

ON THE JEWISH ORIGIN OF THE 'IMPROPERIA'

by

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In the veneration of the Cross during the Roman Catholic Good Friday liturgy, the *Improperia*, i. e. Reproaches, are sung. The dying Jesus addresses "his people" with Micah 6:3, and then the *Improperia* puts into his mouth a series of juxtapositions: The marvellous deeds of God (Jesus!) for Israel in the desert versus Israel's ungrateful misdeeds like the Passion inflicted on Jesus. (There are *Improperia* in other Churches, especially the Oriental ones.)

In an "Additional Note" to an article by S. Pines (*Immanuel* 4, pp. 47-51) D. Flusser endeavours to demonstrate the existence of Jewish models for the liturgical *Improperia* (pp. 51-54). Both Pines and Flusser refer to E. Werner on "Melito of Sardes, the First Poet of Deicide" (*HUCA* 37, 1966, pp. 191-210). Bishop Melito, who lived in the second half of the 2nd century C. E., composed a "Homily on the Pascha", containing several frightening anti-Jewish passages which resemble the liturgical *Improperia*, which are of a much later date (7th to 11th centuries). Melito's *Improperia* (72-90 passim) are sophisticated, fully developed from the christological and the artistic points of view, superior to many later specimens in the *Improperia*-tradition.

The question is whether Melito's juxtaposition-patterns and corresponding lists of beneficia and misdeeds were the product of his own rhetorical and theological genius or only reshaped current Jewish traditions and patterns to fit his christological and polemical anti-Jewish interests.

I hope to show, (following Werner's cue) that Melito did not need new rhetoric, that in fact, all Christian *Improperia* derive from Jewish models. But unlike Werner and Flusser, I do not claim that any of the Jewish "proof-texts" presented here was the *Vorlage* of Melito's or other Christian *Improperia*. There is no proof of direct derivation and dependence among Christian *Improperia* and much less likelihood of straight dependence between specific Jewish and Christian texts. First we must ascertain whether pre-Christian texts which repeatedly oppose God's beneficent acts to Israel's inadequate reactions exist.

A random assortment of the more prominent instances of juxtaposing God and Israel as a means of reproach and incitement to *teshuvah*, returning to God would include Amos 2:6-10; Hosea 11:1-7; Isaiah 5:1-7;

Psalms 78 and 106 almost in their entirety; the prayer of repentance in Nehemiah, 9:6 seq. and so on. These texts use and re-use the themes of Exodus, the sojourn in the desert and the entry into the Promised Land, to contrast God's good grace and Israel's bad grace. It is important to note, however, that each of these texts has its own particular content, colouring and intent, that these "historiographical *hatafot ha-leqah*" (Scheltreden) could take many different concrete forms. And one must not forget that the Exodus and the sojourn in the desert gave rise (not only to prophetic harangue and self-criticism, but) also to joyful hymns of thanksgiving like Psalm 105, which do not even allude to the murmuring of Israel.

We must bear this in mind, when we examine the text Flusser and Werner designate as the source of anti-Jewish Improperia. It is the famous (post-biblical hymn sung at the Passover Seder, the) *Dayyenu*: "How many wonderful things we have to thank God for!" "If He'd saved us from Egypt, but left them still armed, it would have sufficed us." In this exuberant song of praise by the people (we), there is no contrast of "bad" and "good", and none of the sombre anti-Jewish invective found in Melito or in the Latin Improperia: "I gave you to drink the waters of grace from the rock – and you gave me gall and vinegar to drink." How then can the texts be linked when they apply the Exodus events so differently? (In Flusser's view of the literary development, "the *Dayyenu* was the first form, the next stage was the formation of the Jewish Improperia (preserved in late form in Kalir's poem) ... These Jewish Improperia were initiated by the author of Christian Improperia ..." (p. 54) Werner has written before that: "Melito was familiar with both the *Dayyenu*-litany and its subsequent perversion in IV Esdras", (p. 209) (a text we will examine later) which is to him "the immediate *Vorlage* of Melito in its literary contents and in its chronological vicinity" (p. 208).

