

### Aggadah and Piyyut

In this era the spirit of the Jewish nation found expression in the *aggadah*. The *aggadah* actually dates back to far earlier times and always had gone hand in hand with the *halakhah*, both in sharing the same underlying philosophy and in the historical sense. Unlike the *halakhah*, however, the *aggadah* had never been collected in compendia. In the Mishnah and even more frequently in the two Talmuds, *aggadah* appears in the form of an accompaniment to and expansion upon the *halakhic* argument. Alongside the *halakhot* dealing with the order of prayer, for instance, we find much in the Talmud concerning the value of prayer, serving God in the heart, the customs of various scholars and the religious expectations of the Jewish people throughout the generations. *Halakhot* on alms-giving are accompanied by discourses on the importance of charity, on the ways in which it should be dispensed and on principles of social and public life. Occasionally, entire sections of *aggadah* stand on their own, with only a loose connexion established between the *aggadah* and *halakhic* sections by means of associating the *aggadah* with or attributing it to the scholar in whose name the *halakhah* is reported.

However, in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries and even somewhat later, we find independent collections of *aggadah*. The earliest of those that have survived are *aggadic midrashim* (homiletic commentaries) on Genesis, Lamentations and Leviticus from the fifth century. In these *midrashim*, *aggadah* is the point of departure as well as the main substance. Mostly they take the form of homilies on the Pentateuch, the five scrolls and other parts of the Bible that were read in the synagogue on the Sabbath and festivals. Some of this homiletic literature interprets the text verse by verse, while some consists of entire sermons or parts of sermons based on a single verse. The prophecy of consolation in Isaiah 40, for example, which is read on the Sabbath following the Ninth of Ab, is expanded into a discourse on the nation's hope for future redemption. In more extreme instances the verse serves merely as the point of departure for a sermon that goes far afield.

The pattern of *aggadic* writing arose from the fact that the *aggadah* had, from its earliest times, been handed down mainly by means of the public sermon. The preacher used to build his discourse on the reading of the day, with which the congregation was familiar from its own study and from hearing it in the synagogue year after year. The sermon was the channel through which the thoughts of the rabbis and the wisdom of generations were communicated to the general public, including women and children. It was the main instrument of public education and of guidance on contemporary issues in political and social life. Editing and collecting the *aggadah* also satisfied the demand for professional literature for preachers and reading matter and study material for the people on the Sabbath and festivals. Among the collections of *aggadah* on the Torah are works of a type known as *Yelammedenu*, after the standard introductory formula *Yelammedenu rabbeinu* ('May our teacher instruct us'), which introduces the *halakhic* question that the preacher poses and that he answers in the course of the sermon, with the addition of *aggadic* digressions. Often the *halakhic* question is not a genuine problem requiring solution but a formal method of introducing the *aggadah*.

Unlike the *halakhah*, which has been preserved in two parallel compendia – the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds – the *aggadah* and the *aggadic* books are mainly the work of Palestinian Jewry, and the scholars referred to in the *aggadah* of the amoraic period are mostly of Palestinian origin.

Another literary development in these times was the *piyyut*, liturgical poetry that was included in the prayer service, mainly on the Sabbath, festivals and other public occasions. It includes elements of *halakhah* and *aggadah*, mystical thought, prayer and even the secular songs of earlier generations. In the case of many *piyyutim* of this era, we know nothing about the authors, not even their names; but the identity of some of them has been preserved, including Jose ben Jose, R. Jannai and R. Eleazar Kalir. Their works have been incorporated into the prayer-books of the various Jewish traditions. Some *piyyutim* are recorded as having been composed for specific occasions or at the request of an individual and are preserved in collections of *piyyutim* by one or several authors. Although the amoraic era was the golden age of the Palestinian *piyyut*, the composition of *piyyutim* continued in Palestine until much later.

According to some views, the creation of the *aggadah* was a sign of intellectual decline, and the *piyyut* reflects conditions in which the teaching of Torah was banned. *Halakhah*, which was forbidden to be taught, was ‘smuggled’ into the prayer service, which was permitted. The *midrash* states allusively: ‘At one time, when money was not scarce, people longed to hear Mishnah, *halakhah* and Talmud; nowadays money is scarce and, worse, the people sicken under their slavery, and all they want to hear are blessings and consolation’ (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 2:14). However, such views are at best only part of the picture: political or economic conditions do not offer a sufficient explanation for the development of so rich and vital a literature. In fact, this was an era of creative *halakhic* work; and, above all, the *piyyutim* contained the strongest and severest strictures on Christianity and Rome found in the entire Jewish literature of the time.

It is more likely that the *aggadah* and *piyyut* are expressions of the accumulated spiritual wealth of the nation than of its material poverty. This era of Jewish culture in Palestine clearly shows the effect of generations of creative development. Torah education and knowledge of the Torah had penetrated deeply. There was widespread study of the Bible, of the oral tradition and of the Hebrew language, and Tiberias remained a centre for the study of the Bible and of the Hebrew language for generations after the Arab conquest. Jewish homes were full of books, and there was even a degree of return to the use of Hebrew. Many traditions that are recorded in Aramaic in the earlier literature recur in Hebrew in later homiletical collections. The return to Hebrew is reflected even in the use of Jewish names.

