

THE PRAYER OF R. ŠIM'ON B. YOH'AI BETWEEN TEXT,
REVELATIONS AND PROPHECIES *EX EVENTU*

The *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoh'ai* (תפלת ר' שמעון בן יוחאי) is an apocalyptic text that was edited for the first time by Adolph Jellinek in 1857.¹ Jellinek based his edition on a manuscript owned at that time by the Italian rabbi Marco Mortara, head of the Jewish community of Mantua between 1842 and 1894.² Unfortunately, Jellinek did not provide any information on this manuscript³ and, as far as I know, no one among those who have dealt with the *Prayer* has ever made any effort to find it. Nonetheless, I was able to identify the manuscript codex in which our text is preserved. The codex is now stored in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS)⁴ and was purchased from the collection of Elkan Nathan Adler in 1922. Thus, it appears in the catalog that Adler had published the previous year. Adler informs that the manuscript was previously owned by a

certain Schönblum, who edited it partially in 1877.⁵ This Schönblum is the link between Adler and Marco Mortara.

In 1868 Mortara wrote a letter to the scholar Moritz Steinschneider, in which he confessed that he had to give up his intention to preserve in Italy all the manuscripts he owned and that he had to sell some of them to the scholar Samuel Schönblum (1833-1891?). In particular, Mortara claimed that he had sold Nahmanides' *Sefer ha-Qiṣin* and the *Commentary to Qohelet* by Samuel ben Yehudah ibn Tibbon, together with other manuscripts. The codex in which the *Prayer* is preserved is not mentioned in the letter, but it was probably included among the "other manuscripts".⁶ It must be noticed that Jellinek published the *Prayer* in the fourth volume of his *Bet ha-Midrash* in 1857, i.e. more than ten years before that Mortara sold the codex in

¹ A. JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der jüdischen Literatur*, 6 voll., Leipzig 1853-77 (repr. Bamberger & Wahrmann, Jerusalem 1938), vol. IV, pp. 117-126.

² For an introduction to Marco Mortara see M. PERANI, *Per uno studio dell'opera e del pensiero di Marco Mortara: recenti scoperte di manoscritti ignoti, la sua bibliografia e piste di ricerca, con un'appendice di documenti inediti*, in ID. (ed.), *L'Ottocento ebraico in Italia fra tradizione e innovazione: la figura e l'opera di Marco Mortara*, Atti del XXIII Convegno Internazionale dell'AIISG, Ravenna 14-16 Settembre 2009.

³ This is all Jellinek says about his source: (*Bet ha-Midrash* IV, p. ix): "Die Mittheilung dieses für die Geschichte so interessanten Stückes verdanke ich der Güte des Herrn Oberrabbiners Marco Mortara in Mantua, der es einer Handschrift seiner Bibliothek entnommen". Jellinek speaks explicitly of Mortara's private library, therefore I exclude that the codex was stored in the library of the israelitic

community of Mantua, as there is no trace of it in the catalog of this library that was compiled by Mortara himself (M. MORTARA, *Catalogo dei manoscritti ebraici della biblioteca della comunità israelitica di Mantova*, Livorno 1878). Furthermore, if the codex was sold to Schönblum in 1868 (as I will hypothesise later), it is no surprise that it was not registered in the catalog, which was published in 1878.

⁴ MS. 8163 (R34). The manuscript has been digitized and can be viewed at the following link: <https://digitalcollections.jtsa.edu/islandora/object/jts:211022#page/243/mode/2up>.

⁵ E.N. ADLER, *Catalog of Hebrew manuscripts in the collection of Elkan Nathan Adler*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1921, p. 81. The number of the ms. is 2237 and it appears in the section "miscellany".

⁶ Cfr. A. SALAH, *La biblioteca di Marco Mortara*, in *Nuovi studi in onore di Marco Mortara nel secondo centenario della nascita, 1815-2015*, «Quaderni di Materia giudaica» 5 (2016), pp. 154-55.

which our text appears. This justifies Jellinek's affirmation that the manuscript was owned by Mortara at that time.

