose the same date, C.E. 618, to mark the end of Byzantine control over Palestine. According to these poems Byzantine Palestine came to an end after 550 years of "Edomite" or Roman/Byzantine oppression (which began with the destruction of the Temple commonly dated by Jewish sources to C.E. 68).<sup>21</sup> The figure 550 appears either fully expressed (*hamesh meot vehamishim*) or in the form of *gematria* (conversion of the value of the numbers into letters of the alphabet, *takan*). This date precedes the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem by two decades and the brief Byzantine reconquest

<sup>19</sup>O. Irshai, "Constantine and the Jews: The Prohibition against Entering Jerusalem—History and Hagiography," *Zion* 60 (1995) 129–178 (Heb.).

<sup>20</sup>"An Early Jewish Tradition on the Date and the End of Byzantine Rule in Eretz Israel," *Zion* 36 (1971) 110–115 (Heb.). Cf. Y. Yahalom, "Transition" (*supra* n.6) 7–8.

<sup>21</sup>The objections raised by B. Z. Kedar, "A Note concerning the Jewish Tradition on the Date of the End of Byzantine Rule in Eretz Israel," *Zion* 36 (1971) 227, are correctly dismissed by Fleischer (*ibid.*) 228. For comparable age calculations taking the year 68 as a point of departure cf. T. Reinach, *REJ* 85 (1928) 2.

by a decade.<sup>22</sup> I give two examples taken from two different piyyutim (I add the last word in each line to convey the rhyming):

אני עורערתני במדי ופרס ויון ומקדון  
פגרני כמהפכת סדום  
שבת צמדו ואחשה ואדום  
חמש מאות וחמישים שנה בידי עשו אבי אדום

Fragmented by the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Macedonians (*mokdon*),

I was laid waste, a victim of the turbulence of Sodom.

They all conspired to choke me into silence (*edom*).

For 550 years was I in the hands of the father of Edom (= Rome/Byzantium).

אוי כי מכרסם תפש הדום  
ניבוהי די פרזל אותי לקדום  
שמני כמהפכת סדום  
עישני תק ונ שנה במלכות אדום

Alas, the gnawing (animal) had seized the Temple (*hadom*)

Pouncing upon me with iron clad teeth that tore me to the bone (*kedom*)

And I was plunged into the turbulence of Sodom

Oppressed for 550 years under the kingdom of Edom.

As can be seen, reckoning 550 years of Byzantine control over the fate of Israel is part of a general numerical scheme or periodization of Jewish history. The use of calculations in polemics, whether Jewish or Christian, is hardly novel, as the popularity of the Book of Daniel shows.<sup>23</sup> Many such numbers related to messianic expectations. Their popularity naturally raises the question of the reliability of a round figure such as 550. Several items appear to suggest its authenticity. (1) With

<sup>22</sup>This is not the place to discuss the precise date of either, but I am inclined to support the traditional dates.

<sup>23</sup>Krauss/Horbury 59 (on Julian of Toledo in the late seventh century), with R. Landes, "Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100–800 CE," in W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, A. Welkenhuysen, edd., *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (Leuven 1988) 137–211. See also P. J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley 1985).

one exception, the figure 550 does not relate to any of the familiar symbolic numbers.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this is mere coincidence. But the very uniqueness of this number may therefore reflect contemporary calculations based on concrete dates. (2) The date c.e. 618 does not correspond to any date for the end(s) of Byzantine Palestine known from other sources, namely 614 (fall of Jerusalem to the Persians) or 634 or 638 (Muslim conquests of Palestine and of Jerusalem respectively). (3) Because skillful and creative paytanim often took liberties with the text, it is significant that in none of the surviving versions of the piyyutim that deal with the end of Byzantine Palestine does a figure other than 550 appear, although a few other figures could rhyme well enough.

Ultimately, perhaps, the precision of the figure hardly matters. The point is that the figure attempts to present a concrete event of great magnitude in Jewish history. Above all, it is a figure that appears to respond directly to Christian accounts of the same events and to offer correctives to the Christian accusation of Jewish collaboration with the Sasanians.<sup>25</sup> Such calculations would make most sense in the context of the Sasanian conquest of Palestine and particularly of their occupation of Jerusalem.

<sup>24</sup>D. Berger, "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism, Messiah son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus," *Assoc JewishStRev* 10 (1985) 141–164, with A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculations in Israel* (Boston 1959). The exception is based on Gen. 32 where Jacob gives his brother Esau a gift consisting of 200 she-goats, 20 he-goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 camel, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 she-asses, and 10 he-asses, a total of 550 animals.

<sup>25</sup>The discrepancy between the tale of woes recounted by seventh-century Christian sources and the evidence of archaeology, particularly in relation to the Sasanian destruction of major sites and especially Jerusalem, is noted by J. Magness, "A Reexamination of the Archaeological Evidence for the Sasanian Persian Destruction of the Tyropoeon Valley," *BASOR* 287 (1992) 67–74 (on the Valley of the Cheesemakers which runs from the Damascus gate to the Kidron); and K. G. Holum, "Archaeological Evidence for the Fall of Byzantine Caesarea," *BASOR* 286 (1992) 73–85.

### 3. Sasanians and Jews: poetic perspectives

That the Sasanian conquest of Palestine in the 610s, and especially the transfer of Jerusalem from Christian to non-Christian hands, generated intense Messianic expectations among the Jews seems inevitable.<sup>26</sup> For the first time in three centuries the Holy Land was not under Christian control. No less significant was the opportunity that the Sasanian capture of Jerusalem presented to renew Jewish life in the city. Christian sources appear to agree that the Jews played some part in the Sasanian campaigns and in the capture of Jerusalem in 614. They differ, however, over the extent of Jewish support and over the responsibility for the massacre of Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> There are also hints in these sources about Jews

<sup>26</sup>Heightened perhaps by the failure of the Christians to reassert control over Jerusalem in early 614 after the initial Sasanian siege. The final fall of Jerusalem occurred in May 614.

