

## *Between Liturgy and Social History: Priestly Power in Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues?*<sup>1</sup>

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Jewish literature and art from Roman and Byzantine Palestine reflect a fascination with the priestly. This interest builds upon Biblical and classical Rabbinic sources, where issues related to the priests and the Temple are a central concern. Priestly themes are well developed in the so-called 'literature of the ancient synagogue',<sup>2</sup> in *midrash*, *targum* and liturgy (including *piyyutim*), much of which dates to our period. The well carved plaque of the priestly courses discovered in the synagogue of Caesarea Maritima,<sup>3</sup> three-dimensional seven branched menorahs<sup>4</sup> and the once-lovely Aaron panel from the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic are among the most prominent examples of the priestly in synagogue art.<sup>5</sup> This proliferation of priestly themes suggests to a number of scholars that priests in Byzantine Palestine enjoyed increased social and political significance than in previous periods. This approach, first developed by Samuel Klein and Menachem Zulay, has recently re-emerged and drawn a number of contemporary adherents.<sup>6</sup> I do not find

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a lecture delivered at the Society for Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, November 2001. Many thanks to Edward Goldman, Stuart Miller, Richard Sarason, Lawrence Schiffman and David Weisberg for their comments at various stages of this project. It is dedicated in memory of Professor Samuel Iwry ז"ל.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Heinemann and J. J. Petuchowski, *The Literature of the Synagogue* (New York: Behrman House, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> M. Avi-Yonah, 'The Caesarea Inscription of the Twenty-Four Priestly Courses', *Eretz-Israel* 7 (1964), pp. 24–28; J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic* (Israel: Maariv, 1978), pp. 87–88. See also H. Eshel, 'A Fragmentary Inscription of the Priestly Courses?', *Tarbiz* 61.1 (1991), pp. 159–61, has shown that an inscription from Kissufim is not a fragment of a *mishmarot* plaque; S. Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1997), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> These are illustrated in S. Fine, ed., *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford UP and Yeshiva University Museum, 1996), pp. 4, 37, 43, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Weiss and E. Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1996), pp. 20–23.

<sup>6</sup> The first recent statement of this approach to appear in print is by J. Yahalom, *Priestly Palestinian Poetry: A Narrative Liturgy for the Day of Atonement* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 56–57 (in Hebrew). See now O. Irshai, 'The Role of the Priesthood in the Jewish Community in Late Antiquity: A Christian Model?', *Jüdische Gemeinden und ihr christlicher Kontext in kultur-räumlich vergleichender Betrachtung, von der Spätantike bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. C. Cluse, A. Haverkamp and I. J. Yuval (Hannover: Hahn, 2003), 75–85; idem, 'The Priesthood in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity', *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. I. Levine (Jerusalem: Dinur Center and Ben Zvi Institute, 2004), 67–106 (in Hebrew); D. Amit, 'Priests and the Memory of the Temple in the Synagogues of Southern Judaea', *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. I. Levine (Jerusalem: Dinur Center and Ben Zvi Institute, 2004), 143–56 (in Hebrew). E. Reiner presented 'Mittosim Mekomiyim ba-Galil: Kohanim ve-Mishmarot Kohanim ba-Galil ba-Tekufa ha-Bizantit' at the

