

PENITENTIAL LITURGY IN 4 EZRA

BY

D. BOYARIN

New York, N.Y.

Within a remarkably short and compact section of the Pseudepigraphon 4 Ezra (7,102 to 8,36) ¹⁾ one finds a group of reflections of Jewish penitential (*Seliḥot*) liturgy ²⁾, which together include virtually all of the elements of the most ancient known form of the *Seliḥot* service ³⁾. These are listed by GOLDSCHMIDT as recitation of the “thirteen attributes;” “Confession;” litanies of the “Answer us” type; and finally, *Taḥanun*, (= a prayer of pleading). Of these four elements, all but the last are to be found clearly referred to (or even used) in our passage from 4 Ezra.

The first of these elements reflected in 4 Ezra is indeed the litany. The Apocalypticist’s angelic interlocutor has informed him that no intercession of the righteous on behalf of the sinners will be effective when the judgment comes. To this, Ezra’s reply is

And I answered and said: How is it that we now find that first Abraham prayed for the people of Sodom, and Moses for our fathers who sinned in the wilderness; and Joshua after him for Israel in the days of Achar (sic); and Samuel in the days of Saul, and David for the plague, and Solomon for those that (should worship) in the sanctuary; and Elijah for those who received the rain, and for the dead, that he might live; and Hezekiah for the people in the days of Sennacherib and (others) many for many? (7, 106-111)

This passage is striking in its affinity to the Mishna which is the source of all later litanies ⁴⁾ of this type. Ta’anit II, 3 ff. prescribes that

¹⁾ The orders of chapters, etc. differs in different versions and editions of 4 Ezra. Citations in this paper are according to the order in R. H. CHARLES, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the OT*, Vol. II, (Oxford 1913) where the translation and notes are by BOX. BOX’s translation has been quoted unless otherwise noted.

²⁾ A good modern edition of these prayers is *Seder Seliḥot* edited and with a commentary by Daniel GOLDSCHMIDT (Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1965). (Hebrew) Page references in this paper will be from this edition.

³⁾ GOLDSCHMIDT, Introduction, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁾ The responses of the congregation, constitutive of a litany, are of course omitted in the literary work, as they are obviously inappropriate. A more important difference is that in 4 Ezra, the prayers are for others, whereas in the Mishna as

each of the additional *b'rakot* said on fast days should include a phrase such as, "He who answered Abraham on Mt. Moria, He will answer you and will hear the voice of your crying out today."

The Mishna goes on to enumerate the "seven who were answered" (= *seb' 'niyot*), the rest being, The Jews at the Red Sea, Joshua at Gilgal, Samuel at Mitzpah, Elijah on Mt. Carmel, Jonah, and finally David and Solomon. The similarities between the two passages are striking, both in general theme and in many details (when David and Solomon are taken together, as in the Mishna, there are exactly seven in both lists). Since the setting of this "litany" in the Mishna is liturgical *par excellence*, and this theme recurs many times in later *Selihot* (cf. GOLDSCHMIDT, p. 16 ff.) it seems quite likely that the author of 4 Ezra, is alluding in literary fashion to a liturgical tradition already current in his day ¹).

The recitation of the "thirteen Attributes" of God's grace is the next element of the "*Selihot*" liturgy to be found in 4 Ezra (7, 132-140). David SIMONSEN pointed out the Midrashic affinities of this passage ²):

And I answered and said, I know, Lord, that the Most High is now called compassionate in that he compassionates those who have not yet come into the world; and gracious, in that he is gracious towards those who return to his law: and longsuffering, because he shows longsuffering to sinners as his creatures; and bountiful, since he is ready to bestow favour rather than exact; and of great mercy, because he multiplies mercies so greatly to those who are in existence, and who have passed away, and who are to come. . .

The passage continues in this vein, listing all of the "Attributes of G." ³). SIMONSEN demonstrated that this is a Midrash on Ex. 34, 7-8 of a type found in Rabbinic literature in TB Rosh Hashana, 17a, b. What he failed to point out is that such listing and interpreting of the

in the later liturgy the prayer is seemingly for the sake of the worshipper himself. However, this is merely a difference of emphasis and can be explained by the literary use to which the author of 4 Ezra is putting the material.

