

TRANSLATION OF ARTICLE

FROM DARKNESS INTO GREAT LIGHT

by

Prof. Shlomo Pines*

In a most interesting paper¹ concerning the Easter homily of Melito of Sardis,² a Christian writer of the second century C. E., E. Werner deals first and foremost with the connection between a Christian prayer found in various formulations in the order of Easter prayers of several Churches (e. g. in the *Improperia* of the Roman Catholic Good Friday liturgy), in which God blames Israel for their ingratitude to him for what he did for them in the Exodus from Egypt and in the Wilderness, enumerating the miracles one by one – and a similar passage in Melito's homily (lines 651 ff.). Werner sees in this passage the most important source for that prayer. Both the passage and the prayer are, in his opinion, an anti-Jewish parody of the litany in the Passover Haggadah called after its refrain *Dayyenu* ("it would have satisfied us"), a song of thanksgiving, opening with the words, "How many are the favours that God has conferred upon us", and proceeding to enumerate fifteen stages of the redemption of the Jews from Egyptian bondage and their entry into the Promised Land. I shall return to this assumption at the end of this article, but want first to deal with some of Werner's other statements.

He shows (p. 209) that a passage in the *Lefi-khakh* section of the Passover Haggadah has an obvious parallel in Melito's homily. This passage reads: "He brought us out from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning to a festival-day, and from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption".³ The parallel in Melito's homily reads (1. 489 - 493), in translation from the Greek:

"It is he who brought us out from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life, from tyranny to the everlasting kingdom".

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¹ E. Werner, *Melito of Sardis, the First Poet of Deicide*, H. U. C. A. XXXVII, 1966, pp. 191 - 210.

² The text is contained in: O. Perler, *Méliton du Sardes sur la Pâque*, Paris, 1966.

³ cf. D. Goldschmidt, *Haggadah shel Pesach we-toledoteha*, Jerusalem, 1960, p. 126.

Of the four transitions here mentioned, only the bringing out from death to life has nothing similar in the Passover Haggadah. The phrase in Melito's homily, "from tyranny to the everlasting kingdom", is probably parallel to "from servitude to redemption" in the Haggadah. The similarity between the two passages does not seem to be accidental. This raises a problem, which will become more acute when we deal with additional material which to my knowledge has not yet been considered in this context. The principal passages which we shall use are found in *Joseph and Asenath*, a novel written in Greek (or preserved in that language) which, in the opinion of M. Philonenko⁴ and of other scholars, is of Jewish-Hellenistic origin, the date of its composition being in dispute. Philonenko believes that the story was composed in Egypt shortly before the Jewish revolt which broke out in 115 C. E. Another scholar believes that it was written in the first century B. C. E. There are also other conjectures. At a certain point in the story a prayer is found in which Joseph asks God to lead Asenath to truth and blessing (VIII, 10, pp. 156-158 in Philonenko's edition).

"O Lord, the God of my father Israel, Most High, Powerful, who has given life to everything, who has called from darkness to light, from error to truth, and from death to life, do Thou by Thyself, O Lord, keep alive and bless this virgin."

Here are mentioned three transitions from bad to good, two of which – the transition from darkness to light⁵ and from death to life – are also mentioned by Melito. In the Passover Haggadah, one of these two, the transition from darkness to light, is mentioned. Asenath also mentions the going out from darkness to light in her words to the angel who brings her good tidings:

"Blessed be the Lord God, who has sent thee in order to bring us out from darkness and to lead us into light".

It is difficult to suppose that there is no connection between the passage in Melito's homily and Joseph's prayer. But, while the words in the homily, as well as those in the Passover Haggadah, are related to the Exodus from Egypt, the subject of Joseph's prayer is the salvation of one soul. Philonenko even supposes that this prayer was a remnant of a liturgy for the reception of proselytes. The data in our possession do not allow us to decide whether the common source of these three texts was originally related to the way of the individual soul and afterwards transferred to characterise the way of the people, or vice versa. Nor are we able (contrary to the view of Werner, who does not mention Joseph's prayer in this connection) to decide whether the affinity between these passages stems from the influence of Jewish-Hellenistic literature on the text of the Passover Haggadah, or vice versa.

⁴ M. Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth*, Leiden, 1968.

⁵ Acts 26:17-18; Col. 1:12-14 (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10).