in this corpus evidence for the increased social position of the *kohanim* in Byzantine Palestine. It is my belief that greater modesty before the paucity of sources is necessary, as is greater appreciation of the gulf between liturgical and archaeological sources on the one hand and social history on the other. In this note I will here argue for an alternative approach. I will suggest a 'liturgical' interpretation for the increased presence of priestly themes in the literary and archaeological remains of Byzantine-period Palestinian synagogues.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning with his 1909 dissertation *Die Barajta der vierundzwanzig Priesterabteilungen*, Samuel Klein focused scholarly attention upon the position of priests of late Roman and Byzantine Galilee.<sup>8</sup> Klein argues, without providing substantiation, that Judaeen priests inhabited villages that were destroyed during the First Jewish Revolt. Klein argues for the greater presence of priests in Late Antique Palestine, organised according to priestly courses, though generally in small numbers outside of recognised centres, based upon extant Amoraic sources and *piyyutim*. This focus upon priestly influence seems to have had some broad appeal. In 1922, for example, Nahum Slouschz associated the fine three-dimensional limestone menorah that he had recently discovered in Hammath Tiberias with supposed priestly behaviour within the synagogue. Slouschz writes: 'I could not doubt that we had found here a Menorah made faithfully on the plan of the Menorah of the Holy Temple. This model had unquestionably been used by the priesthood, and had been hidden away for some unknown reasons.'<sup>9</sup> In 1952 Menahem Zulay took this approach a step further. Zulay hypothesised that *piyyutim* on the priestly courses 'were originally intended for communities in the Land of

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1999 Hebrew University of Jerusalem conference that resulted in Levine's *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, idem. L. I. Levine, 'Contextualizing Jewish Art: The Synagogues at Hammat Tiberias and Sepphoris', *Jewish Culture and Society Under the Christian Roman Empire*, ed. R. Kalmin and S. Schwartz (Peeters Press and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004), 91–132; P. V. M. Flesher, 'The Literary Legacy of the Priests? The Pentateuchal Targums of Israel in their Social and Linguistic Setting', *The Ancient Synagogue from the Beginning until 200 CE*, ed. B. Olsson and M. Zetterholm (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), 467–505. J. Magness, 'Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues', *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, ed. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 363–92; S. C. Reif, 'Approaches to Sacrifices in Early Jewish Prayer', *Studies in Jewish Prayer*, ed. R. Hayward, forthcoming. Many thanks to Professors Flesher, Irshai, Levine, Magness and Reif for sharing their articles with me prior to publication.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss the liturgical approach in my 'Art and the Liturgical Context of the Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic', *Galilee: Confluence of Cultures: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Galilee*, ed. E. M. Meyers (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 227–37, and my 'A Liturgical Interpretation of Synagogue Remains in Late Antique Palestine', *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. I. Levine (Jerusalem: Dinur Center and Ben Zvi Institute, 2004), 402–29 (in Hebrew). I will return to this subject in greater detail in my *Art and Judaism During the Greco-Roman Period: A New 'Jewish Archaeology'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pt 4.

<sup>8</sup> Kirchhain, 1909, reprinted in the same year as *Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschichte Galiläas* (Leipzig: Rudolf Haupt, 1909); *Galilee: Geography and History of the Galilee From the Return from Babylonia to the Conclusion of the Talmud*, ed. Y. Elitzur (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967), 62–68, 176–92.

<sup>9</sup> N. Slouschz, 'Recent Discoveries in Palestine', *Menorah Journal* 8, no. 2 (1922), p. 336.

Israel in which priests were concentrated. With the end of these communities the *piyyutim* disappeared together with the custom of reciting *qerovot* in memory of the [priestly] courses'.<sup>10</sup> Recently Joseph Yahalom returned to this model to explain the fact that numerous *piyyutim* with clear priestly interest did not survive, while midrashic texts of the late Byzantine period did.<sup>11</sup> Yahalom suggests that the reason liturgical poetry connected to priestly themes was lost is because it derives from priestly and not from Rabbinic circles, and hence was not preserved. One need only reference the prominent role of poems with clear late antique antecedents in the Ashkenazi *Mussaf Avodah* prayer of Yom Kippur<sup>12</sup> to raise doubts as to Yahalom's contention. Similarly, the fact that extant *piyyutim* are deeply embedded in Rabbinic culture, and reflect nothing of an alternative religious tradition, mitigates against this point.<sup>13</sup> A more simple explanation for the disappearance of most late antique liturgical poetry is the lessened use of these Palestinian poems in communities that were increasingly aligned with the Babylonian liturgy.<sup>14</sup>