<sup>27</sup>Problems with the sources are evident. Thus the contemporary *Chronicon Paschale* of 626 and the ninth-century *Chronicle* of Theophanes differ markedly on the role of the Jews in events connected with the Persian and Islamic conquests. On the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614, *Chron.Pasch.* (704–705 Dindorf; transl. M. and M. Whitby [Liverpool 1989] 156) does not accuse the Jews of collaborating with the invaders, as Theophanes, Sebeos, and Antiochus Strategos do when they tell of Jews ransoming Christian captives from the Persian army in order to kill them (Theophanes) or to convert them (Strategos). See R. Fishman-Duker, "Anti-Jewish Arguments in the *Chronicon Paschale*," in Limor/Stroumsa (*supra* n.1) 115. For a fuller comparison of the sources see Whitby/Whitby 149–150, 156. Cf. Z. Baras, "The Persian Conquest and the End of Byzantine Rule," in *The Land of Israel from the Destruction of the Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (Jerusalem 1982) 300–349; Av. Cameron, "The Jews in Seventh-Century Palestine," *SCI* 13 (1994) 75–93, esp. 79, plausibly claims that Theophanes and other Christian writers may have exaggerated the Jewish role in aiding the Persian forces. Her opinion echoes the *Chron.Pasch.* (s.a. 614) which is silent about the Jews, as is the material gathered in C. Clermont-Ganneau, "The Taking of Jerusalem by the Persians," *PaleQ* 1898, 36–54. I intend to discuss elsewhere the topos of the apostate Jews as guiding conquerors to holy sites.

Neither *Chron.Pasch.* nor Theophanes nor Malalas mention the anti-Jewish *novellae* of Justinian (forced conversion in northern Africa, mandatory reading of the Mishnah in Greek in the synagogues, forced separation of Passover from Easter): Fishman-Duker 115; Linder (*supra* n.4) 356–411; A. Rabello, *Giustiano II* (Milan 1988) 797–828. Malalas and Theophanes depict an unruly and disloyal Jewish population that deserved its ignominious fate. The *Chron.Pasch.* does not repeat these accusations, but it does compare the death of Chosroes, the captor of Jerusalem, and the recapture of the city by Heraclius in 628 to the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews: Fishman-Duker 116; V. Déroche,

playing a role in the management of Jerusalem once its bishop capitulated.<sup>28</sup> But none of the Christian writers who touched on these events offers any precision with regard to the nature of the renewed Jewish community of the city, its leadership, aspirations, and the nature of the Jewish-Sasanian collaboration after 614.

Several piyyutim narrow this gap and provide a corrective to the pro-Byzantine and anti-Jewish tenor of the Christian sources. One such, known by its opening line as "Time to Rebuke" (*Ha'et li'geor*), written for the ninth of Av (the commemoration of the destructions of the Temple), "anticipates" the end of Edom-Byzantium through the coming of "Assyria."<sup>29</sup> The piyyut also alludes to Jewish efforts to reinstate Temple service and, above all, to the appearance of a Jewish leader in Jerusalem. How widespread the sentiments recorded in this piyyut were can be gauged from its better-known but later prose parallel, the so-called Book of Zerubbabel.<sup>30</sup>

ואשור	יבוא	עליה
ויטע	אפדנו	כגבוליה
וישרד	כל	אוהליה
ויבושו	כל	אליה
ויחפרו	כל	פסיליה

"La polémique anti-judaïque au VI<sup>e</sup> et au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Un memento inédit, les *Képhalaia*," *TravMém* 11 (1991) 275–311; Déroche and G. Dagron, "*Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati*," *ibid.* 17–273.

<sup>28</sup>For bibliography see B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle I–II* (Paris 1992: hereafter FLUSIN). A good if briefer overview is also provided by Baras (*supra* n.27).

<sup>29</sup>The first two stanzas quoted here are based on Yahalom, "Transition" (*supra* n.6) 7 (lines 9–27). The last stanza is based on Fleischer, *Tarbiz* 54 (1984–85) 414 (lines 22–28). Yahalom (6 n.21) has shown that Fleischer combined two piyyutim that do not belong together, and that while the second is indeed Killir, the first (and for us the relevant part) is not.

<sup>30</sup>Fleischer (*supra* n.29) 407 on the relative dates of both and 404 on the date of the piyyut (between 629 and 634). The book of Zerubbabel is easily accessible thanks to the study of Israel Levi, "L'Apocalypse de Zorababel et le roi de Perse Siroes," *REJ* 68 (1914) 129–160, 69 (1919) 108–128, 71 (1920) 57–65. Text is also in Shmuel (*supra* n.5) 71–88.

כבהלות יבהיליה  
 וקאת וקפור להנחיליה  
 לעות מעליליה  
 להכחיד כל חייליה  
 ובלב ימים יפיליה  
 ועד תהום ישפיליה  
 ובקו תוהו יאפיליה  
 ובאבני בוהו יאפיליה  
 ויורגעו מעט אנשי קודש  
 כי ירשם אשור ליסד מקדש קודש  
 ויבנו שם מזבח קודש  
 ויעלו בו זבחי קודש  
 ולא יספיקו לכונן הר קודש  
 שעדיין לא יצא חוטר מגזע קודש  
 ותחלה יבוא מעוז ראש  
 במקדש מעט עלימו לדרוש  
 ויושם לקצין ולראש  
 וכמשלוש חדשים [ישיג ראש]  
 ועליו יבוא שר הראש  
 וכמקדש מעט אותו יחרוש  
 ועל [צריח סלע] דמו יקרוש

And Assyria shall go forth against her (Edom)  
 And will plant our gear along her borders,  
 and Assyria will destroy all her tents,  
 all her idols will be ashamed,  
 all her images will be confounded,  
 panic will Assyria install in her,  
 the hawk and the porcupine she will bequeath  
 to distort her doing  
 to blot out her soldiers  
 to sink her into the heart of the seas  
 to lower her into the deep (humiliate her to the utmost)  
 to shade her with a line of chaos  
 and to hit her doubly with stones of darkness.