In 1877, as already mentioned, Schönblum published three of the texts preserved in the codex.⁷ Unfortunately, in the introduction to his work Schönblum does not mention Marco Mortara. In any case, in 1877, or in the very previous period, the manuscript was most likely still owned by Schönblum. However, already in 1878 Adolf Neubauer published the *Sefer Minhagot* (ספר מנהגות) from the same codex, affirming that the manuscript was then owned by N. Adler, "Oberrabbiner von England".⁸ This is certainly Nathan Adler, father of Elkan Nathan. It is thus likely that between 1877 and 1878 the codex was sold by Schönblum to Nathan Adler. Then Elkan Nathan Adler inherited it together with his father's wide collection, as he states in the introduction to his catalog.⁹ Eventually, in 1922 Adler sold many of his manuscripts to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Among these manuscripts was our codex.

To summarize, we lack documents that can certify that the codex passed from Mortara to Schönblum and then to Adler, but the evidence presented so far confirms this reconstruction. Moreover, there are other elements that support this hypothesis. First of all, obviously, a confrontation between the text published by Jellinek and the one preserved in the manuscript shows a perfect correspondence. Furthermore, on the last line of page 124 of Jellinek's edition, the scholar highlights a word that was erased in the manuscript. Even in our codex (f. 117 r) that same word was canceled. I will return to this point later. One last piece of evidence consists in the fact that Jellinek published another text (*Midraš 'Eser Galiyyot* – מדרש עשר גליות) pre-

served in the codex in the same volume of his *Bet ha-Midrash* in which he edited the *Prayer*, specifying that both come from the same manuscript.¹⁰ This cannot be mere coincidence.

The codex in which our text has been preserved has been briefly described by Adolf Neubauer as a paper manuscript produced in France, or more precisely in Provence.¹¹ The script is Sephardic-Provençal. According to Neubauer, the codex was copied by Ya'akov ben R. Makhir, also called Comprat Davin (or Doyen) de Vives. Elkan N. Adler indicates the year 1271 as the date of copy of the manuscript. However, a paleographic analysis of the script hints rather for the 15th century.¹² I believe that the problem with the dating concerns the name of the copyist too. On f. 243v., at the end of the text *Mordecai's Dream* (חלום מרדכי), there appears the name Ya'akov b. R. Makhir, who identifies himself as the copyist (אני הכותב יעקב ב. ר. מכיר). But in the colophon we read: "I have written (this) by myself. This is my name: Comprat Doyen (or Davin) de Vives" (כתבתי אני לעצמי). Adler, probably influenced by Neubauer,¹³ believed that the two names corresponded to the same person, i.e. that Comprat Doyen de Vives was the nickname of Ya'akov b. R. Makhir. However, it remains incomprehensible why the copyist would have used different names in two different parts of his work, and, moreover, why he did not declare that the first was his nickname.

It is likely that Adler dated the manuscript to the year 1271 by linking it to Ya'akov b. Makhir ibn Tibbon, an astronomer from Provence (Marseilles 1236 - Montpellier 1304). The problem is that his Provençal name was Don Profiat Tibbon,¹⁴ not Comprat Doyen de Vives. I hypothesise that in the 13th century

⁷ S. SCHÖNBLUM, מסכת ספרים (נפתחים א) שלשה ספרים נפתחים א) (ב) פירקא דרבינו הקדוש או הבבית ג) ברייתא דישועה : אשר נתחברו עוד קודם חתימת התלמוד והיו סמוכים ומכוסים בכת"י, זה יותר מאלף שנים ונעלמו מעין כל רואה עד היום הזה, Lemberg 1877.

⁸ A. NEUBAUER, *Miscellen*, «Israelitische Letterbode» 4 (1878), pp. 132-33.

⁹ ADLER, *Catalog*, cit., p. V.

¹⁰ JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash*, vol. IV, cit. The introduction to *Midrash Midraš 'Eser Galuyot* is on p. XII, while the text itself is on pp. 133-36.

¹¹ A. NEUBAUER, *Documents sur Narbonne*, «Révue des études juives» X, 20-19 (Janvier-Juin 1885), pp. 105-98.

¹² The website Ktiv.org suggests the year 1450 as date of copy. The dating to the 15th century was confirmed to me by Professor Judith Olszowy-Schlanger (personal correspondence), whom I wish to thank for her precious support.

¹³ NEUBAUER, *Documents*, cit., p. 100.