¹) See also Joseph HEINEMANN, *Prayer in the Period of the Tanna'im and the Amoraim* (Jerusalem 1964) (in Hebrew), pp. 91, 95 and 98, where, however, 4 Ezra is not mentioned. I wish to thank Dr. Menahem Schmelzer of the J.T.S.A. for this reference and a great deal of aid during the writing of this paper.

²) DAVID SIMONSEN, "Eine Stück Midrasch im Buch IV Ezra", *Israel Lewy Festschrift* (Breslau 1911), pp. 270-278. SIMONSEN already realized that in 4 Ezra this has the form of a prayer encounter, but did not connect it with the formal liturgy.

³) According to JACOB LICHT, *Sefer Hazon Ezra* (Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem 1968), p. 52, n. 7, the attributes here are seven, not as in normative Judaism, where they are thirteen, but see SIMONSEN.

“Attributes of God” belongs not only to a hermeneutic tradition but to a liturgical one as well.

In the *Seliḥot*, recitation of the „Thirteen Attributes” takes a central position, and has indeed from the earliest records we have of formal penitential liturgy ¹⁾. These recitations are introduced by *Piyyuṭim* in which the “Attributes” are mentioned or even explained in Midrashic form ²⁾.

The age of the liturgical tradition of formal recitation of the “Attributes” can be seen from the same passage in TB where the Midrash discussed by SIMONSEN is found. In Rosh Hashana 17b, R. Yochanan says,

Were it not written Scripture, one could not say it. It teaches that the Holiness, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself like a reader and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said any time that Israel sins let them follow this order before Me and I will forgive their sins.

In addition to this Rav Yehuda says, “A covenant is made with the Thirteen Attributes that they do not return empty-handed,” to which RASHI comments (*s.v. brit*), “If Israel will make mention of them in their Fast-Prayers, they do not return empty-handed.”

R. Yochanan’s statement gives us then a definite *terminus ante quem* for this liturgical tradition in the third century. Moreover, the very fact that both R. Yochanan in Palestine and R. Yehudah in Babylonia (slightly his junior) seem to be referring back to established practice would antedate it even more. It seems quite plausible, therefore, that the author of 4 Ezra is not merely quoting a Midrashic interpretation of these verses, but rather reflecting a ritual of reciting them in time of petition to God for succour.

The suggestion that we have here in the third vision of 4 Ezra

¹⁾ GOLDSCHMIDT, Introduction, p. 5.

²⁾ A good example of such a *Piyyuṭ* is: (p. 7, GOLDSCHMIDT) “For You are a God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, great of mercy, and exceeding in doing good and conducting all the world with the attribute of mercy.” On the next page an example can be found where verses from the prophets are used to aid the elaboration of the attributes:

“You are a Long-Suffering God / and the Master of Mercy You were called / . . . the greatness of Your Mercy and Grace / remember today and every day for the sake of the seed of Thy loved ones.../ Pass over wrongdoing and blot out blame (ʔl ʔrk ʔpym ʔth/ wbʔl rhmym nqrʔt/ . . .gdwlt rhmyk wdḥsyk/ tzkwr hym wbkl ywm lʔrʔ ydydyk! . . .tʔbwr ʔl pʔʔ wtmḥb ʔʔm: GOLDSCHMIDT, p. 8). The verse beginning *gdwlt* seems a clear allusion to *rb ḥsd wʔmt* and *tʔbwr*, etc. to *nrʔʔ ʔwn wpsʔ* and *tmḥb*, etc. to *nqb*. See also, however, GOLDSCHMIDT’s notes *ad loc.*

allusions to an ancient form of the *Seliḥot* is strengthened further by a passage which clearly echoes the “*Viddui*” (= Confession), the third element of the basic *Seliḥot* liturgy:

For we and our fathers have done deeds of death: ¹⁾ but, Thou, because of us sinners, wert ²⁾ called compassionate. For if Thou hast a desire to compassionate us who have no works of righteousness ³⁾ then shalt Thou be called the gracious One. (8, 31)

The beginning of the *Viddui* shows strong affinities to this outcry of Ezra’s:

For we are not so brazen and stubborn to say before You Lord, our G. and G. of our fathers, that we are righteous and have not sinned, but we and our fathers have sinned ⁴⁾.