A brief respite will then be gained by the people of holiness,  
 Assyria allowing them to found a temple of holiness;  
 and they will build there an altar of holiness  
 and they will sacrifice offerings of holiness,  
 but they will not have the chance to erect the mountain of  
 holiness,  
 for there has yet been no scion of the root of holiness.

First there will come the advance guard  
 into a temple (synagogue) there to talk to the people,  
 and he will be made a general and a head.  
 Within three months he will carry [?];  
 upon him a general will pounce,  
 and in the temple he will be trampled  
 and on the rock his blood will be spilt.

Couched in eschatological mold this piyyut casts Byzantium's  
 (= Edom) chief enemy as "Assyria," meaning, I suggest, the  
 Sasanians. Although the word "Persia" would have been closer  
 to the historical reality of the early seventh century, it would  
 have been confusing. In the annals of the people of Israel, Persia,  
*i.e.* old or Achaemenid Persia, had provided a crucial key in  
 periodic calculations relating to the collective Jewish fate, as the  
 piyyutim quoted above demonstrate. "Assyria," although an  
 equally well-known biblical entity, had not formed a component  
 in these cyclical computations. Poets could thus enlist  
 "Assyria" to denote the new (Sasanian) Persia, evoking in their  
 audience memories of the mighty Assyria in the Bible while main-  
 taining contemporary geographical accuracy.<sup>31</sup> Listeners in their  
 turn would have conjured up images of benevolent (Achaemenid)  
 Persian rulers who authorized Jewish settlements in  
 Jerusalem (Ezra-Nehemiah) and even Jewish revenge on their  
 enemies (Esther), and hope to witness a repetition in their own  
 time.

<sup>31</sup>The denomination "Assyria" was applied with a certain liberality to various groups, including the Arabs (more often "Ishmaelites"): Yahalom 1979 (*supra* n.6) 6 n.22.

As the two empires, "Edom" and "Assyria," clashed in battle, the poet presented the Persian-Byzantine campaigns not only as a mighty military encounter but also as a war between two creeds. The defeat of the Byzantines by the Sasanians became a humiliation of its chosen version of Christianity. Here it seems that the poet echoed two contemporary issues, iconoclasm and Christian theology of victory.<sup>32</sup> The former may seem surprising in an early seventh-century context; the latter hardly so, particularly in view of the growing tension between the imperial government and its Jewish subjects in the sixth and early seventh centuries.<sup>33</sup> Pressures to conform to the vision of a universal and unified Christian empire resulted in a series of edicts that included a call for forced baptism. The piyyut's anti-Christian note was formulated in response to repeated assertions of the superiority and invincibility of Christian Byzantium. The poet had good reason to celebrate Sasanian victories over Byzantium. In his eyes the Sasanian advent spelled doom for the Byzantine adversary and for its creed.

These verses also provide an outstanding example of piyyutim's manipulation of the biblical text, and of the ways in which these poems can be decoded as historical documents. Micah 1:7 casts the "house of Israel" as an idolatrous sinner. The paytan, by contrast, casts Edom (Byzantium) as the offending target of the divine wrath. Some seventh-century listeners would have appreciated this clever transfer of objects and the promise of consolation which it entailed, as they further recalled the prophet's association of the Assyrian advent with a return of a Davidic ruler (Micah 5:1, 4). Micah had linked the Assyrian invasion with a general uprooting of idolatry (5:9–14) and the universal reassertion of God's power on earth. His language,

<sup>32</sup>F. Heim, *La théologie de la victoire* (Paris 1992); Av. Cameron, *Changing Cultures in Byzantium* (Aldershot 1996).

<sup>33</sup>J. Starr, "Byzantine Jewry on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (565–638)," *JPOS* 15 (1935) 280–293.

however, is so allusive as to hint at the destruction either of idolatrous Israel or of the idolatrous world in general, perhaps of both. What the paytan did was to reverse the message by presenting the Assyrian intervention as a harbinger of disaster not for Israel but for iconodule Byzantium. The prophetic devastation announced by Micah becomes the fate of Byzantium.<sup>34</sup>

In Jewish eyes, moreover, the expectations of a change of regime in Palestine included permission to do precisely what the previous government had forbidden: the Sasanid rulers of Palestine are to allow the Jews to rebuild a sanctuary on Temple Mount in Jerusalem and to reinstate sacrifices.<sup>35</sup> For five centuries Jews had not been allowed to worship in Jerusalem. For two centuries they had lacked a recognized Jewish authority, such as a patriarch (*nasi*). Hopes of revival focused on the resettlement of Jerusalem, the reconstruction of the Temple, and the recognition of Jewish autonomous leadership. The piyyut appears to indicate that steps were taken to ensure precisely that. An altar was constructed on the site of the Temple, sacrifices resumed, and the community bestowed its recognition on an unnamed man who appeared *ex nihilo* to claim the mantle of leadership. This figure with its messianic undertones remains elusive. Whether the piyyut speaks of a "messiah" or of a pre-messianic precursor is unclear. What does seem clear and of great significance is the close association between the appearance of this man and a renewal of Temple service in Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> All these activities, as can be expected in a piyyut, are encoded

<sup>34</sup>See also echoes of Ps. 83:7, 9, 12, 18.

<sup>35</sup>The term used in the piyyut is *miqdash me'at* which in talmudic writings designates a "lesser" or "diminished" Temple, namely a synagogue, based on Ezek. 11:16 (BT Meg. 20a). See L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven 2000) 4 and *passim*.

