NEW TESTAMENT AND JUDAISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

JEWISH ROOTS OF THE LITURGICAL TRISHAGION

by

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The liturgical trishagion[1] (Greek for "thrice-holy") is a chant found in all the ancient Eastern Churches and used until today. In the West, it is preserved in the Roman Missal in the "Improperia" (Reproofs), a section of the Good Friday Liturgy. Its words are: "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us". Already in patristic times there was a debate about the meaning of these words and many thought that the chant was revealed from heaven. Modern scholars are sceptical about its heavenly origin. They are rightly also not prepared to accept the Church Fathers' trinitarian explanation, according to which "Holy God" would mean the Father, "Holy Strong" the Son and "Holy Immortal" the Holy Spirit. As the liturgical trishagion is attested for the first time at the Council of Chalcedon (451 C. E.), it was supposed that it was a slogan against the Monophysites. But the chant is accepted by all Eastern Churches: by the Orthodox, the Nestorians and Monophysites; thus it seems to be much older than the Council of Chalcedon. Most modern scholars suppose that the liturgical trishagion is a doxology concerning the Divine Word, i. e. Christ.

Nobody will have doubts about the importance of the study of the history of liturgy, not only as a history of ideas, but also because it enables us to discover the roots and, by this, the impulse which gave birth to a liturgical text. I hope to show in this article that originally the liturgical trishagion was not a theological statement of the Church in patristic times, but a Jewish doxology accepted by the Church. The profound influence of the Jewish synagogal service on Christian liturgy is a well-established fact. In our special case it has to be shown that the trishagion accords with Jewish liturgical patterns.

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[1] About the liturgical trishagion see especially: *Hebdomada Sancta*, Vol. 2, by H, A. P. Schmidt, Herder, 1967, p. 793; J. M. Hanssens, *Institutiones liturgicæ de ritibus orientalibus*, Rome, 1932, Vol. III, pp. 108 - 156; H. J. Scholz, *Die byzantinische Liturgie*, Freiburg i. Br., 1964, pp. 46 - 51. I thank Professor Albert Houssiau of the University of Louvain for his help. A. Baumstark, *Trishagion und Qeduscha*, J. L. W., III, 1923, pp. 18 - 32, does not treat the liturgical trishagion.

The threefold "holy" of the trishagion is connected with Is. 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory". The importance of this biblical verse both for the Jewish and the Christian liturgy is clear enough. At this point Christian liturgy was influenced by the Jewish rite. The threefold poetical repetition of the word "holy" in the angelic song of Is. 6 has its stylistic merits, but this is not enough, from the old Jewish point of view, according to which each word in the Holy Scriptures has its own task and none is superfluous. This conviction is reflected in the old Aramaic translation *(Targum)* of the threefold "holy" in Is. 6:3:

"Holy in the highest heavens, the house of his dwelling; Holy upon earth, the work of his might; Holy in the age of ages".

Thus, according to this explanation the first "holy" means that the holiness of God manifests itself in the heavens, where his glory dwells; the second "holy" describes God's holiness on earth, God's creation; and the third "holy" states God's eternity. Though the third "holy" in the Targum ("Holy in the age of ages") has its parallel in the third "holy" of the trishagion ("Holy Immortal"), I suspect that this Targum's explanation of the third "holy" is secondary, and that an older form which showed a closer parallelism to the explanation of the first two disappeared during the oral transmission of the Targum. Elsewhere[2] I have tried to show that Luke 2:14 ("Glory be to God in the highest, and upon earth peace, goodwill toward men") reflects a hypothetical Aramaic Targum of the threefold "holy" of Is. 6:3 (very similar to the existent Targum) whose wording was approximately: "Holy in the highest heavens his glory, Holy upon the earth his peace, Holy toward man his good will".