Let us pass on to another point. In Melito's Easter homily, the plague of the firstborn is attributed to an angel: "When the lamb was slaughtered ... the angel came to smite Egypt ... in one night he bereaved her when he smote her. For when the angel passed among Israel and saw them sealed with the blood of the lamb, he turned to Egypt and smote stiff-necked Pharaoh" (16-17, 1.100-115, p. 68). "And Egypt covered Pharaoh as with a raiment of wailing ... this was the garment with which the righteous angel clothed the unbending Pharaoh" (20, 1.135-139, p. 70). "Searching Death took hold of the firstborn of the Egyptians at the command of the angel" (23, 1.160-161, p. 72).

On the basis of a certain similarity in detail, it is generally assumed that the description of the plague of the firstborn in Melito's homily was influenced by the description of that event found in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, chapters 17 and 18. However, in one very important detail, there is a difference between the two accounts. While Melito believes, as we have seen, that the slaying of the firstborn was performed by the destroying angel, according to the *Wisdom of Solomon* this was done by "Thy (God's) omnipotent Logos" (18:15). Werner believes (p. 204) that Melito deviated from the *Wisdom of Solomon* in this detail because he did not want to attribute to Jesus an act of slaying. It appears to me unlikely that a Christian writer, without any support from tradition, would charge to the account of the destroying angel an act which, in the source from which he drew, was performed by the Logos. It is a fact that a tradition such as this did exist. In Philo's *Questions and Answers on Exodus* it is said with reference to the smiting of the firstborn that the loss and the destruction were caused by agents (or servants) and not by the King, the Master.⁶

As is well known, the opinion expressed on this subject in the Haggadah is different. "He brought us out from Egypt, not through an angel, and not through a seraph, and not through an intermediary, but the Holy One, blessed be he, in his glory, he himself ... 'I will pass through the land of Egypt, I and no angel, I will kill every firstborn, I and no seraph, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, I and no intermediary'".⁷ According to the findings of Louis Ginzberg,⁸ in the most ancient sources (i. e. Hebrew and Aramaic sources - not Greek ones) we meet the view that the slaying of the firstborn and the redemption from Egypt were directly accomplished by God himself, whereas in later literature the view can also be found that the slaying of the firstborn was performed by an angel. In the opinion of Louis Finkelstein, the passage under review

⁶ Philo, Supplement II (Loeb Classics), *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, London/Cambridge (Mass.), 1953, p. 32.

⁷ cf. Tj *Sanh.* 2:1, p. 10a and Tj *Horayot* 3:1, p. 47a.

⁸ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V, pp. 433 ff., n. 213.

comes as a polemic against the belief that the angels are intermediaries between God and his creatures, which became more and more current in the period of the Second Temple. It appears to me that the opinion according to which the passage in the Haggadah has the function of a polemic is essentially a probable one; because otherwise it is difficult to explain the repeated stressing of the view that God himself and not an angel executed the deeds. But – to judge from the material in our possession – we must add to the opinion of Finkelstein the rider that in the early period about which he speaks, the view that the slaying of the firstborn was performed by an angel was current mainly, if not exclusively, among Hellenistic Jews. There is therefore some justification for the supposition that the passage was introduced into the Haggadah with the aim of opposing the view which was current among Greek-speaking Jews and found expression in texts which were accepted by these Jews. The fact that in the *Siddur* (Prayer Book) of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon, and in the Geniza sources, there are added to the passage "not through an angel and not through a seraph" the words "and not through the Word"⁹ can be explained on the basis of this assumption, because in the Wisdom of Solomon the slaying of the firstborn is executed by the *Logos*. In my opinion, there is no need, and perhaps it is also not possible, to look in the rest of the words mentioned for a polemic against the doctrine of the Christian *Logos*.

The acceptance of the view that the Haggadah text in the matter with which we are dealing was crystallised out of a struggle with the Hellenistic texts obviously strengthens the presumption that the *Lefi-khakh* passage was influenced by a Greek parallel (see above), and also the presumption that the passage *Dayyenu* was composed in opposition to a hypothetical passage, one form of which is found in Melito's homily, in which God blames Israel for their murmurings in spite of the good things which he did for them – good things which he enumerates one by one.

