

**Avraham Fraenkel, Abraham Gross (Hg.), mit Peter Sh. Lehnardt, Hebräische liturgische Poesien zu den Judenverfolgungen während des ersten Kreuzzugs, Wiesbaden (Harrassowitz Verlag) 2016, XXXIII–481 S. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Hebräische Texte aus dem mittelalterlichen Deutschland, 3), ISBN 978-3-447-10159-2, EUR 130,00.**

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The publication of this volume in the sub-series »Hebräische Texte aus dem mittelalterlichen Deutschland« belonging to the glorious collection »Monumenta Germaniae Historica«, well known to any student of Medieval history, follows the first instalment, published in 2005 by Eva Haverkamp, presenting the critical edition of the Hebrew chronicles relating to the very same tragic events, the persecutions of the Jews in the Rhineland during the first Crusade<sup>1</sup>. The present edition of a well-chosen selection of *piyyutim*, that is of liturgical compositions directly concerned with the events, established, introduced and annotated by Avraham Fraenkel and Abraham Gross with the collaboration of Peter Lehnardt, who translated and adapted in many ways the original Hebrew for a German-speaking readership, represents a much valuable contribution to the study of the Jewish cultural and religious perception and elaboration of the shocking events of the year 1096. Undoubtedly these events had a defining character for Medieval Ashkenazi Jewry but the very fact that one of the means chosen for transmitting the memory of the great suffering caused to the Jewish communities along the Rhine has been liturgical poetry engages the general reader, no less than the historian and the philologist, to a particularly challenging task. As a matter of fact, this publication is not aimed exclusively to specialists and the particular care that has been invested in avoiding the allusive parlance of the specialists, although no attempt has been made of hiding or belittling the technical aspects (such as metrics and prosody) which are instrumental for the understanding of this kind of texts, for explaining the critical choices made by the editors and putting the poems in the appropriate historical and literary context, strongly recommends the volume to students of Medieval history but also to a broader readership and especially to students in search of an introduction to Jewish medieval liturgic poetry. The very accurate and balanced German translation of the poems does not aim, as P. Lehnardt in his preface rightly emphasizes, at substituting in any way the Hebrew original, but it serves, together with the commentary, as an introduction to the Hebrew text and, at the same time, its syntactic and stylistic anomalies help maintaining its character of »stumbling stone« (»Stolperstein«), stimulating reflection and reference to the notable autonomy of the source.

One of the most important merits of this accurate selection is the motivated severity in operating the choice which is at the basis of the corpus of texts presented here: many later compositions, liturgically tied to the memory of the persecutions but unrelated to the historical core of the events

1 [Eva Haverkamp \(Hg.\), Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs, Hannover 2005 \(Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Hebräische Texte aus dem mittelalterlichen Deutschland, 1\).](#)



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are not included. This does not mean, in turn, that the compositions forming the selection should be considered *ipso facto* historical sources in a most precise and by all means traditional sense. Special attention has been dedicated by the editors to sketching a chronological order of composition, carefully distinguishing the poems that have been written within a few years from the facts and later elaborations on the basis of a constant comparison with the already mentioned chronicles of the events and of an attentive examination of intertextual phenomena (from simple allusion or common inspiration down to outright citation of previous *piyyutim*). As it is well-known, one of the most debated questions concerning these texts has been initiated by Israel Jacob Yuval's contentions, first expressed in a famous article appeared in the scholarly journal »Zion« in 1993 concerning the mutual influence of Christian representations, especially concerning martyrdom and (self)-sacrifice. The editors do not shy away from facing all the relevant issues and their effort at reaching a balanced view of the overall picture emerging from these touching documents is remarkable. The reader will appreciate, to name only one example, the prudence with which Abraham Gross suggests a differentiation among the *payetanim* (liturgical poets), in particular in the case of Eli'ezer ben Nathan, and among the various literary genres involved (especially the ones called *selichah* and *zulat*), as to the dramatic question of active sacrifice and its value, whether it had to be considered a mere response to a state of emergency or as a way to empower the victims of religious sense of purpose.

The more general question, that is to say the historiographical challenge, particularly relevant for Israeli historiography, to analyze Medieval Ashkenazi refusal to accommodate to the exclusive role of the victim is hardly conceptualized, at least explicitly, in this book, but all relevant materials are put at the disposal of the reader, who can peruse this exquisite collection to further his reflections on this topic too. The liturgical setting of these texts raises the most relevant question emerging from this collection: since historical facts have been reworked in a literary frame, are we still dealing with history or are we facing a mere articulation of memory, in the strong sense of conscious selection of contents and forms to be transmitted to future generations in order to create a specific (or regional, as the editors have it) identity? In other words: can we use these texts as historical sources and, if yes, how? It is my persuasion that the poems contained in this book can and should be considered highly valuable historical sources, but not so much in order to reconstruct the historical core of the events they purport to depict, since they at best end up confirming the historical picture one gathers from the Hebrew chronicles.

Their greatest value lies rather in helping the historian to understand the formation of a specific mentality trying to cope with the cruel absurdity of historical events. The specific features of the *piyyutim*, their relationship with the »great code« of the Bible and with their liturgical setting (always running the risk of transforming the punctual event into cyclical forms) display in front of us an attempt at constructing an identity based on loss, a painful exercise in keeping a wound bleeding. Paradoxically this dismal effort is practiced with texts of high literary value and of undisputable esthetic beauty. One is almost ashamed of tasting them as pure poetry, which they certainly are, among other things. The ethical dilemma embodied in this corpus is double: once beyond the liturgical setting for which these poems have been composed, they tend to become literature, hollowing subtly the truthfulness of what they were meant to testify. One is reminded of the bitter formulation used once by Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno about the »cunning of unreason« (List

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der *Unvernunft*): these texts have assured for centuries the transmission of a specific memory but their very esthetic value threatens to dissolve any historical core into mere narrativity and, on the other hand, it offers no guarantee against the repetition of what they portray. Quite on the contrary, liturgy draws its uncanny strength precisely from reiteration.

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