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May 8, 2009

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The “Alenu” Prayer: A Protest or Acclamation

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This paper was presented by Asher Finkel at the 44th International Conference on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University on May 8, 2009.

44th International Congress on Medieval Studies
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI
May 8, 2009

THE “ALENU” PRAYER: A PROTEST OR ACCLAMATION

Asher Finkel, Ph.D.

The synagogal Hebrew prayer of *Aleynu* closes the daily service, morning, as well as afternoon and evening, that governs the religious life of the Jewish people. It is followed by the Aramaic recitation of the *Qaddish*, as a public proclamation of God’s uniqueness with His holy name. This liturgical tradition is rooted in early Judaism of the theocratic state in the Land of Israel. It was the very first free state in the Hellenistic world to adopt such a rule with the Torah as its constitution during the Hasmonean-Herodian time. During this period the biblical monotheistic religion challenged the Greco-Roman world of mythopoeic thought and polytheistic religions as it also faced philosophical, Gnostic and magical challenges. The Jewish people in their land and in the Diaspora, at that time, proclaimed a Kingdom of God for all people and the biblical canon of “Torah” was translated into the contemporary languages, Greek and Aramaic, with the pursuit of proselytism in the Middle East.

During the First Century, Jesus the Jew ushered in the Kingdom of God and his Jewish disciples were engaged with proselytization. Their challenge eventually succeeded to convert the Roman world after two centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple. The heroic acts of martyrdom by Jews in pre Maccabean days, as well as by Christians in their early period, displayed the ultimate commitment to God’s reign in the display of human free will and altruistic concern for humanity without resort to violent force. Indeed, this display attests to the very principles of the Decalogue governing God’s Kingdom. Both the followers of Jesus and the Jews after the Destruction of the Temple enjoyed a common view of God’s law to be rooted in the dual commandment of love, the love of God and the love of the fellow person. For Judaism after the destruction enjoyed the dominance of the Hillelitic Pharisaism with the establishment of Mishnaic schools. Prior to the destruction the Shammaitic zealotic school of Pharisaism prevailed, to which Jesus addressed his woes (Matt 23:1-39). The Shammaitic school ceased to exist after the war when the zealotic disciples were killed and Hillel’s disciple, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, escaped the besieged Jerusalem prior to the end of the war. The future Roman emperor Vespasian allowed him to establish a pacifistic academy at Jamnia. Similarly the Jewish Christians left Jerusalem prior to the war and they settled across the Jordan River.¹ After the Bar Kochba war, the Hillelitic schools were relocated in Galilee and the patriarch Rabbi Yehuda, a descendant of Hillel, issued a final edition of the Mishnah, a canonical counterpart of the oral law to the Biblical canon. His academy issued pacifistic norms for the exilic life and binding legislation not to seek to regain their land by militaristic force.² The Church was aware of his work as it is reflected in *Didaskalia*, with a critical view on their relationship to the Jews.

¹ See A. Finkel, “The Departure of Essenes, Christians and R. Yochanan from Jerusalem” in *Wie Gut sind deine Zelte, Jaakow*, Festschrift Mayer, Bleicher, 1986.

² See Bab Talmud Kethubot 111a (three oaths).

The Church gained acceptance by the Roman empire during the reign of Constantine whereas the Jewish people faced a negative view of their religion and their proselytizing efforts ceased. In the Christian view as formulated by Augustine³ the Jews were tolerated as the witness people to the supremacy of Christianity. Indeed the Roman world was converted to the Biblical view of God with its anticipation of Messianic fulfillment for all people. Therefore the new millennium offered a propitious time for the Church to liberate the holy land from the hands of Islamic rule that viewed Christianity as idolatry. Whereby the Jewish people faced first the wrath of the crusaders as “infidels at home.” They were put to death on the march to the Holy Land and in the centuries that followed they faced arrests, pogroms, confiscations and penalties. The rabbis were subject to restrictions and public debate that led to their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in 1492. In 1400 a Jewish convert named Peter accused his former coreligionists of vilifying Christ as Savior in the *Alenu* prayer.⁴