Interest in identifying Jewish sources that deal with priestly themes with a specific priestly social group is basic to Julius Wellhausen's sociological notions regarding the priestly source of the Pentateuch,<sup>15</sup> and more recently has been applied to Second Temple and Rabbinic prayer. Daniel K. Falk has noted this tendency among some scholars of Qumran and Rabbinic liturgy to 'discern sociological settings of liturgical elements on the basis of content'. Falk is correct in arguing that scholars who adopt this practice 'risk subjectivity by identifying stereotyped concerns with different groups'.<sup>16</sup> Recent

<sup>10</sup> 'New Piyyutim by Rabbi Hadutha', *Tarbiz* 21–22 (1950–1951), p. 30, in Hebrew (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> J. Yahalom, *Priestly Palestinian Poetry: A Narrative Liturgy for the Day of Atonement* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), pp. 56–57 (in Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> *Mahzor la-Yamim ha-Nora'im*, ed. D. Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), pp. 434ff.

<sup>13</sup> A quick perusal of the footnotes of scholarly editions of *piyyut* collections makes this point adequately.

<sup>14</sup> See L. A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame, Ind., and London: University of Notre Dame Press); and E. Fleischer, *Tefilah u-Minhagei Tefilah Eretz-Yisraeliyim ba-Tekufat ha-Genizah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988). This is the case with a host of liturgical poems and Palestinian targum texts as well. One need only remember that only one poem by Yannai was known before Israel Davidson identified one of his works on a Genizah fragment (I. Davidson, *Mahzor Yannai*, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1919). Similarly, no longer a part of the Ashkenazi liturgy, only one complete manuscript each exists of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neofiti (itself having been 'lost' in the Vatican libraries until Diez Macho recognised it).

<sup>15</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885).

<sup>16</sup> D. K. Falk, *Daily, Sabbath and Festival Prayers in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 54 and note 150. Falk refers specifically to the work of J. Maier, 'Zu Kult und Liturgie der Qumrangemeinde', *Revue de Qumran* 14 (1990), pp. 544–45. Tz. Zahavy, *Studies in Jewish Prayer* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990). For an application of this general method, see M. Smith, 'On the Yozer and Related Texts', in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools for Oriental Research, 1987), 87–95. R. Eilior has made similar claims regarding the Hekhalot literature. See her 'From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayers and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and Its Relation to Temple Traditions', *JSQ* 4 (1997), 217–67; idem, 'The Merkavah Tradition and the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism', in A. Oppenheimer (ed.), *Sino-Judaica: Jews and Chinese in Historical Dialogue* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv

interest in priestly power in Byzantine Palestine is related to a broader theme in Jewish studies during the twentieth century, the search for late antique ‘non-Rabbinic Jews’.<sup>17</sup> While sources that reflect the position of the Rabbis are read quite narrowly by many of these scholars—hence limiting the scope of Rabbinic influence in late antique Palestine—scant sources that supposedly reflect priestly ascent are read with a far less rigorous ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’.<sup>18</sup> Concern for the priestly does not require the existence of distinct priestly communal loci of power.

To begin: what do we know with some reliability about ‘real live’ priests in late antique Palestinian synagogues? Rabbinic sources reflecting the second through fourth centuries mention priests in synagogues, both anecdotally and in more theoretical terms. What these sources reflect more than anything else is the presence of priests within synagogues, and the ambivalence of the Rabbinic community toward priesthood.<sup>19</sup> This is nowhere better illustrated than in Rabbinic discussions of the priestly blessing in synagogues. The blessing is both a desired element of the liturgy, and an activity that was closely regulated by the Sages.<sup>20</sup> This evidence is sometimes centuries earlier than the Byzantine period, however, and so must be used with caution. The most useful evidence for assessing the stake of priests in Byzantine-period synagogues is inscriptional—at least as far as priests engaged in local euergetism.<sup>21</sup> Of the 87 inscriptions published by Joseph Naveh in Hebrew and Aramaic in his *On Stone and Mosaic*<sup>22</sup> and the 39 Greek inscriptions published by Leah Roth-Gerson,<sup>23</sup> priests appear among the donors in synagogue inscriptions in Aramaic from Na’aran<sup>24</sup> and Eshtemoa<sup>25</sup> and in Hebrew from Khirbet Susiya.<sup>26</sup> All of these synagogues are located in Judaea. Among the still un-