The Jewish approach, according to which no single word in the Bible is superfluous necessitated each of the three "holy's" in Is. 6:3 being explained separately and thus the Aramaic paraphrase of this verse came into existence. Another kind of such an explanation is the Christian liturgical trishagion: "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal". But while the Targum gives a real explanation of the three "holy's", the trishagion is, at the first glance, less perfect: it adds to each of the three "holy's" a word which is by no means a real explanation, i. e. fruit of exegetical reflection, but the three words "God", "Strong" and "Immortal" seem to be a mere enlargement. Such a procedure is uncommon in Christian liturgy, but not at all foreign to Jewish liturgy. A similar explanation of a formula occurs for the first time in Jewish literature in the *Manual of Discipline* of the Dead Sea Sect (IQSI: 12-13):

"And all those who devote themselves to His truth shall bring all their *knowledge*, and their *strength* and their *property* into God's

[2] D. Flusser, Sanctus und Gloria, in: Abraham unser Vater, Festschrift für Otto Michel, Leiden, 1963, pp. 129-152.

community: to clarify their *knowledge* in faithfulness to God's ordinances, and to direct their *strength* according to His perfect ways, and to use all their *property* according to His righteous counsel".

The same method is applied in a prayer used on the 9th of Av, the day of the destruction of the Temple. Zion is described as follows:

"The city that is in mourning, laid waste, despised and desolate: in mourning – without children; laid waste – deprived of her dwellings; despised – fallen from her glory; and desolate – without inhabitants".[3]

A second example from Jewish liturgy of such an enlargement of a certain formula is in the first benediction of the *Shema'* on Sabbath morning:[4]

"There is none to be compared unto Thee; neither is there any beside Thee; there is none but Thee; who is like unto Thee? There is none to be compared unto Thee, O Lord our God, in this world; neither is there any beside Thee, O our King, in the life of the world to come; there is none but Thee, O our Redeemer, in the days of the Messiah; neither is there any like unto Thee, O our Saviour, in the resurrection of the dead".

Here each of the four statements is followed by two expansions (one is an invocation, the second a "chronological" designation). The last example of this liturgical pattern occurs in the hymn *Nishmat* preceding the *Shema'* on Sabbath morning:[5]

"O God, great, mighty and awful, God most high, Creator of heaven and earth ... : God – in Thy power and might; great – in Thy glorious name; mighty – for ever; and awful – in Thy awe inspiring acts, the King who sitteth upon a high and lofty throne".

The last example is in its form closest to the "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal" of the liturgical trishagion.

It is important to keep in mind that both the Jewish examples given, and the Christian trishagion, are by no means pure *midrashim*, and this not only because the texts (with the exception of the three "holy's" of the trishagion, which are taken from Is. 6) are not biblical.[6] Although the core words of these texts gain through expansions a broader meaning, yet they are not explained. The Targum of Is. 6:3, though identical in form with the other examples, is, however, a pure midrash.

[3] In The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, ed. by S. Singer, London, 5722 – 1962, p. 105.

[4] ibidem, p. 177.

[5] ibidem, p. 175.

[6] The words, "God, great, mighty and awful" in *Nishmat* are, strictly speaking, from Deut. 10:17, but the whole formula there is the beginning of the Eighteen Benedictions, according to the ancient Palestinian rite. But also the Trishagion is not directly based upon Is. 6:3, but it developed because of the liturgical use of this verse.

The pattern to which the liturgical trishagion belongs is derived from the midrash, but it lost exegetical value under the impact of rhetorical proliferation typical of liturgy.[7] There is one difference between the Jewish examples and the liturgical trishagion: while the latter is autonomous, all the Jewish examples first give the core words and subsequently repeat and expand them.[8]

This is also the case with a liturgical pattern that is closest to the liturgical trishagion, and which occurs in the synagogal poetry of Yannai,[9] a famous poet who lived before the rise of Islam, probably not earlier than the sixth century C. E. It is interesting to see how he composes his *piyyutim* around the part of the synagogue service that is called the *Qedushah* and which contains Is. 6:3. He usually quotes this verse three times and in between he expands the three "holy's" of it, between the first and second time in a rather short enlargement, and between the second and third time in a more extensive one. As an example we take the *piyyut* for a Sabbath on which the story of Abraham is read:

"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts ...