¹⁴ He was also known with the Latin name Profatius Judeus. On Ya'akov b. Makhir see J. ROBINSON

Ya'akov b. Makhir ibn Tibbon compiled a now lost manuscript and signed with his name at the end of *Mordecai's Dream*. Then, around 1450, Comprat Doyen de Vives copied this codex, but preserved the signature of Ya'akov b. Makhir and compiled the colophon, where he mentioned himself too. Alternatively, the fact that the colophon was apparently written by a different hand with respect to the rest of the codex also suggests that it might have been copied in the 15th century by someone called Ya'akov b. Makhir, and that later, on an unknown date, Comprat Doyen de Vives added the sole colophon, in which he presented a list of the texts contained in the codex. In this case, the affirmation "I have written (this) by myself" would refer to the colophon, not to the entire work. It is nonetheless interesting that the *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai* circulated in southern France in the 15th century, and maybe already in the 13th century, if Ya'akov b. Makhir was indeed the astronomer just mentioned.

The codex passed in Christian hands too, and it was censored in 1575. In fact, under the colophon there appears a note in Latin script informing that the codex was censored in that year by Laurentius Franguellus ("Revisus per me Laurentiu[m] Frangu[ellum] 1575"), who inspected some Hebrew manuscripts and incunables in the same period.¹⁵ It was probably during the process of censorship that the word mentioned above was erased from the manuscript of the *Prayer*. In this section the text nar-

rates that Armilos, the "Antichrist" of Jewish Medieval literature, will come to the land of Israel, claim that he is the Messiah and God, and order the nations of the world to bring him the holy text that he had given to them. The text reads as follows:

He will travel about and announce in all the cities and say to the descendants of Esau, "Bring me my scripture which I have given to you", and again the nations of the world will come and bring a book [erased word] and he will say to them, "This is (indeed) what I have given to you".¹⁶

The phrase that was erased was most likely "sefer 'awen/ 'awon gillayon" (עון/און גיליון), i.e., "the book of guilt (or falsity) of the margin (or of the sheet/revelation)", an epithet that was frequently used in the Middle Ages to indicate the Gospel, also because of the paraphony with *evangelium*.¹⁷ Since the descendants of Esau are identified, in Jewish medieval literature, as the Christians, the whole scene is to be intended as an evident offence to the Gospel. This insult was evidently not tolerated by the Christian censor in 1575, who decided to erase the offensive word.¹⁸

The codex is composed of 249 recto-verso sheets and preserves the following texts:¹⁹ ספר מנהגות by R. Moše ibn Šmu'el of Marseilles; פרקא של רבנו; מדרש עשר גליות; מדרש של ר' אליעזר בנו של סדר ניקוד הבשר; דרך ארץ; ריהג' הקדוש extracts from רבה זוטא; פרקי השלום; מסכת סופר

- U. MELAMMED, *Tibbon, Ibn (Tibbonids)*, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd ed.), vol. 19: SOM-TN, pp. 712-714.

¹⁵ See for example *Be'or 'al ha-Torah* (באור על התורה), printed by Ya'akov Marcaria in Riva del Garda in 1559 and later inspected by Franguellus. The incunable is now preserved at the library of Trento (T 0 f 23) and can be viewed at this website: www.bdt.bibcom.trento.it.

¹⁶ The English translation is taken from J.C. REEVES, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2006, p. 103.

¹⁷ Cfr. M. JASTROW, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature*, Leipzig 1903, p. 27 (און). See also the PhD thesis by L. BENOTTI on *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2016, p. 118.

¹⁸ M. STEINSCHNEIDER (*Apocalypsen mit polemischer Tendenz*, «Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft» 28, 4 (1874), p. 635, note 17) suggested to fill the gap with the word תפלותם, "their frivolity", because of the parallel passage in another medieval eschatological text, *Otot ha-Mašī-ah* (ed. JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash II*, cit., p. 60). REEVES (*Trajectories*, cit., p. 103, note 155) seems to agree with this hypothesis. However, none of the two scholars had evidently the chance to see the manuscript, in which it is clear that the erased word had two vertical down traits. Another possibility in this sense could be *sefer ha-qalon* (ספר הקלון), i.e. "book of prostitution" or "book of idolatry". However, the expression 'awon gillayon is more frequent in Jewish polemic literature against the Christians, thus making it preferable for our case.

¹⁹ See ADLER, *Catalog*, cit., p. 81.

מס' ידיים; מס' סמכות רבתי; מדרש תנחומא by Avraham ben David of Posquière; ס' הקבלה by Avraham ben David of Toledo; אגרת פרשטו יואן (*Prest-er John's Letter to the Emperor*); חלום מרדכי; Responsum as to שחיטה ה', and שאלות as to the Resurrection by Sa'adya Ga'on. It is worth noting that many of these texts are works by 12th-13th century Provençal authors.