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University Press, 1999), 101–58; idem, ‘Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature: Its Relation to the Temple, the Heavenly Temple and the “Diminished Temple”’, *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. I. Levine (Jerusalem: Dinur Center and Ben Zvi Institute, 2004), 107–42 (in Hebrew).

<sup>17</sup> See my ‘“Jewish Archaeology”: Between *Erusin* and *Qiddushin*’, *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2002), pp. 9–12, 30. I develop this theme further in my *Art and Judaism*, part 1.

<sup>18</sup> See especially Irshai, ‘The Role of the Priesthood in the Jewish Community in Late Antiquity: A Christian Model?’; ‘The Priesthood in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity’; Levine, ‘Contextualizing Jewish Art’; Magness, ‘Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues’.

<sup>19</sup> C. Licht, *Ten Legends of the Sages: The Image of the Sage in Rabbinic Literature* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1991), pp. 91–100, 103–19, discusses Rabbinic attitudes toward the latter Second Temple period priesthood. Licht’s *Tradition and Innovation: Studies in Rabbinic Literature* (Givat-Haviva: Givat-Haviva Press, 1989), pp. 23–32 (in Hebrew), also discusses the priority of the Sage over the prophet in Rabbinic literature. See D. Ben Hayim Terifon, *ha-Kohanim me-Hurban Bayyit Sheini ve-Ad Aliyat ha-Natzrut* (PhD Dissertation, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1985); R. Kimelman, ‘The Conflict between the Priestly Oligarchy and the Sages in the Talmudic Period (on the Explanation of PT Shabbat 12:3, 13c=Horayot 3:4, 48c)’, *Zion* 48 (1983), pp. 135–47 (in Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> On the priests in synagogue ritual, see Levine, *The Synagogue*, pp. 496–500.

<sup>21</sup> On this neologism, see A. J. S. Spawforth, ‘Euergetism’, *OCD*, third edition, p. 566.

<sup>22</sup> J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Israel: Maariv, 1978) (in Hebrew).

<sup>23</sup> L. Roth-Gerson, *Greek Inscriptions in the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1987) (in Hebrew).

<sup>24</sup> Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

published dedicatory inscriptions from the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic we hear of one Yudan son of Isaac the Priest'.<sup>27</sup> Yudan is apparently the only priest mentioned in a Galilean inscription. He is but one of many donors mentioned in the mosaic, the only donor in the extant inscriptions who was a priest. The same kind of mix appears at Na'aran, Eshtemoa and Susiya as well. No priest other than Yudan appear in the synagogues in or near the Beit Netofa Valley in the lower Galilee or in the area of Tiberias, precisely the regions where the majority of priestly communities are placed in *piyyutim* of the priestly courses.<sup>28</sup> If priests were so significant in Byzantine period synagogues, one might expect far larger numbers of priests within this corpus and more direct reference to specific priestly watches in synagogue inscriptions—and not just the general references to the Temple cult (including the twenty four priestly courses) that exist in synagogue art! No 'synagogue of priests' of the sort mentioned theoretically in Rabbinic sources and no evidence of broad priestly euergetism within Galilean synagogues have been uncovered through excavation. The opposite is in fact evidenced: at Na'aran, Eshtemoa, Susiya and Sepphoris priests appear as individual donors integrated among donors of other casts (including a Levite at Susiya).<sup>29</sup>