It is clear that in the Pseudepigraphon a similar confession formula is reflected. This point gains further in cogency by an inference drawn in TB from an act of Shmuel’s (again a first generation Amora) ⁵⁾:

Said Bar Hamdodi: I was standing before Shmuel, and he was sitting, and when the reader reached the part where one says, “but we have sinned,” he stood. He said one learns from this that this is the essence of the Confession.

Furthermore, in the *Seliḥot*, Confession is intimately associated with the repetition of the Thirteen Attributes ⁶⁾, and so it is here in 4 Ezra as well, viz. “Thou wert called compassionate.” This is exactly the language of the *Seliḥot* quoted above. A liturgical origin seems, therefore, rather certain for this passage as well.

In addition to the “structural” parallels between 4 Ezra and the *Seliḥot*, i.e., those that involve the basic liturgical elements of the penitential prayers, there are individual parallels between phrases in the Pseudepigraphon and phrases in the prayer book. 4 Ezra 8, 13-14

¹⁾ Following CAHANA (*The Apocrypha* (Hebrew), repr. Jerusalem 1970) 7, 31, BOX translates, “have passed our lives in ways that bring death”.

²⁾ Again after CAHANA, BOX has “art”, but since again this is most likely a further allusion (see below) to Ex. 34 “wert” seems more appropriate.

³⁾ CAHANA’s translation *ky ʔyn bnw mʿsy sdqb* calls up Jewish liturgy brilliantly.

⁴⁾ *Seliḥot* p. 12, GOLDSCHMIDT’s suggestion that the original reading was “but we have sinned” and that “our fathers” is a later interpolation based on Ps 106, 6 or Lam. 5, 7 seems somewhat weakened in the light of the parallel with 4 Ezra. It is seemingly early a part of the confession liturgy.

⁵⁾ Yoma 87b. ref. from GOLDSCHMIDT. And see R. RABBINOVICZ, *Var. Lect.*, ad loc. Many manuscripts read that Shmuel, himself, said that this is the essence of confession, but see also other readings there.

⁶⁾ GOLDSCHMIDT, note p. 8.

reads: "Thou wilt kill it (the body) as (it is) thy creature, / and quicken it as (it is) thy work! / If, then, with a light word thou shalt destroy him who with such infinite labour has been fashioned by thy command to what purpose was he made." This is strongly reminiscent in theme (and even rhythm!) of a plea in the beginning of *Selihot*, "The soul is Yours, and the body Your making. Have compassion on Your Work" ¹).

Next, in the passage which immediately precedes Ezra's *Viddui*, we find a passage replete with themes of the *Selihot* for the Days of Awe (8 : 22 ff):

O *look* not on the sins of thy people,
but on them that have served thee in truth;
Turn not ²) to the deeds of the godless
but to those who have kept thy *covenant*
in tortures . . .
but *remember* those who willingly recognize
the fear of thee ²) . . .
Look to those ²) that have gloriously taught
thy law. [emphasis added]

This is strikingly similar to many penitential prayers, but particularly to the famous *Seliha* for the night of *Yom Kippur*, the refrain of which is, "O, look to the covenant, turn not to the (deeds of) the evil inclination" ³).

The significance of these comparisons lies, it would seem, not only in the particular light that each one sheds on the respective passage in the Apocalypse, but also in their presence all together in a concentrated passage in the work. It would seem not unlikely that the Apocalypticist had in his mind's eye as he composed this entire section a liturgical model from which he drew freely and to great effect. This analysis grows in cogency when it is remembered that these visions and prayers of Ezra's are all within the context of fasting—the original setting of course, as well, for the *Selihot* ⁴).

¹) *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²) Following CAHANA.

³) Daniel GOLDSCHMIDT, *Mabzar V'yamim Nora'im*, Jerusalem 1970, Vol. II., p. 36.

⁴) GOLDSCHMIDT, *Selihot*, Introduction, p. 10.