> Holy – on behalf of those who *trust* you, Holy – on behalf of those who *believe* in you, Holy – on behalf of those who *hearken* unto you.

Holy, Holy, Holy ...

> Holy – he (Abraham) was forty years old, when he *trusted* you and went into exile; Holy – he was seventy-five years old when he *believed* in you and went; Holy – he was ninety years old when he *hearkened* unto you and was circumcised.

Holy, Holy, Holy ...".[10]

One notices that the second set of enlargements contains elaborations based on the words "trust", "believe" and "hearken" of the first set. Although this pattern in Yannai's poetry is very refined and sophisticated, it may give us a clue to the origin of the Christian liturgical trishagion. It is true that of all liturgical forms known to us only Yannai's *piyyutim* show these additions to the three "holy's" of Is. 6, and therefore the possibility cannot be

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[7] All these examples have been taken from the Jewish liturgy, with the exception of the quotation from the *Manual of Discipline*, but it is likely that this text was said on the occasion of acceptance of new members of the Sect, and thus functioned in a liturgical framework.

[8] The Targum of Is. 6:3 is no exception, because the Targum follows the reading of the basic text. If our theory is correct, as developed in this contribution, it could very well be that originally the liturgical trishagion was linked to a separate quotation of Is. 6:3 in the service.

[9] *Piyyute Yannai*, ed. by M. Zulay, Schocken, Berlin, 1938.

[10] ibidem p. 34.

ruled out that Yannai may have invented this whole treatment of the three "holy's". But it is more likely that Yannai based himself on an already existing pattern in which additions were made to the three "holy's" of Is. 6, without the second set of longer additions. And such a hypothetical pattern on which Yannai may have based himself resembles very much the liturgical trishagion: "Holy – God; Holy – Strong; Holy – Immortal".

We have seen that the liturgical trishagion is fully explained by Jewish liturgical patterns. We have found an important parallel to it in Yannai's *piyyutim*. Can we go beyond this? Are there still more parallels?

The trishagion is recited in the liturgy of the Eastern Churches in connection with the lections from the Holy Scriptures. To this we have a remarkable parallel which occurs in a similar place in the synagogal liturgy, namely when on Sabbaths and Feasts, before the Torah is read,[11] the Reader takes the Torah scroll and the following is said (we add in juxtaposition the trishagion in such a way that the parallelism may come out):

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one
One (is) our God   [liturgical trishagion: Holy – God
Great (is) our Lord   Holy – Strong
Holy[12] (is) his Name"   Holy – Immortal]

The similarity between the sentence said in the synagogue and the liturgical trishagion is striking. The greatest difference is in the third part of either formula, although in both cases it staits with the word "Holy". The word "immortal" does not exist in Hebrew, but it may be significant that the third "Holy" of Is. 6:3 is paraphrased in the Targum, as we saw, as: "Holy in the age of ages". The difference between the synagogal sentence and the trishagion diminishes even further when we read the sentence in the Tractate *Soferim* 14:7: "One (is) our God, Great (is) our Lord, Holy and awful[13] (is) his name for ever and ever". The words "for ever and ever" come very close to the word "immortal" in the trishagion.

The first word of the synagogal sentence "One" is dictated by the fact that it follows immediately on Deut. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel ... the Lord is one". The sentence itself is a further example of the above discussed pattern of expanding some core words of a formula by enlargements. Here enlargements are added to the three main designations of God, namely: *God*, the *Lord* (Adonay) and the *Name* (the Tetragrammaton). There is, however,

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[11] The liturgical piece exists in the Ashkenazic and Byzantine rite. It is also preserved in Tractate *Soferim* 14, 8 - 14. See I. Elbogen, *Der judische Gottesdienst*, Olms, Hildesheim, 1962, pp. 198 - 9. According to the Byzantine rite the piece is said always when the Law is read.