Literary sources that refer to Byzantine period social settings are in short supply. Jews wrote very little about their social situation in a straight-forward discursive manner. Rather, much of what we know is encoded in Scriptural interpretation, particularly in the *piyyut* literature. Only one known late Byzantine poet was a priest, Shimon ben Megas.<sup>30</sup> There is no evidence that any other of the named Byzantine-period liturgical poets were priests. Neither Yose ben Yose, Yannai, Eleazar ha-Qallir, Yehuda or Hadutha ben Abraham identify themselves as members of the priestly class—and all wrote on distinctly priestly themes. The strong focus upon the priesthood in *piyyutim* of Yose ben Yose led medieval copyists to identify this author as *Yose ben Yose Kohen Gadol*.<sup>31</sup> This reflects careful medieval reading of the text and its contents—but nothing about Yose's actual priestly pedigree. No demarcated priestly class of poets is reflected in extant sources, though there were clearly priest poets in Byzantine Palestine.

Were priests as powerful as some suggest during Byzantine times, I would imagine that the relatively large corpus of inscriptions might mention priestly euergetism—but they do not. As far as the evidence goes, priests existed within synagogue communities in greater or lesser numbers (based upon the

<sup>27</sup> Weiss and Netzer, *Promise and Redemption*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Levine, *The Rabbinic Class*, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Levites also appear in a number of inscriptions. Jose son of Levi the Levite is mentioned in inscriptions from Baram (Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, pp. 19–20) and Alma in the Upper Galilee (*ibid.*, pp. 22–23). A Levite was a donor at Hammath Gader (*ibid.*, pp. 57–58) and Judan the Levite's donations are memorialised in two inscriptions from the Susiya synagogue (*ibid.*, pp. 120–21, 121–22).

<sup>30</sup> M. Zulay, 'Mehkarei Yannai', *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), pp. 221–31 (in Hebrew); J. Yahalom, ed., *Liturgical Poems of Simon Bar Megas* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1984) (in Hebrew).

<sup>31</sup> *Yosse Ben Yosse Poems*, ed. A. Mirsky (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977), pp. 13–14 (in Hebrew). Cf. Levine, *The Synagogue*, 499–500; Reif, 'Approaches to Sacrifices'.

presence of priests in a particular village or neighbourhood) from Second Temple times onwards. There is no Jewish evidence for expanded priestly communal power during the Byzantine period.<sup>32</sup>

This is not to say that priestly themes did not reach a new prominence in Jewish literature or in synagogue art of the Byzantine period. Scholars are correct in pointing out the increased prominence of priestly themes during this period. Yose ben Yose, for example, lionises the high priest and sets his service at the very centre of creation. He even ‘cleans up’ much of the Mishnah’s ambivalence toward the high priest. Where Mishnah Yoma, chapter 1, treats the high priest as a kind of embarrassment—as a leader only by virtue of birthright—Yose ben Yose erases most signs of negativity.<sup>33</sup> As for Ben Sira (another non-priest) before him,<sup>34</sup> the high priest epitomises everything holy and beautiful. Even the geography of the Galilee was imagined in terms of the priestly courses. Stuart S. Miller and Dalia Trifon have shown that the very poems that Klein and Zulay thought proved the transfer of the priestly courses from Judaea to the Galilee after the Bar Kokhba Revolt should be seen in a hagiographic sense, as attempts to redefine the geography of the Galilee in Jewish terms.<sup>35</sup> Again, while these very different sources certainly show interest in *kohanim*, assertion of priestly holiness (within a Judaism that increasingly democratized that holiness) did not require a parallel rise in priestly power or prerogative.