To sum up: Werner is correct in pointing out the parallel between certain passages in the Haggadah on the one hand and Melito's homily on the other. But he bases himself on the assumption – which in his opinion is indisputable – that there was here a one-way influence by the Haggadah. However, on the strength of study (in addition to that of Melito's homily) of Hellenistic texts such as the passage in *Joseph and Asenath*, as well as on the strength of the clash between the standpoint of the Haggadah and the views of Philo, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, and Melito about the question of who actually performed the slaying of the firstborn, we reach the conclusion that it is a possible – and regarding the slaying of the firstborn, probable – hypothesis to suppose that to a certain extent the Passover Haggadah was influenced (whether by way of taking over certain

⁹ Goldschmidt. p. 49, note 60.

patterns or by way of polemics) by Hellenistic texts. This possibility has, of course, also to be borne in mind when we – with Werner – see a connection between the *Dayyenu* of the Passover Haggadah and the parallel and contradictory text in Melito's homily referred to at the beginning of this article. It is possible that comparison with Hellenistic texts will give rise to similar assumptions regarding other early passages in the Passover Haggadah.

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Additional Note by Prof. David Flusser:

HEBREW IMPROPERIA

Pines's important article sheds new light on the probable connection between the *Dayyenu* litany in the Passover Haggadah, the Paschal Homily of Melito of Sardis and the Improperia (Reproaches) in the Latin Good Friday liturgy. All three pieces contain a list of God's gracious deeds to Israel from the Exodus to their entry into the Land of Israel. The *Dayyenu* shows the following pattern:

How many are the claims of the Omnipresent upon our thankfulness!
Had He taken us out of Egypt,
but not executed judgments on them,
It would be enough (*dayyenu*).

Had He executed judgments on them,
but not upon their gods,
It would be enough.

And so on. As the *Dayyenu* concludes the list of God's favours with the building of the Temple, scholars rightly suppose that it was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C. E.

The list in Melito's homily is embedded in anti-Jewish polemics: Israel, who despised and killed Christ was ungrateful towards God who had granted her such great gifts. A similar pattern occurs in the Improperia: a sentence expressing God's goodness to Israel during the Exodus and the

entry into the Land is contrasted by one containing reproaches against the Jews who tortured and crucified Christ. In addition, there is another Christian source which in two places contains a similar list of God's favours to Israel, namely the Didascalia.¹ Although also in the Didascalia the list is adduced to prove Israel's wickedness, in contrast to Melito's homily and the *Improperia* their wickedness is not demonstrated by their rejection of Christ but by their ungratefulness to God and to Moses. This juxtaposition of God's grace and Israel's sins is not specifically Christian or anti-Jewish² but accords very well with the Jewish tradition of contrasting God's goodness with Israel's sinfulness as a pedagogical device to bring the community to repentance. Can we thus accept Pines's suggestion that there existed a Jewish parallel to the *Dayyenu* in which God's blessings during the Exodus and the entry into the Land were compared with Israel's sins at that period? Or, in other words, did Jewish *Improperia* exist which are reflected in the anti-Jewish *Improperia* of the Latin Good Friday liturgy?

Pines's ingenious intuition can be fully confirmed: such a text exists and is even written according to the same pattern as the Christian parallel. It is a poem recited according to the Ashkenazic rite on the 9th of Av, the day of destruction of the first and second Temples.³ Its author is Kalir, the last great scion of the old *piyyut*. He lived before the Islamic conquest in Syria or Palestine, probably in the sixth or seventh century. Both the Latin *Improperia* and Kalir's poem contain twelve strophes, in each of which the praise of God is followed by a verse speaking of Israel's sins. In Kalir's poem the verse of each strophe containing God's praise begins with "To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness" and the second verse which mentions Israel's sins with "But to us shame of face" (quoted from Daniel 9:7). Thus the *first* strophe reads: "To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness through the signs which thou hast wondrously shown from of old until now; but to us shame of face because of trials by which we were tried, and thou didst abhor us". In the *second* strophe, God's taking "a nation from the midst of another" is contrasted with Israel's imitating the ways of the heathen. In the *third* strophe, Israel's salvation from the yoke of Egypt is contrasted with its rebellion at the Red Sea. In the *fourth* strophe, God is praised because he said to Israel, "You are my witness and I am God", but Israel is cursed

¹ Didasc. VI, 3, 1 and VI, 16, 6 (= Const. Apost., ed. Funk, VI, 3 pp. 304-307 and VI, 20, 6 pp. 350-353). A similar list in Const. Apost. VIII, 12, 26 (p. 504) is unimportant because its source is probably the Didascalia.