<sup>36</sup>The "three months" is a stereotypic number here implying, I believe, a very short time period: Yalom (supra n.6) 7 n.23.



in visionary language as though they belong to an eschatological era yet to come.<sup>37</sup>

The euphoria reflected in the piyyut did not last. At an unspecified date that "Rosh" (head) was executed by a military man, a representative, one may assume, of the current Sasanian regime. The piyyut thus records two stages in the life of the Jewish communities of Sasanian Palestine. One is a period of cordial Jewish-Sasanian relations that included permission to renew Jewish life in Jerusalem and even inspired messianic expectations. The other is a period of disillusionment marked by the brutal smashing of these hopes and the execution of the figure that had aroused such optimism. The first stage, the collaboration between Jews and Sasanians, is well attested in contemporary Christian writers who clearly did not relish the close relations between the new Sasanian governor of Palestine and their Jewish neighbors. The second is based on an interpretation of the piyyut itself.<sup>38</sup>

That the Sasanian regime in Palestine and the Jewish communities did form an alliance in 614 seems plausible enough. The Sasanians needed as much local support as they could muster. The Jews had nothing to lose and much to gain by supporting a power that had supplanted their old enemies. Nor is there reason to doubt the willingness of the Sasanian governor to respond to Jewish requests concerning Jerusalem. The city did

<sup>37</sup>Cf. the Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius (late VII), a Christian version of the Arab ("Ishmaelite") conquest of Palestine. For its interpolated Greek version see A. Lolos, *Die Apokalypse des Ps.-Methodios* (Meisenheim 1976); for the Syriac version, G. J. Reinink, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (Louvain 1993).

<sup>38</sup>Sebeos, *The Armenian History* (transl./comm. R. W. Thomson, J. Howard-Johnston, T. Greenwood [Liverpool 1999]), provides corroboration. According to his history (ch. 34–35: II 206–209) the Sasanians controlled Jerusalem first through a small military/political commission and only in 616 changed to direct rule. The change was accompanied not only by restoration of churches in Jerusalem but also by either expelling Jews from Jerusalem or not allowing them to move into the city. Sebeos also records the demolition of a small synagogue which had been built on the esplanade of the Temple Mount, undoubtedly the sanctuary of the piyyut. Its destruction can now be securely dated to 618, the fifth year of the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem (see below).

not occupy a major strategic location. The governor, like his Roman and Byzantine predecessors, chose Caesarea Maritima as his seat. And the Sasanian aimed to conquer Egypt rather than to control Jerusalem: the coastal road leading to Egypt had considerably greater significance than the inland region of Jerusalem.

Whether or not the apparent benevolence of the Sasanians toward the Jews at the start of their Palestinian presence also reflected general religious policies is more difficult to assess. Such policies appear too inconsistent to offer much illumination. The relations between the government of Chosroes II and the Jews in Persia, for example, were too erratic to provide a model to be applied to Byzantine territories.<sup>39</sup> A measure of Sasanian religious tolerance can be gauged not only from the Jewish resettlement of Jerusalem in 614 but also from the fact that (in spite of gruesome descriptions in Christian sources of the massacre of Christians in Jerusalem) the Jerusalem church was soon able to launch a fund-raising campaign to restore churches in Jerusalem without interference from the new rulers, if not with their active permission.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, a rapprochement between the Christians of Palestine and the Sasanians must have been inevitable given the number and influence of the former. While the date of this rapprochement remains a matter of conjecture, it surely paved the way for a final rift between the Sasanian governor and the Jews. As the piyyut shows, the execution of the newly-found Jewish leader extinguished all hopes of restoration. Fears of forced conversion were expressed and a mysterious figure, Armelius/Armilius/Amelius, materialized to inflict further destruction on the Jews and to force them to idolatry.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>J. Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia V* (Leiden 1970) 113–114.

<sup>40</sup>Eutychius *Ann.* 28 (PG 111.1084b; M. Breydy, *CSCO Scr. Arab.* 472 [1985] 100) relates a journey of Modestus of Jerusalem to Ramla, *Tiberias*, and Damascus to demand funds from the Christian communities there. On his success see Flusin II 174–175.

<sup>41</sup>Fleischer (*supra* n.29) 415 lines 39–47, and below.

## 4. Synagogal poetics and polemics

Hints, such as those provided in this piyyut, of plans to rebuild the temple under the "Assyrian" regime also explain in part the intensification of Christian hostility to the Jews in the early seventh century. The plans account for the euphoric mood of the Jewish community in Palestine, so long deprived of a recognised leadership and a sacred center. Contemporary and near contemporary authors expressed these centuries-old hopes, which seemed on the verge of realisation, in liturgical poetry as well as in prose apocalypses such as the "Book of Zerrubabel." The following piyyut, "On That Day," is an example of the peculiar blend of realities and fantasies that so characterises "historical" piyyutim of the early seventh century. Its popularity is reflected in the number of its surviving versions.<sup>42</sup>

אותו היום אשר יבוא משיח בן דוד  
אל עם אשר נדחקו  
תראינה האותות האלה בעולם ויופקו  
ארקה ודוק ימקו  
וחמה ולבנה ילקו  
ויושבי הארץ ישתקו  
ומלך מערב עם מלך מזרח זה לזה ידיוקו  
ומלך מערב חילותיו בארץ יתחוקו  
ומארץ יקטן יצא מלך ומחנותיו [בארץ] יחזוקו  
וישבי תכל כולם ידוקדקו  
ושחקים על חלד עפר יריקו  
ורוחות בארץ יופקו  
וגוג ומגוג איש את אחיו ידפקו  
ואימה בלב הגויים ידליקו

<sup>42</sup>The text is based on Yahalom 1979 (*supra* n.6) 130–133 (80 lines); I give lines 1–28. The translation is based on B. Lewis, "On That Day. A Jewish Apocalyptic Poem on the Arab Conquest," in *Mélanges d'Islamologie. Volume dédié à la mémoire de A. Abel Salmon* (Leiden 1974) 197–200 (where a typographical error, p.200, resulted in a mistaken translation (five and four days instead of forty-five days).