We must take issue with the opinion that the Improperia, whether Jewish or Christian, are distortions or perversions of the *Dayyenu*. Are the Improperia a parody? In all the forms known to us, the Improperia are decidedly not parodies of the *Dayyenu*. Parody uses the same diction as the original, takes over its formal and stylistic elements but changes the content in order to create a comical or satirical discrepancy. *Dayyenu* is not the model for Improperia, nor could any other hymn or litany of praise serve this purpose. The parallel between *Dayyenu* and Improperia is limited to their listing of deeds and their revolving around Pesah Passion. This is not enough to establish a relationship.

Had we only biblical reproach by contrast and juxtaposition, *Dayyenu*, we could be sure that the Improperia are far-reaching developments of ancient Jewish models. But how much better is our fare: We possess Jewish Improperia to help us establish the missing links between biblical reproaches and Christian anti-Jewish polemics. Not only are these early post-biblical

Jewish texts interesting in themselves, but they show clearly how they had to be altered and reshaped to fit Christian polemical purposes – unfortunately most effectively.

It would be surprising indeed, if the biblical patterns of contrasting God's good deeds with Israel's bad deeds had not affected post-biblical homiletics and few biblical stories lend themselves better to elaboration and homiletic use than those of the Exodus. The nucleus of the Exodus and the desert events and their different elaborations could serve in multiple functions. For example, there is no word about Israel's rebellions in the desert on Pesah, for only joyous remembrance is appropriate for that day; self-criticism and rebuke were reserved for other occasions, for the 9th of Av, on the Days of Awe (or the preparatory time before Pesah).

We will work our way back via Jewish-Christian Improperia to a text that is undoubtedly Jewish, untouched by Christian hands. Part I of the apocalyptic work now called V Ezra (chapters 1 and 2 of IV Ezra) was recognized by M. R. James in 1895 as similar to the Improperia of the Roman Church. Dating from the latter half of the 2nd century, its first part is designated almost unanimously as a worthless cento of O. T. quotations "too numerous to note them all", as one translator states bluntly. Because this text is regarded as mediocre patchwork *more propheticum*, students do not seriously research it and therefore do not decide whether it is Jewish or Christian – or both.

V Ezra is extant only in two slightly different Latin versions, both of which show several stages of Christian reworking. I refer the reader to the edition of R. L. B. Bensly, the Fourth Book of Ezra, the Latin Versions . . . , Cambridge, 1895, and to my forthcoming study of these and other Improperia in *Kairos*, 18, 1976.

V EZRA I:

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The Lord speaks to Ezra:

- 5 "Go, inform my people of their misdeeds and their sons of the iniquities . . . so that they may inform their grandchildren
6 because the sins of their parents have multiplied in them . . .
that they have forgotten me . . .
7 Did I not lead them out of the land of Egypt . . . ?
But they angered me and spurned my counsels . . .
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12 You must by all means speak to them, saying: This is what the Lord
says:
13 As everybody knows, I led you across the sea and laid open broad
highways through places where there were no roads.
I gave you Moses as a leader and Aaron as a priest.

- 14 *I provided you with light by a pillar of fire and performed great wonders among you, but you have forgotten me, says the Lord.*
- 15 *This is what the Lord Almighty says: The quail was a sign to you; I gave you camps for protection, yet there is where you complained;*
- 16 *And you did not exult in my name by virtue of the destruction of your enemies but have kept right on complaining until now.*
- 17 *Where are the benefits I bestowed on you? When you were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, did you not cry out to me, saying,*
- 18 *Why did you lead us into this wilderness to kill us? It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians . . .*
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- 21 *I apportioned to you fertile lands; the Canaanites, the Perizzites and the Philistines I expelled before you.*
- What more can I do for you? says the Lord.*
- 22 *That is what the Lord Almighty says: When you were in the desert, thirsty at the brackish river and blaspheming my name,*
- 23 *I did not send fire upon you for (your) blasphemies, but made the river sweet by casting wood into the water.*
- 24 *What can I do about you, Jacob? You would not listen to me, Judah. I will turn to other nations and give them my name in order that they may keep my decrees.*
- 25 *Because you have forsaken me, I will forsake you.*
- When you entreat me for my mercy, I will not have compassion for you.*
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Speaking to Ezra, God first summarizes his bounty and contrasts it with Israel's forgetfulness, which has grown steadily from parents to grandchildren. Then Ezra is summoned to give the Israelites a last warning, but in this text he says God has already rejected them definitely. And reiterating all God's benefits and Israel's failures and blasphemy of his name he says God will turn to another people: "Because you have forsaken me I will forsake you . . . It is not as though you have forsaken me, but you yourselves, says the Lord" (v. 27).