² Although the second passage in the Didascalia is part of a passage originating from an Ebionite source.

³ Published with English translation in: *The Authorized Kinot for the Ninth of Av*, translated and annotated by Rev. Abraham Rosenfeld, London 5725 - 1965, pp. 123f. A critical and annotated edition was published by David Goldschmidt, *Seder ha-Qinot le-tish'ah be-Av*, Jerusalem, 1972, pp. 79f.

because it said to Aaron, "Arise, make us gods". According to the *fifth* strophe, God gave Israel manna, but Israel offered it on the same day to the Golden Calf. In the *sixth* strophe, God's sustenance of Israel with manna, a spring from the rock and a pillar of cloud is contrasted with Israel's murmuring. According to the *seventh* strophe, "We have not lacked anything in the Wilderness", but Israel angered God at Libnah, Hazerot and Di-Zahab. In the *eighth* strophe, God is praised for his smiting of "Sihon and Og and the kings of Canaan", while Israel is blamed because of Achan. In the *ninth* strophe, God's sending the Judges is contrasted with Micah's making an idol. In the *tenth* strophe it is said, "To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness for erecting sanctuaries at Shilo, Nob, Gibeon and an Eternal House (of Jerusalem), but to us shame of face, for they were all destroyed through the guilt that was found in us". In the *eleventh* strophe, the author thanks God for the continuing existence of the Jewish people despite the destruction of the Temple, and hopes for the people's repentance. In the *twelfth* strophe the poet praises God that he had postponed the destruction of the second Temple, and closes with David's prayer for the restoration of the Temple.

Although the last two strophes are not written according to the basic structure, it is clear that this list of God's gracious deeds fits the same pattern as the other pieces mentioned previously, starting with the Exodus and ending with the possession of the Land. It is characteristic that the building of the Temple is mentioned at the end of both the Jewish sources: the Dayyenu and Kalir's poem, but is missing from all Christian parallels.⁴

There can be no question about it: the Jewish and Christian texts all depend on the Dayyenu in the Passover Haggadah or a very similar text. It is very likely that the connection of Kalir's Improperia with the 9th of Av is secondary, but this poem belongs to a tradition of Jewish Improperia, the texts of which have not been preserved, which originally had their place in the Passover liturgy, but were subsequently transferred to the 9th of Av. This could happen because they ended with the reference to the building of the Temple (as can be seen in the Dayyenu and in Kalir's poem), and by this transfer it was underlined that it was Israel's sins which caused the destruction of the Temple. A further indication of these Jewish Improperia belonging to the Passover liturgy is the fact that both Melito's homily and the Improperia have a clear link to the Paschal liturgy.

⁴ The Kingdom of Israel is mentioned both in Melito's first list (line 641 – but is missing from the second) and in the Improperia, but not in the other sources; the spring from the rock and the pillar of cloud occur in the Christian lists as well as in Kalir's poem, but not in the Dayyenu; it is likely that they were once also present there. The smiting of "the kings of Canaan" occurs, interestingly enough, only in the two latest texts, namely in Kalir's poem and the Improperia.

From the foregoing it becomes evident that the Christian Improperia — and possibly the passages in Melito's homily — were not only an anti-Jewish distortion of the Dayyenu, but depend on a Jewish *Vorlage*, of which Kalir's poem is a late derivative. The literary development can be viewed as follows: the Dayyenu was the first form, the next stage was the formation of the Jewish Improperia (preserved in late form in Kalir's poem) in which God's gracious deeds during the Exodus and the entry into the Land are contrasted with Israel's sins. These Jewish Improperia which had already twelve strophes (as have the Christian Improperia and Kalir's poem) were imitated by the author of Christian Improperia, but with the difference that God's gracious deeds during the Exodus and the entry into the Land were no longer contrasted with sins committed in that period but with alleged sins of the Jews during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The Christian Improperia are by no means the only examples of Jewish self-criticism being transformed in the mouth of Christians into violent anti-Jewish invective — in this case, the accusation of deicide.