וישראל מכל פשעיהם יתנקו  
ומבית התפילה עוד לא יודחקו  
ברכות ונחמות עליהם יורקו  
ובספר החיים יוחקו  
ומלכים מארץ אדום יתמו  
ויושבי אנטיוכיה ימרדו וישלימו  
ומעזיה ושומרון ינוחמו  
ועכו והגליל ירוחמו  
ואדומים וישמעאלים בכקעת עכו ילחמו  
עד ישקעו הסוסים בדמים ויהמו  
ועזה ובנותיה יורגמו  
ואשקלון ואשדוד יהוממו  
וישראל מקריה יצאו ויקדימו  
ארבעים וחמשה ימים בר לא יוטעמו  
ויגלה משיחם וינוחמו

On that day when the Messiah son of David will come to a  
downtrodden people,  
these signs will be seen and produced,  
Earth and Heaven will wither  
as the sun and the moon are eclipsed  
and the inhabitants of the land struck into silence.  
The king of the west will wage a mortal war with the king of  
the east,  
and the king of the west will strengthen his force in the land.  
But from the land of Yiktan a king will set forth and his  
camps will be fortified in the land.

Then all the people of the universe will be judged,  
the sky will pour dust on the land  
and winds will be blown throughout the world.  
Gog and Magog will then mightily clash  
inspiring fear in the hearts of the nations (*goyim*),  
and Israel will be cleansed of its sins  
and no longer will be kept away from the house of prayer.  
Blessings and consolations will be heaped upon them  
and in the book of the living they will all be inscribed.

There will be no more kings from the land of Edom.  
 The inhabitants of Antioch will rebel and make peace,  
 Maazia and Samaria will be consoled,  
 Acre and the Galilee will be spared.  
 Edomites and Ishmaelites in the valley of Acre will fight  
 Till the horses will be drowned in blood and panic.  
 Gaza and her daughters will redden with blood (or be pelted  
 with stones),  
 Ashkelon and Ashdod stunned.  
 And Israel will leave the city, turning eastward,  
 and fasting for forty-five days  
 till the messiah will be revealed and they will be consoled.

Beginning with eschatological imagery, this piyyut offers precisely the opposite order of the previous one, although both appear to refer to the same events. It also serves as a good example of the reworking of piyyutim to accommodate contemporary needs. At first sight the piyyut would seem to provide a poetic account of the clash between "Edom" and "Ishmael," Byzantium and the Arabs. But there are several problems with this. "King of the west and king of the east" is hardly appropriate for the Byzantine-Islamic war of the 630s: To describe Mohammed or his successor as "king of the east" in either 614 or 634 would be to stretch credulity. Moreover, the place-names seem to fit better the itinerary of the Sasanian than the Islamic conquest of Palestine, although neither is known in any great detail.<sup>43</sup> Hence I would postulate that "On That Day" was

<sup>43</sup>A piyyut of Simon ben Megas may preserve another echo of the Sasanian invasion when it speaks of Edom's humiliation. Y. Yahalom, *Liturgical Poems of Simon bar Megas* (Jerusalem 1984) 189–190, piyyut 19 lines 8–9: As was done to Egypt (Mitzraim) / Thus she (Edom/Byzantium) will be humbled by the one from Mesopotamia (Naharaim). Another possibility is that "Ishmaelites" refers to the Saracen tribes who fought in the Sasanian army. They were a familiar feature in the life of late ancient Palestine as peaceful settlers, raiders, and soldiers (Anthony of Coziba 7.32; transl. T. Vivian and A. N. Athanassakis, *Anthony of Choziba, Life of St. George of Choziba* [San Francisco 1994] 63). Antiochus of St Sabas (*Ep. ad Eustathium*, PG 89.1424B–C) refers to marauding Ishmaelites, whom Flusin (II 153 n.4) regards as the monastery's Saracen neighbors. He also notes the support that the Saracens, and the Jews, extended to the Sasanians. Perhaps the *Doctrina Iacobi* 4.21 (cf. Jones, *Later Rom. Emp.* I 316–317) also reflects a confusion between Saracens and Sasanians: a rabbi,

originally composed to commemorate the Sasanian rather than the Arab conquest of Eretz-Israel/Palestine.

The piyyut describes two invading routes, both from the north-east, both starting in Antioch. Events at Antioch in the early seventh century accord well with this. In 608/9 the city rebelled against the Byzantine government. According to Theophanes the rebellion involved a Jewish insurrection against the Christians, the murder of the city's patriarch, and the killing of many landowners.<sup>44</sup> This last suggests not so much a religious war as a social one. Since the identity of the landowners is not disclosed, the responsibility of the Jews may be doubted. Nor is it clear what they expected to gain from the death of the patriarch. At any rate, the impetus for the uprising could have been the Sasanian threat. The suppression of the uprising was swift and brutal, orchestrated by a notorious officer, Bonosus (who also played a prominent role in rivalries of circus factions in Syria-Palestine and in Egypt).<sup>45</sup> Antioch, then, both as a launching point for the Sasanian invasion of 614 and as a scene of Jewish sufferings, served well the poet and his Palestinian audience.

If the itineraries traced in the piyyut can be taken literally, one invading route led, via the eastern parts of Palestine, through Maazia (Tiberias) and Samaria, most likely to Jerusalem. The other led to the coast through the Galilee, Acre (Ptolemais),

asked about a prophet who came with the "Saracens" and proclaimed the coming of the "anointed," replied that "prophets do not come with sword and chariot."

<sup>44</sup>Theophanes s.a. 608/9 (425–426 Mango/Scott); cf. Michael the Syrian 10.25, 11.1 (II 379, 401 Chabot), who dates the uprising to 610/1.

<sup>45</sup>On Jewish participation in the troubles in the time of Phocas in various cities including Ptolemais (Akko) and Antioch: *Doctrina Iacobi* 1.41, 3.1, 4.5, 5.20, with Flusin II 152 n.3. J. Starr, *The Jews of the Byzantine Empire 641–1204* (Athens 1939) 17–24; A. Sharf, "Byzantine Jewry in the Seventh Century," *BZ* 48 (1955) 103–115, and *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade* (London 1971) 31–33, on the Jewish Himyarite kingdom and its history of Jewish-Christian conflict with Byzantine and Persian ties. Sharf 1971 (47–48) dates the Antiochene disturbances to 609.

Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Gaza.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the Sasanians sent the main invading army westward with Egypt as the ultimate goal, while the other branch aimed at securing the hinterland, as well as the support of the Jews of Tiberias and the Samaritans of Samaria.<sup>47</sup> According to Eutychius, patriarch of Alexandria in the tenth century, the Sasanian invading force that headed to Jerusalem was accompanied by Jews from Tiberias, the Galilean mountains, and Nazareth.<sup>48</sup> His lone testimony is now confirmed by the piyyut. In addition, the piyyut's reference to Samaria, or rather to the Samaritans, makes sense within the history of both Jews and Samaritans under the Byzantines. It may be inferred that like the Jews, the Samaritans, a sorely tried and much harassed minority, had much to gain and little to lose by supporting the new power. The Sasanians' march through territories with Jewish and Samaritan populations would have been greeted with sighs of relief, if not with outright enthusiasm. Perhaps too the successful collaboration *ca* 570 between the Jews of South Arabia and the Sasanians against the former's Christian-Abyssinian landlords helped inspire the later cooperation.<sup>49</sup> The existence of a large and important Jewish community in Sasanian Persia may have acted as another incentive for their Palestinian brethren to support the Sasanians against the Byzantines.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Sebeos (ch. 34; comm. II 206) seems to distinguish between a military march to Caesarea, which would coincide with the piyyut's western route along the coast, and a bloodless extension of political authority throughout Palestine.

<sup>47</sup>I am uncertain how to place Anthony of Choziba's reference to the Sasanians surrounding Diospolis (7.34; Flusin II 153; Vivian/Athanassakis 65). Anthony's chronology appears hopelessly confused, and he places the siege of Jerusalem in 614 in several different contexts. See also Starr (*supra* n.33), esp. 286.

<sup>48</sup>*Ann.* 1083a, with Flusin II 152 n.3.

<sup>49</sup>G. W. Bowersock, *DOP* 51 (1997) 9, and "A New Greek Inscription from South Yemen" in his *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire* (Goldbach 1994) 285–290; C. Robin, *L'Arabie antique* (Aix en Provence 1993) 144–150.

<sup>50</sup>I. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era* (Jerusalem 1990); G. Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *IrAnt* 1 (1961) 117–162.

The role of the Jewish community of Tiberias in the Sasanian conquest and presence in Palestine is further confirmed by a peculiar tale in Theophanes. In an entry describing Heraclius's triumphant restoration of the true cross to Jerusalem in 628, Theophanes recounts an encounter in Tiberias between the emperor and his wealthy Jewish host Benjamin.<sup>51</sup> On that occasion the Christians (in Tiberias?) accused Benjamin of oppressing them during the Sasanian occupation. When Heraclius asked his host for an explanation, he received the somewhat brazen answer that since the Christians (presumably including the emperor himself) were enemies of the Jewish faith they deserved such a lot. The emperor discovered that he had another mission besides rebaptizing Jerusalem and prevailed upon Benjamin, now in his entourage, to convert. The baptism ceremony was apparently celebrated in Samaritan Neapolis and not in Jewish Tiberias. For Christian historians the image of emperors as missionaries (rather than issuers of edicts of forced baptism?) proved an alluring theme. A different version of the story, found in Eutychius' *Annals*, includes the same motif. In this latter version Benjamin is altogether absent and instead the imperial zeal is aimed at unnamed delegates of the Jewish community of Tiberias.<sup>52</sup> What both versions reflect is the important role played by Tiberias and by members of the Jewish community in Sasanian Palestine. This is exactly what the piyyut implies as well.

Jewish assaults on Christians in the city of Acre (Ptolemais), encouraged most likely by the Sasanian advance, are reported

<sup>51</sup>*Chron.* 328 s.a. 627/8. See also Y. Hirschfeld, ed., *Tiberias from its Foundation to the Islamic Conquest* (Jerusalem 1988).

<sup>52</sup>Eutychius *Ann.* 30 (PG 111.1089B–1091B; 108–109 Breydy), with Flusin II 310–311. An emperor bothering to convert a single Jew is to say the least unusual. Agents of conversion rarely include members of the imperial house, least of all the emperor himself. The initiative often is from local ecclesiastical authorities, as the story of the forced conversion of the Jews of Magona (Minorca) illustrates (S. Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca. Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* [Oxford 1996]).

by a third Christian source of the early seventh century. The *Doctrina Jacobi*, a tale of a converted Jew and an obvious anti-Jewish manifesto, records the forced conversion of a Christian priest in Acre, probably on the eve of the Sasanian siege of the city if not during the siege.<sup>53</sup> The author claims that this, as well as Jewish burning of churches, occurred when the Persians were attacking the territory.<sup>54</sup> The size of the Jewish population is not disclosed, but a large number is implied.<sup>55</sup> Yet Acre boasted only a single synagogue, at least according to the *Doctrina*, while the Christian community had several churches. There were also Samaritans living in Acre but neither their number nor their relations with the Jewish community are addressed in the *Doctrina* (the Samaritan quarter was the scene of the priest's suicide).

Intercommunal clashes may have been a regular feature of the urban landscape of late Byzantine Palestine. In Tyre, just north of Acre, Euty chius reports a Jewish rebellion which may have occurred in 614. He also claims that the Sasanians entrusted the capture of Acre and Tyre, two fortified towns, to the Jews.<sup>56</sup> Whence these Jewish troops materialized did not engage the Alexandrian patriarch, nor their ability to conduct siege warfare. The likelihood of a group of ad hoc recruits without military experience and without siege machines successfully taking walled cities appears slim in the extreme. It seems that Euty chius garbled rumors about Jewish rebellion against the Byzantine government on the one hand, and urban violence on the other, to create an impression of organized collaboration between Jews and Sasanians. The piyyut merely commemorates

<sup>53</sup>Y. Dan, "Information about Acre in a Greek work of the Seventh Century," *Studies in the History of the People of Israel and the Land of Israel* 2 (1972) 53–62, for what follows on Acre.