We have some idea how Yose ben Yose’s poem was acted upon liturgically. It was recited within a synagogue/study house context as part of the Yom Kippur prayers. Within the rhetoric of the Yom Kippur *Avodah*, the liturgical actor, the *shaliah tsibur*, seems to have acted the part of the high priest,<sup>36</sup> and apparently the congregation acted the role of the Jews assembled in the Temple observing the sacrifice. The synagogue building became the ‘set’ where all of this took place. It is not without significance that the synagogue building was increasingly conceived as a *miqdash me’at*. It was no longer just a meeting house, but a ‘small temple’,<sup>37</sup> ‘second to the Temple of Jerusalem’.<sup>38</sup> This process of ‘templisation’ is first seen in Tannaitic literature and accelerates in Byzantine period literary sources of all sorts, inscriptions, and synagogue decoration.<sup>39</sup> Within the synagogue, local communities participated in

<sup>32</sup> Irshai (‘The Role of the Priesthood’, ‘The Priesthood’) adduces a small number of Patristic sources to speculate that with the decline of the Patriarchate the Jewish ‘priestly class’ ascended to authority positions in Byzantine Palestine.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188ff.

<sup>34</sup> Sir. 45:6–17, 50:1–29.

<sup>35</sup> S. S. Miller, *Studies in the History and Traditions of Sepphoris* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 125–12; D. Trifon, ‘Did the Priestly Courses (*Mishmarot*) Transfer from Judaea to the Galilee after the Bar Kokhba Revolt?’, *Tarbiz* 59, nos. 1–2 (1989–1990), 77–93 (in Hebrew).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Swartz made this point, arguing: ‘the poet—who, we must remember, was usually the performer—identified with the priest’. See M. Swartz, ‘Sage, Priest and Poet: Typologies of Religious Leadership in the Ancient Synagogue’, *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. S. Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> B. Meg. 29a.

<sup>38</sup> Targum Jonathan to Ez. 11:16.

<sup>39</sup> This is a major theme of my *This Holy Place*.

liturgy that was not only seen as a replacement for the Temple sacrifice, but often memorialised the sacrifices through liturgical reenactment. Lit menorahs, reminiscent of the Biblical menorah, a Torah shrine called an 'Ark' after the Ark of the Covenant, and lists of the priestly courses visually connected the liturgical set, the synagogue, into the locus of 'templised' liturgy. At Sepphoris (and conceivably elsewhere as well) one would see on the floor the image of Aaron serving in the Tabernacle no doubt dressed in Byzantine-period garb (not unlike like that of the *shaliah tsibbur* standing before him). Intentionally or not, the image of Aaron and the living synagogue leader thus mirrored one another.<sup>40</sup> We do not know whether the *shaliah tsibbur* who recited the *Avodah* for Yom Kippur was a priest. If (and I do mean if) later practice is any indication, priestly lineage was not a requirement. I would say the same of the Palestinian synagogue custom of reciting *piyyutim* each Sabbath that recalled the priestly course that would have served in the Temple that week.<sup>41</sup> Such increased interest in the Temple and its service is indicative of increased concern for priestly themes, though not necessarily of increased priestly influence, control, political power or authorship!

This is not to say that priests participating in synagogue ritual would not have enjoyed an elevated status, that they would not have appreciated priestly images, or even might have served in leadership positions (this having been the case, for example, at Dura Europos).<sup>42</sup> My point is that the use of priestly imagery may reasonably be explained in terms of a general interest in the priestly in Jewish culture of late antiquity. Imbedded in Jewish literature itself—within the Mishnah and its literature and more importantly within the Pentateuch and hence Targum and midrash, is an extremely strong focus on the Tabernacle/Temple and its cult and cultic personnel. This interest was essential to Rabbinic (and for that matter, Qumranic) liturgy from the very beginning.<sup>43</sup> The lionisation of priests in *Targum*, *Piyyut* and some *midrashim* and *halakhic* texts, coupled with the increased idealisation of the priesthood the increasing distance from the Second Temple as time passed, explains the heightened presence of priestly themes in a satisfactory manner.<sup>44</sup> The pseudo-priest became a liturgical actor within the pseudo-Temple—that is, the *shaliah tsibbur* seems to have gained mythic prominence within the increasingly holy synagogue (even as the Temple became increasingly synagogue-like and Aaron more like a Rabbi in Byzantine period *midrashim*).<sup>45</sup> The approach that I am suggesting is firmly based in liturgical studies, where scholars are increasingly

<sup>40</sup> For more on this approach, see my 'On the Liturgical Interpretation' and *Art and Judaism*.