[12] According to the Tractate *Soferim* and the Byzantine rite: "Holy and awful"; according to the Ashkenazic rite "and awful" is said only at the New Year and on the Day of Atonement.

[13] See the preceding note.

a difference in the function of the word "God" in the synagogal sentence from that in the trishagion: while "God" in the first part of the synagogal sentence is one of the core words which is enlarged by the word "one", in the trishagion the word "God" is itself an addition to the core word "Holy".

The synagogal sentence occurs in the Ashkenazic and Byzantine rite and in the rite referred to in the Tractate *Soferim*.[14] As this Tractate reflects the Palestinian-Talmudic tradition, it may be assumed that the origin of this sentence is Palestinian,[15] but, unfortunately, this part of old Palestinian liturgy has not been discovered. Further, it is significant that this sentence, which is so similar to the trishagion which takes such a prominent place in the Christian-Byzantine liturgy, was a part of the Jewish-Byzantine rite. There is still another point of contact between the Christian-Byzantine liturgy and the Jewish rite: according to *Soferim* 14:5 our sentence was recited thrice, with variants, while according to most Eastern Christian, including Byzantine, liturgies the trishagion is also on one occasion recited thrice.[16]

The similarity between the synagogal sentence and the trishagion becomes evident when we see that in the same order we find:

in the *synagogal sentence:*	and in the *trishagion*
"God„	"God"
"Great"	"Strong"
"For ever and ever"	"Immortal"

As we have seen, the synagogal sentence is an enlargement of the three Jewish main designations of God, and the trishagion an enlargement of the three "holy's" of Is. 6:3 according to a pattern attested in the Targum on Isaiah 6 and in the *piyyutim* of Yannai. This pattern of enlarging certain core words goes back as far as the Dead Sea Scrolls. What is thus the origin of the liturgical trishagion? It seems that this central Christian liturgical chant came into existence by a conflation between a Jewish chant in which the three main designations of God were expanded by three additions, and a Jewish usage to expand in a similar way the three "holy's" of the angelic song of Isaiah 6, which is of such great importance in both the Jewish and Christian liturgy. It is, thus, not difficult to assume that the chant: "One (is) our God, Great (is) our Lord, Holy (is) his name for ever and ever" could serve as an impulse for the creation of a new chant, based on the three "holy's" of the angelic song: "Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal".

This supposed origin of the liturgical trishagion accords wholly with Jewish liturgical patterns. There is nothing especially Christian in it. On

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[14] See above, note 12.

[15] About the influence of the Palestinian rite on the Ashkenazic rite, see Elbogen, op. c., p. 267,

[16] See, e. g. L. Fendt, *Einführung in die Liturgiewissenschaft*, Berlin, 1958, p. 248

the contrary: the patristic trinitarian explanation is, according to modern scholars, unlikely and it seems to me also difficult to explain the trishagion as a doxology concerning Christ, the Divine Word. Therefore it seems very probable that the liturgical trishagion, as it stands, was originally Jewish. This would be only one of many examples of a Jewish synagogal element having been accepted in Christian liturgy. It seems to me likely that the trishagion was received from the Greek synagogue in the Diaspora, especially because of the word "immortal", a word which has no equivalent in Hebrew or Aramaic. I dare to guess that the trishagion passed from the Synagogue to the Church also because of its beautiful melody.

In this attempt to show the Jewish background of the prehistory of the liturgical trishagion, my point of departure was a practical knowledge of Jewish liturgy and – alas – a certain naivité and ignorance concerning modern theological approaches to the subject. In view of the lack of access to Jewish sources among my Christian colleagues, this contribution may give them some new insights into the history of an important part of the Eastern Christian liturgy. This may exemplify the importance both of philological methods and of the knowledge of Judaism for the understanding of early-Christian subjects.

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