<sup>54</sup>Sharf 1971 (*supra* n.45) 49 on Jews being attacked in Acre, with *Doctrina Jacobi* 5.12 (Ethiop. ch. 91: S. Grébaud, *PO XIII* [1913] 63).

<sup>55</sup>5.6 πλῆθος Ἰουδαίων Bonwetch p.77, with Dan (*supra* n.53) 58.

<sup>56</sup>Tyre: Euty chius *Ann.* 29 (PG 111.1084d–1085a; 101–102 Breydy), with Flusin II 152 n.3.

a decisive battle between "Edomites" and "Ishmaelites" in the valley of Acre. If my reading is correct, and "Ishmaelites" replaced the original "Assyrians," this provides us a unique testimony on the location of a critical battle.

Not unnaturally, the attention of the paytan was focused on the fate of Jerusalem. Like the piyyut quoted earlier, "On That Day" also records how the Sasanian conquest kindled messianic expectations. And again it links the defeat of Byzantium with the abolition of liturgical restrictions, particularly the prohibition of worship in the area of the Temple. But "On That Day" is much clearer about the personality of the anticipated messiah. This was Menahem ben Amiel (the "consoler, son of God's people") who would come in the fifth year and would declare himself publicly as the Messiah, son of Joseph, son of Israel. In his wake, thousands would flock to Jerusalem, muster according to the ancient tribal divisions, and attend the sacrifices administered by the "Consoler." But like his counterpart in the other piyyut, this man too was doomed to die prematurely and violently. In both piyyutim (in portions not quoted above), an Armilius is involved in the grim events, either as the man who tries to force the Jews to idolatry or as the murderer of the messiah.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Armilius or Ermelus is variously described as the son of Satan and a beautiful statue, the first ruler of Rome-Edom, destined killer of the Messiah son of Joseph but an intended victim of the ultimate Messiah (Berger [*supra* n.24] 155). Efforts to put Armilius in a specific literary context have led to assimilation with a variety of historical, semi-historical, and mythical figures, ranging from Romulus to a Eremolaos (or destroyer of a people), and from Balaam son of Beor to Laban the Aramaean (Deut. 26:5) whose identity had been somehow confused with that of the first king of Edom (Berger 161). See also R. Patai, *Messiah Texts* (Detroit 1979) 156–164. Note that the name Aemilius could have been easily turned into Armilius in a Hebrew transliteration as already appears in an unpublished Qumran fragment which contains the words "Aemilius killed." This Aemilius has been identified with the first Roman governor of Syria in 62 B.C.E., Aemilius Scaurus: E. Eshel, "Personal Names in the Qumran Sect," in A. Demsky *et al.*, ed., *These are the Names. Studies in Jewish Onomastics* (Ramat Gan 1997) 45–46. In sum, he is a figure with a long ancestry of animosity towards Israel who is nonetheless destined to become involved in Jewish messianic hopes. See also Alexander (*supra* n.23).

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the eschatological narrative of "On That Day" is the number used to date the "messiah." Both this piyyut (in portions not quoted above) and the Book of Zerubbabel refer to the "fifth year" as the date of the appearance and the death of this figure. Neither the prose nor the poetic account specifies the starting point for the counting of this fifth year. If the number is more than purely symbolic, it may contain an allusion to a specific end of a specific period. I would hazard a guess that the fifth year refers to the end of the Jewish-Sasanian alliance and by implication to the end of Jewish hopes and aspirations under the Sasanian regime. The Christian sources that record the collaboration between the Jews of Palestine and the Sasanians, especially in conjunction with the siege and capture of Jerusalem in 614, do not state the length of the Jewish-Sasanian entente. What is of critical importance to all of them is the beginning of the collaboration, for it entailed a catastrophic turn of events, the loss of Jerusalem and of its sacred relics. For the Jews, the end, no less than the beginning, held an overpowering significance. With their hopes dashed and their leader dead, the picture must have been very bleak indeed.

Juxtaposing the two piyyutim here examined allows the following reconstruction of the course of events. After the surrender of Tiberias, Acre, and Jerusalem, these cities and perhaps others were administered with the help of members of the Jewish communities there.<sup>58</sup> In Jerusalem, the community was hastily formed in 614, probably from nearby settlements. Within a few months of the resettlement an unnamed man proclaimed himself as a herald of the messiah or as the messiah himself. Four years later, in 618, which Jewish sources designated the fifth year of the renewal of Jewish life in Jerusalem, he was

<sup>58</sup>There is only one isolated reference to the presence of Persians in Jerusalem, and it may be discounted: Theophanes (*s.a.* 626/7) says that Heraclius wished to send back unharmed to Persia Persians who were in Edessa, Palestine, Jerusalem, and "other Roman towns" (457 Mango/Scott). The double reference to Palestine and Jerusalem is strictly speaking unnecessary.

executed (or, alternatively, a messiah materialized and was immediately killed). By then, the Sasanians, preparing an invasion of Egypt, were convinced that the Christians were a more viable ally.<sup>59</sup> The fifth year, then, after the conquest of Jerusalem in 614 became a key number in the configuration of Jewish history at the beginning of the seventh century. Its import is fully implied in the dating of the end of Byzantine Palestine to 618.