An array of strong polemical statements by a Christian author leads to the second part, which contains Ezra's vision of the "coming people" (1: 35, 38) who gather on Mt. Zion around the "Son of God" (2: 42 seq.). This is a typical Judeo-Christian apocalypse whose first part is basically Jewish and reworked slightly, but substantively and decisively. Changing the end of a Jewish Improperia – text made it function as a Christian prophetic diatribe to the unbelievers among the Jews, who were told, that God had definitely rejected the people who did not heed his decrees and did not wish to see the "coming people" who gather around the "Son of God", Jesus returning, on Mount Zion.

¹ (Translation is that of Jacob Myers, I and II Esdras, Anchor Bible 42, New York, 1974, p. 140 seq.)

Verses 13 - 23 follow a well-designed pattern of rhetorical questions and exclamations, beginning with the crossing of the Red Sea and ending with the apportioning of fertile lands. This kind of philippic, addressed by a Jewish preacher to a Jewish community, would undoubtedly have been as harsh as the present Christian version, but would have ended with a conciliatory statement. The Jewish-Christian editor, however, puts the list to a different use. A positive, or at least a not altogether negative ending, is deleted (see remnants in 2:2-4 and the plea, that God refuses this prayer for mercy in 2:5-7!).

The change in the order of events in the desert makes this argument possible. The text reverts in verse 22 to the "brackish river" after Israel had already reached the (Promised) Land. The sole purpose here is to find a climax of sin for which Israel has not yet been punished and will now be punished. They profaned his name at Mara, but God turned the water sweet. Now God gives his name to other nations that will keep his decrees (v. 24). The author-editor's intimate knowledge of Scripture allows him to put to new use a sin, which, since Scripture says nothing about it, was not punished in the desert. God has waited patiently, but now "the sins of their parents have multiplied ... to such an extent ... that they have forgotten me ..." (v. 6) This is a rather abstract statement, so the editor avails himself of an "unpunished" sin, the blasphemy of God's name at Mara.

V Ezra 1:13-24 is an example of post-biblical Jewish Improperia. When it is compared with the texts of Melito and the liturgical Improperia, one can easily see that the continuation of Israel's misdeeds in the wilderness in their mistreatment of Jesus (as the real author of all past benefits) was either still unknown or unsuitable to the purpose of the Jewish-Christian editor of V Ezra, who did not even explicitly link the "murder of the prophets" motif to the violent death of Jesus, as done in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.

This text (even in its Latin translations from the Greek, the Hebrew or the Aramaic?) is far from a cento, indeed is very well organized. Although basically and thoroughly Jewish, we may not yet, on its basis alone speak of a newly-discovered literary genre only for the time being called Improperia.

But we have another, unquestionably Jewish text, in the Palestinian Targumim Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Yerushalmi II, for Deuteronomy 1:1. It is an ingenious paraphrase of "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan, in the desert, in the plain (Arava) over against Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazerot and Di-Zahab".² The Targumim "reconstruct" a discourse Moses delivered to Israel even before those contained in the "Mishnah Torah", and its Improperia character has

² (The text is from the Codex Neofiti 1 version of Targum Yerushalmi II. For an analysis of all versions see my article in *Kairos*; translation by M. B.)

until now passed unnoticed. Everything in this text can be traced back to pre-tannaitic and tannaitic times, but it is doubtful, whether the entire composition can be dated earlier than the 3rd century C. E. (And again, it is not the immediate *Vorlage* for Melito's or other Christian Improperia, but proves only that homiletic Improperia existed in early Judaism and made the Christian versions possible).

"These are the words that Moses spoke with all the sons of Israel.

And he reproached them while they were staying *beyond the Jordan*. Answering, Moses said to them:

Was not the Law given to you, sons of Israel, *in the Desert*, on Mount Sinai, and was it not explained to you in the *plains* of Moab?

How many miracles did God work with you, sons of Israel?

When you were standing at the *Reed Sea*, the sea separated itself before you and twelve paths were made, one for each tribe.

You angered before him at the sea and rebelled at the *Reed Sea*.