### *The Revolt Against Byzantium*

In the last days of Byzantine rule over the Land of Israel the Jews made an attempt to exploit the rivalry between the powers ruling the orient – Persia, Byzantium and Rome – in order to regain their political independence. For hundreds of years they had repeatedly hoped that the redemption of the Jewish people would come with the

conquest of Palestine by Persia; and now the time seemed to have arrived. At the beginning of the seventh century, the Persians set out on their conquests in the East, and in the year 614 they reached the borders of Palestine. Their approach set off a powerful messianic fermentation, which is reflected in several works written at the time whose theme is the Redemption. The Armenian historian Sebeos reported (Chapter XXIV): 'As the Persians approached Palestine, the remnants of the Jewish nation rose against the Christians, joined the Persians and made common cause with them.' The Jews assisted the invaders materially in their conquest of Galilee. From there the invading army turned to Caesarea and continued its conquests down to Apollonia, then eastwards to Lydda and from there to Jerusalem, which was captured in May 614. Jewish forces also took part in the conquest of Jerusalem. Sophronius, a contemporary monk who lived near Bethlehem, wrote in a poem: 'God-seeking strangers and citizens of the city [Jerusalem]/ . . . When they faced the Persians and their Hebrew friends/Hastened to close the city gates.'

The Persians handed Jerusalem over to Jewish settlers, who proceeded with the expulsion of the Christians and the removal of their churches. At the head of Jerusalem stood a leader whom we know only by his messianic name: Nehemiah ben Hushiel ben Ephraim ben Joseph. The sacrificial cult may even have been resumed. Jewish rule in Jerusalem lasted three years. In 617 there was a reversal of Persian policy. For reasons that are not sufficiently clear, the Persians made peace with the Christians. The Jews, on the other hand, did not, and the Persian authorities were forced to fight them: 'And they waged war against the saints and brought down many of them, and Shiroi [the king of Persia] stabbed Nehemiah ben Hushiel, and sixteen of the just were killed together with him' (*Book of Zerubabel*, page 101).

Meanwhile, the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, had begun to build up his military strength, and in the spring of 622 he embarked on a campaign against Persia. Though the Persians remained in possession of countries that had been part of the Byzantine Empire and Persian governors resided in Antioch, Damascus, Jerusalem and Alexandria, Heraclius succeeded in reaching Ecbatana and forced the Persians to sue for peace and agree to withdraw from his conquered possessions. In 629 the emperor arrived in Palestine, preparing for the greatest hour of his life when he would enter Jerusalem and reinstate the Holy Cross. The Jews made a desperate attempt to come to terms with the new conqueror. The emperor received the Jewish leaders of Tiberias, Nazareth and the hills of Galilee, accepted their gifts, promised to pardon them and even signed a treaty with them and confirmed it on oath. One of the Jewish leaders, Benjamin of Tiberias, who was exceedingly rich, offered the emperor lodgings in his house in Tiberias, maintained the imperial court and army at his own expense and accompanied the emperor on his journey to Jerusalem. On 21 March 629, Heraclius made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and, with a procession in the Byzantine style, proceeded to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and returned to their place the relics of the true Cross, which the Persians had surrendered to him. The emperor, who by inclination was not anti-Jewish and had even pardoned the Jews of Edessa, who had defended the town after the Persians had abandoned it, had intended to keep his promise of clemency but was forced to break it at the insistence of the clergy.

*From the Abolition of the Patriarchate to the Arab Conquest*

The priests assumed responsibility for the emperor's perjury, in atonement of which they instituted a special fast, which the Egyptian Coptic Church continued to observe for centuries. The emperor ordered that the Jews be expelled from Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings. A number of Jews were accused of having killed Christians and of having destroyed churches in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Many were put to death; others fled to the desert or to Persian or Egyptian lands. In the brief interval between the return of Heraclius to Jerusalem and the Arab conquest, there were even official campaigns to convert the Jews by force, as well as persecutions on the part of Christians.

This was the final confrontation between Judaism and the Roman Empire on the political plane, for by this time the Arabs, who were to rule in Palestine for many centuries, had already appeared on the scene. The Arab conquest lasted from 630 to 640. While the Jews certainly looked forward to the fall of the 'kingdom of evil', they expected little from the victory of the Arabs. Islam was unlikely to restore Jewish rule in Palestine, for, like Byzantium, its aspiration was uncontested rule by its own religion, although the Moslem attitude towards non-Islamic sects was at that time more tolerant. At all events, we have no reliable reports of Jewish assistance to the Arabs in their conquest or of any special treatment allotted to the Jews by the new rulers. The main advantage derived by the Jews from the Arab conquest was the right to live in Jerusalem again, and even that right was restored not at the time of the conquest but only later.

After the Arab conquest, the condition of the Palestinian Jewish community was easier than it had been under Byzantine rule; but it was no longer the centre of Jewish leadership.