In hindsight, the Sasanian interlude proved too short to count in the permanent commemoration of Jewish history in synagogal liturgy. It was overshadowed by the Islamic conquest; the "Assyrians" were quickly replaced by the "Ishmaelites." The similarities, however, between the Sasanian and Islamic conquests were too striking to ignore. Nor could the paytanim resist the use of the language of the "Sasanian" piyyutim of 614–618 in their recording of the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem two decades later. What exactly happened in the years between 614 and 618 in Jewish-Sasanian Jerusalem remains a mystery. In poetic refashioning of history this period witnessed the reorganization of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, the endorsement of some sort of autonomous leadership, and the resumption of liturgical services on the site of the Temple. The optimism reflected in the piyyutim proved short-lived. The Sasanians (and later the Arabs) were hardly more benevolent than the Byzantines.<sup>60</sup> Their brutal treatment of the "messiah" (or his herald) spelled doom for Jewish hopes for centuries to come. The real end of Byzantine rule over Palestine came, in this light, not in 614, with the victory of the Sasanian over the Byzantine

<sup>59</sup>By 619 the Persians conquered Alexandria: *Chron.* 724 113, with Mango/Scott, *Theophanes* 432. When Chosroes was preparing to invade Egypt, Theophanes says that he became particularly bloodthirsty and rapacious (*s.a.* 619/20).

<sup>60</sup>A curious passage in *Pesikta Rabbati* 34–37 (Friedmann) appears to reflect the disillusionment of the Jews with the Sasanians (= wicked Persia), alluding to the kings of Persia, Arabia, and Edom: B. J. Bamberger, "A Messianic Document of the Seventh Century," *HUCA* 15 (1940) 425–431.

army, but in 618, when Jewish messianic hopes were abruptly cut short.

If this reconstruction is correct, two more points need to be briefly considered. (1) The purported Islamic reconstruction of the "Temple" in 638 or soon after: Theophanes claims that Umar started a project to rebuild the Temple of Solomon but failed to carry it through.<sup>61</sup> The story is reminiscent of the more famous plan of the emperor Julian to do likewise and may well be a fiction or a misplaced recording of the events of 614–618. Crone and Cook appear to credit a Muslim intention to rebuild the Temple.<sup>62</sup> But Umar had little reason even to contemplate a project that would have inspired vain hopes among the Jews. To the contrary, his name is closely linked with a treaty in 638 that banned Jews from entering Jerusalem.<sup>63</sup> (2) Three tenth-century Karaite authors, Daniel al-Qumasi, Sahl ben Masliah, and Salmon ben Yeruhim, claim that for just over five hundred years Jerusalem had been abandoned, a fact that forced Jewish pilgrims to the Holy Land to pray elsewhere in Palestine, until "the king of Ishmael defeated the king of the south" (*al-Qumasi*). Moshe Gil interprets this evidence to refer to the events covered by the piyyutim which I have analyzed.<sup>64</sup> He further suggests that the paytanim misunderstood the number that the Karaitic authors use, which should be 503 (rather than 550). Added to

<sup>61</sup>*Chron. s.a.* 642/3 (476 Mango/Scott). M. Schwabe, "The Jews and the Temple Mount after the Conquest of Jerusalem by Umar," *Zion* 2 (1927) 94–107 (Heb.); L. Conrad, "Theophanes and the Arabic Historical Tradition: Some Indications of Inter-Cultural Transmission," *ByzForsch* 15 (1990) 1–44; A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship. Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden 1995), esp. 32–33.

<sup>62</sup>P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge 1977) 10, based on B. Lewis, "The Secrets of R. Simon ben Yohai," *BSOAS* 13 (1950) 308–339, and I. Levi, *REJ* 67 [1914] 178–182, with Elad (*supra* n.61) 161.

<sup>63</sup>S. Goitein, "Did Umar Prohibit the Stay of Jews in Jerusalem?" *Melilah* 3–4 (1950) 156–165, repr. *Palestinian Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times in the Light of Genizah Documents* (Jerusalem 1980) 36–41.

<sup>64</sup>*A History of Palestine 634–1099*, transl. E. Broidi (Cambridge 1992) 68–69, which substantially reproduces J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* I (London 1920) 42–43.

135 (revolt of Bar Kochva and the Hadrianic ban on Jewish entry to Jerusalem), this yields 638, indeed a meaningful date in the annals of Islam in Palestine. But this reconstruction is based on an erroneous assumption that the Hadrianic measures served as a basis of Jewish chronology. The critical date of counting years in Jewish history was the destruction of the Second Temple in 68 (or rather 70), as many late ancient inscriptions show. So the Karaite testimonies appear to relate to Roman bans on praying in Jerusalem and not to the length of Roman-Byzantine rule over Palestine. Nor is it likely that the Palestinian paytanim copied Karaitic writings. The opposite is much more plausible.

In conclusion it must be emphasised that the above is only a tentative reconstruction. Its main purpose has been to draw attention to the unused wealth of the piyyutim and to their importance for our understanding of critical moments in the history of Palestine in late antiquity. The piyyutim used here provide unique insights into the mood of the Jewish community of Palestine on the eve of the Sasanian and later the Islamic conquests. They also throw light on Jewish attitudes to the Byzantine government, and provide invaluable hints of the atmosphere in which contemporary Christian authors wrote about the same events.<sup>65</sup> To judge by the piyyutim, the Jews of Palestine looked forward to freedom from Byzantine oppression. To surmise from Christian reactions, the Christians hoped for the reinstatement of Byzantine control. Both, to an extent, proved futile. As Andrew Sharf noted,<sup>66</sup> "In Palestine it was

<sup>65</sup>As Walter Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge 1992) 213–214, has shown in his survey of the seventh-century search for scapegoats.

<sup>66</sup>Sharf 1971 (*supra* n.45) 50. Cf. M. Avi Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine* (Oxford 1976) 269–270: the change of Persian attitudes towards the Jewish population under their control in Palestine was "an event of very great importance in Jewish history ... By betraying their Jewish allies the Persians put an end to the national hopes of the Jews for many centuries ... The deception, which the Jews suffered in their alliance with the Persians, marks

not the coming of the Persians but the collapse of imperial rule which was welcomed."<sup>67</sup>

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Department of History  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045  
hsivan@ku.edu

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therefore the real end of the political history of Judaism in Palestine. Having to give up their hope of liberty and independence, they ceased to be a political power." The piyyutim corroborate this pessimistic view.

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