<sup>41</sup> Abramson, 'Qerovot', 54–55.

<sup>42</sup> C. Kraeling, *The Synagogue. The Excavations of Dura Europos, Final Report VIII*, part I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 263–68, 277–78. See Abramson, 'Qerovot', p. 51, n. 8, for a slightly later example.

<sup>43</sup> R. Sarason, 'The "Intersection" of Qumran and Rabbinic Judaism: The Case of Prayer Texts and Liturgies', *Dead Sea Discoveries* 8.2 (2001), pp. 169–81; S. Fine, *This Holy Place*, pp. 49–55.

<sup>44</sup> This point was made regarding Amoraic literature by N. Glatzer, 'The Attitude toward Rome in Third-Century Judaism', in *Essays in Jewish Thought* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1978), pp. 1–15.

<sup>45</sup> Fine, *This Holy Place*, pp. 79–94.

aware of the holistic relationship between the liturgical space and the liturgical life of each community.<sup>46</sup>

Samaritan and Christian interest in priestly themes is significant for understanding increased Jewish interest during late antiquity. The Aaronite priesthood was paramount within Samaritan culture during late antiquity, as it is to this day. In fact, sacrifice was still practised by Samaritans on their holy mountain, Mt Gerazim, on the festival of Passover. Synagogue ritual too was permeated with priestly concerns. Mosaic pavements discovered within Samaritan synagogues in Samaria include illustrations of Temple implements, particularly of the menorah.<sup>47</sup> These mosaics bear important parallels with Jewish depictions. In fact, a single pair of artisans seem to have laid decorative mosaics within both a Jewish and a Samaritan synagogue in the Beth Shean region.<sup>48</sup> The centrality of priesthood and priestly themes among the rival Samaritans may well have helped to strengthen Jewish concern with things priestly. Christian concern with the biblical priesthood and with the church as temple, together with supercessionist notions concerning the Biblical priesthood<sup>49</sup> certainly may have influenced Jews—to the extent that Jews actually knew that these were Christian interests. The broad availability of Temple themes among the artistic patterns adapted for synagogue use might certainly have made images from the Biblical cult more prominent than they might otherwise have been.<sup>50</sup> While Samaritan and Christian contention over the priesthood might have heightened Jewish interest, it was certainly no more than a supporting factor in a culture already permeated with Temple themes.

The most intriguing evidence for increased priestly status in synagogues does not derive from the Byzantine period at all, but from the Fatamid and

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the sources listed in note 7, see: L. A. Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989); On the relationship between church art, architecture and liturgy, see T. F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971); S. De Blaauw, 'Architecture and Liturgy in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Traditions and Trends in Modern Scholarship', *Archiv für Liturgie-Wissenschaft* 33.1 (1991), pp. 1–34; S. Sinding-Larsen, *Iconography and Ritual: A Study of Analytical Perspectives* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget As, 1984); Gier Hellemo, *Adventus Domini: Eschatological Thought in 4th-Century Apses and Catecheses* (Leiden: Brill, 1989). On the application of liturgical models to synagogue art: S. Fine, 'Art and the Liturgical Context of the Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic', *Galilee: Confluence of Cultures: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Galilee*, ed. E. M. Meyers (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 227–37; idem, 'On the Liturgical Interpretation of Ancient Synagogues in the Land of Israel', in *Jewish Cultural Life of Late Antiquity in its Byzantine-Christian Context*, ed. L. I. Levine, forthcoming (in Hebrew).

<sup>47</sup> 'Samaritan Synagogues', *The Samaritans*, ed. E. Stern and H. Eshel (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Press and Israel Antiquities Authority, 2002), 382–443 (in Hebrew); R. Pummer, 'Samaritan Synagogues and Jewish Synagogues: Similarities and Differences', *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. S. Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 143–44.