No wonder the *Alenu* prayer became suspect, especially when it was recited by Jews and their rabbis who faced their death in public squares. The Church was concerned with its Hebrew formulation, which meaning they sought from Jewish converts. The focus was on *Alenu* contrasting reference to the faith of the crowds, the Christian spectators. The third line reads “God does not assign our portion with them, nor our lot with the tumultuous crowd.” It is followed by the crucial line that offers the contrasts in their worship. “For they bow to vanity and emptiness, as they offer prayer to a God who does not save.” The oblique suggestion in Hebrew *HwRYQ* points to Jesus via *Gematria*⁵, that is followed by the Hebrew form of his name *Yesu`a* that appears in this line. This seems to be the point of view by the Jewish convert. Thus, the European Christian states at the behest of the Church insisted on the deletion of said line from “*Alenu*” prayer in the synagogues. The noted rabbi scholar of the seventeenth century, Manasseh ben Israel, who opened the door to Jewish migration to Great Britain after they were expelled five centuries earlier, sought to reverse the above charge but to no avail. Even until our days, certain scholars see in this phrase a Jewish refutation of Christianity and it is customary among Jews of Ashkenazic rite to delete the line.

The questionable line clearly echoes the wording of Deutero-Isaiah 45:20. He refers to the contrast with idol worshippers in Babylonian time. He rejected their form of worship, stating “they pray to a god who does not save,” the very phrase of *Alenu*. A poetic affirmation of God’s saving Israel already appeared in the “Song of the Sea.” It refers to the idolatrous Egyptian army of six hundred charioteers attacking Israel at the Reed Sea. It reads “*Vayehi Li LiYeshu`a*” (He became my salvation) and thereby it ushers God’s kingdom (Exod 15:3, 15). Such is the wording of the *Alenu* prayer that declares theocratic rule in Hasmonean-Herodian time. It opens with God as the Creator and Lord of the universe and concludes with God’s kingdom on earth. Such a declaration celebrates the theocratic rule in the Second Temple at the beginning of the Jewish year. This is indeed the *Sitz im Leben* of the unique proclamation for *Alenu* that was celebrated by the crowds of Jewish pilgrims. For great crowds of pilgrims came from the land of Israel and Diaspora to declare their faith especially at the beginning of the Jewish year. For Rosh Hashanah, the New Year was ushered in with the blast of the *sofar* declaring God’s kingship. He is addressed as Holy King (*Hamelekch Haqadosh*) to whom the people turn for a review of their personal life seeking atonement. Indeed this day opens a period of ten days of prayer, reflection and repentance that ends in the holy days of Atonement. It is the awesome day when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies to seek forgiveness for their believers. Thereby, *Alenu* expresses precisely the hope for humanity

³ See Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, Chapter 3, Mahwah: Paulist Press, McMillan, NY 1963.

⁴ Refer to above, Chapter 5, note 96.

⁵ WRYQ equals 316 as YSW is 316, since R + Q = S

to accept God's rule of compassion and forgiveness in contradistinction with mythopoeic deities of war and lust. The *Alenu* prayer reflects a public acclamation of the pilgrims who are looking forward to the time when all people will embrace this reality. Thus, it closes with a prophetic fulfillment of Zachariah 14:9, "The Lord will be king over the entire world, on that day the Lord will be one and His name one (*ehad*)."

Ehad translates one but with the root meaning of uniqueness. Thus, the Creator God, at the beginning of the Pentateuch, is related to the first act of creation on the first day, in Hebrew *Ehad*. This refers to the cardinal determination of the number and not to the ordinal count of *Ri'SOn* in Hebrew, as the case is with the other days. It reflects a particular determination of the Biblical God in contradistinction to all mythical religions. For the latter, such as *Enuma Elish*, presents gods in the world order and in the preworld of chaos. The God of Israel is distinct from the physical reality of electromagnetic force of light in the universe that relate to the formation of galaxies of stars. On the Biblical first day the Hebrew word *or* signifies God's light, different than the lights of the fourth day when the luminaries appear, as the sun, moon and the stars. Thus, the first three days are governed by God's light. This distinction is presented by the Psalmist (104:2), as a unique view of creation, namely "God is enwrapped with light (*or*) as a garment." It points to a non physical manifestation of splendor and majesty. The proclamation of God's Kingdom in terms of *ehad*, uniqueness, posits a distinct reality apart from the material world. This is the promise of Zachariah in the end days, when humanity will acknowledge this reality. The proclamation of God's Kingdom points not only to pilgrims' awareness and hope expression but a universal hope for humanity. The *Sitz im Leben* for the *Alenu* was the period of the New Year, when pilgrims come to declare the uniqueness of their God, as "set apart" (Holy) King. They seek personal atonement and proclaim their universal hope, as altruistic concern is wedded to the individual need. For the *Alenu* is a collective prayer, i.e. *Tefillah*; in Hebrew it means pleading for others, which includes the person himself. Thus, *Alenu* begins with the words "it is upon us to praise, a joyous collective acclamation."

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