And because of the spies which you sent from the desert of *Paran* to explore the land of Canaan

And because of the *Manna* (Laban), of which you said: Our soul is disgusted of this bread, because it is light food (Tophel)

and in *Hazerot* your corpses fell

(and) because of the meat you desired

And because of the *calf* (Di-Zahab, of gold) you made

God decided in his word to extinguish you

Were it not for his remembering the covenant which he made with your fathers, with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob

and the tent of meeting which you made in his name and the ark of the covenant of God which you brought into it and covered it with pure gold – he decided in his word and forgave your sins."

The "synagogue in the desert", (just before Israel entered the Promised Land) must listen to a warning of God speaking through Moses, thinly veiled by the first verse of Deuteronomy. Although Israel received the Torah and its explication, and although God worked so many miracles for them, they sinned "bo badavar" – each miracle and Israel's sin "therein". Making the golden calf is the climax for which God would have destroyed Israel, were it not for the fathers and the media of atonement. "May the gold of the *kapporet* come to atone for the gold of the idol!" (Sheqalim 1:1). Thus, not only was Israel spared, but God pardoned them while they were still in the desert.

This text does not seem to follow the "standard pattern" of good deed versus bad deed, but we (must) take into account that the biblical text restricts the Targum. A regular series of juxtapositions is impossible, because the inexplicable toponyms (in the text) have negative connotations, some of

them being known from the route of the Exodus: Paran, Hazerot. Laban (white = Manna) is combined with "Tophel" (root *tfl*, to speak frivolously), as this cannot stand alone, being a name unknown elsewhere in the Bible. "Sea" and "gold", however, serve two functions, positive and negative. To emphasize the contrasts, both "desert" and "plains" are the sites of God's goodness (see Targum Onqelos)! Given these limitations, the targumic homily succeeds in creating the same basic structure of Improperia by first stressing God's grace, then haranguing the listeners for their failures, those of their fathers and their own (cf. Ps 106,6 seq.).

The central difference between Jewish and Christian Improperia is salient. When the climax of sin has been reached, in the case of the golden calf, God's ever-enduring grace and the media of atonement enter to resolve the "suspense" and make a new beginning. In this dramatic manner, the listeners are called to revise their lives and to return to God.

An anti-Jewish polemicist need not change much in such texts. He can just cut off the positive ending, continue the negative list, heap up misdeeds and top every negative biblical climax with yet another, the greatest and insurmountable sin which cut Israel from God definitely. As Melito has it, "He who is God is put to death . . . He who is King of Israel is slain by an Israelite hand."

Patterns and texts developed by Jewish preachers to continue the prophetic heritage of "self-criticism" were taken over by emerging Christianity. First, they were needed by "Jewish Christians" who were striving by all means (and failing more or less) to convert their entire people to read the Torah in the dazzling light of the story of Christ resurrected. From very soon afterwards until today they have been used by Christianity "from the gentiles", turned against Israel in the garb of prophetic criticism, but without the prophets' love and promises. Promise became the exclusive possession of the new "coming people". Christians forgot that prophetic reproach is legitimate and meaningful only when both criticism and promise, warning and love, are directed to the same people. Christians wielded the weapons of prophetic admonition against Jews and Judaism, sure that they themselves would keep the promise and love for themselves. Perhaps this is the reason why Christian history is replete with "projections" of its own failures and errors, individual and collective, against the Jews.

The tradition history of the liturgical Improperia (as assumed by Werner and Flusser) has to be revised. There are no such things as evident dependencies and well-defined stages of tradition. (From Dayyenu to Jewish Improperia to Christian Improperia.) None of the given texts is the model *strictu sensu* of Melito's or of any form of the Christian Improperia.

Yet it is proper now to speak of a hitherto unknown Jewish literary genre which served, both in form and content, as the pattern for Christian anti-Jewish Improperia. There are additional texts to be analysed in this respect.

Many Christian commentators on the Latin Improperia feel the need to stress that they are not directed against the Jews but meant only to soften the hearts of Christians, and they may be partly right. Thus one might say that Improperia have given up their *Sitz im Leben* in Jewish liturgy and have taken it into Christian liturgy, after centuries of direct polemical use. What cannot be denied, however, is the evidence of their violent anti-Jewish misuse, even if we disregard the history of persecution and pogroms incited regularly in the days before Easter.

Which people is Jesus addressing, when he reproaches "his people", *popule meus*, from the Cross? The ambiguity of the Good Friday Improperia will remain.

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