<sup>48</sup> At Beth Alpha and Beth Shean A. See Pummer, 'Samaritan Synagogues and Jewish Synagogues', 131.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, J. Branham, 'Sacred Space under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Churches', *Art Bulletin* 74.3 (1992), pp. 375–94.

<sup>50</sup> A number of scholars have postulated the existence of pattern books. See R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 391–95, and the bibliography cited there.

Abbasid periods. In the world preserved in the documents of the Cairo Geniza, the priesthood seems to have enjoyed enhanced status and privilege. A number of *paytanim* who wrote on priestly themes during the early Islamic period were in fact priests. These include Joshua ha-Kohen, his possible son Johanan ben Joshua ha-Kohen,<sup>51</sup> Reuven ha-Kohen<sup>52</sup> and Phineas ha-Kohen from Kafra (near Tiberias).<sup>53</sup> This large assembly of priests seems to suggest that priestly poets did indeed proliferate in Islamic Palestine. Priests were prominent in Babylonia, Egypt and Palestine of this period. Arnold Franklin notes that ‘The Palestinian yeshiva was explicitly identified with priestly authority on several occasions’.<sup>54</sup> In addition, ‘memorial lists of geonim of the Palestinian yeshiva demonstrate that the yeshiva was dominated by members of three priestly families from the mid-ninth century onwards’.<sup>55</sup> Franklin attributes this situation to both traditional respect for the priesthood and more significantly, to the importance of lineage in Islamic culture. The question is whether a situation that existed in Islamic Palestine, under Islamic influence, existed centuries earlier. Ante-dating is always difficult, particularly when Judaism of the Greco-Roman period is interpreted in terms of established medieval norms. However suggestive or tempting, projection from the medieval situation onto the late antique is best greeted with guarded skepticism.

### *Concluding Comments*

I have argued against jumping too quickly from liturgical evidence to social history, particularly in a period where our knowledge is really so slight. A better explanation for the prominence of priests in Jewish literature of Byzantine Palestine is to be found in the realm of religious sensibilities and liturgy. In a culture focused upon Scripture, living among non-Jews who themselves were interested in priestly issues, Jews increasingly lionised the lost Temple and its priests based upon patterns as old as the Pentateuch itself. In the process of sanctifying the synagogue as a ‘holy place’, loosely modelled, if only metaphorically, upon the Temple, the Jerusalem Temple and its officiates were afforded greater conceptual prominence, if not necessarily social prominence, within synagogue life. This late antique situation may certainly have set the stage for the increased status of the priests as a hereditary elite during the Islamic period. This increase is evidenced only in medieval sources, however. There is no positive evidence for increased priestly influence in the synagogues of Byzantine Palestine.

<sup>51</sup> On Joshua, see J. H. Schirmann, ‘Joshua’, *EJ*, 10:270–71. On the relationship between Joshua and Johanan, see M. Zulai, in: *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry 5* (1939), pp. 155–57; idem, in *Alei Ayin, S. Schocken Jubilee Volume* (1952), pp. 89f.

<sup>52</sup> S. Abramson, ‘Qerovot le-Hatan’, *Tarbiz* 15 (1943–1944), p. 51.

<sup>53</sup> S. Klein, *Sefer ha-Yishuv*, 1 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1939), p. 90 (in Hebrew); Trifon, ‘Did the Priestly Courses (*Mishmarot*) Transfer from Judaea to the Galilee after the Bar Kokhba Revolt?’, p. 78, n. 11 (in Hebrew); E. Fleischer, ‘Early Paytanim of Tiberias’, in O. Avissar, ed., *Sefer Teveria* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), pp. 368–71 (in Hebrew).

<sup>54</sup> A. E. Franklin, *Shoots of David: Members of the Exilarchal Dynasty in the Middle Ages* (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2001), p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.