The *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai* is on folia 110r-118r. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, this text is a Jewish medieval apocalypse. In this case, the label "apocalypse" is perfectly suitable, as it is composed by a series of revelations bestowed to the 2nd century *tanna* Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai. The visions are mediated by the archangel Meṭaṭron, a very recurrent figure in Jewish medieval literature, particularly in the corpus of the *Hekhalot*.²⁰

The *Prayer* is considered by most scholars as a reworking of another medieval apocalypse, *Secrets of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai* (נסתרות ר' שמעון בן יוחאי), which could be dated, according to some, to the 8th century, at the time of the passage from the Umayyad to the Abbasid caliphate.²¹ By confronting the two texts synoptically, remarkable common traits emerge. Such parallelisms can be noticed in other texts, such as the *Future Events of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*,²² which is why I agree with Reeves when he speaks of "R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai complex".²³

Another interesting writing needs to be mentioned here. Two manuscripts held at the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma (Mss. 3122 and 2342), dating back to the end of the 13th century,²⁴ transmit the same text - with very few differences between one another - which is clearly another version of the *Secrets of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*. This text, still unedited,²⁵ is named in the manuscripts as *Order of the Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah* (סדרן של אותות שיבואו קודם ביאת משיח).²⁶ Interestingly, it contains a section that is absent in the *textus receptus* of the *Secrets*, but that appears in the *Prayer*, and that describes the struggle between Christians and Muslims, including a battle in the plain of Acre. Even more surprisingly, the prophecies *ex eventu* are not presented as revelations to R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai, but rather as the fruit of his study and of a tradition going back to him. What we have here is probably a phase in the textual transmission in which historical events, re-interpreted under an eschatological light, had not yet been inserted in a context of revelation and contact with the supernal world. In fact, the archangel Meṭaṭron, who in the *Secrets* and in the *Prayer* functions as mediator between God and R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai, does not appear in the text transmitted in these two manuscripts. If we consider that the version of the *Secrets* edited by Jellinek was based on a printed edition dating

²⁰ See REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., pp. 179-86 for an introduction to Meṭaṭron.

²¹ See REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., pp. 76-78 and the bibliography reported here. Reeves' translation is based on the edition by JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash III*, cit., pp. 78-82.

²² This text is embedded within the *Midraš on the Ten Kings*, preserved at the Palatina Library of Parma, ms. 2785. It is a parchment codex in Sephardic script, dating to the year 1289. See B. RICHLER - M. BEIT-ARIÉ, *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma*, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 457-58. The midraš was edited by C.C. HOROWITZ in *Bet 'eqed ha-Aggadot*, Frankfurt a. M. 1881, pp. 51-55 (Heb.). A Hebrew version was edited also in J. EISENSTEIN (ed.), *Ozar Midrashim: A Library of Two Hundred Minor Midrashim*, vol. 2, New York 1915, pp. 461-466 (Heb.). The text has been translated into English by G.W. BUCHANAN in *Jewish Messian-*

ic Movements from AD 70 to AD 1300: Documents from the Fall of Jerusalem to the End of the Crusades, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 1978, pp. 388-406. D.C. MITCHELL has provided a partial English translation in *Messiah ben Joseph*, Campbell Publications, Newton Mearns, Scotland 2016, pp. 204 ff.

²³ REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 76.

²⁴ Ms. 3122 reports a precise date: the month of Tammuz in the year 5030, i.e. 1270. See the description of the mss. in RICHLER - BEIT-ARIÉ, *Hebrew Manuscripts*, cit., pp. 144. 460-461. Both mss. have been digitized and can be viewed on the website Ktiv.org.

²⁵ I intend to publish this text in the future.

²⁶ This text has been considered by U.Z. SHACHAR, *A Pious Belligerence: Dialogical Warfare and the Rhetoric of Righteousness in the Crusading Near East*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2021, pp. 135 ff.

back to 1743 – and is thus quite late – we could even suppose that the revelatory frame was elaborated in a period between the redaction of the two Parma manuscripts (i.e. the end of the 13th century) and the copying of the manuscript of the *Prayer*, ca. 1450.²⁷ Manuscripts preserving the *Secrets* have come down to us, but they all date from the 16th century on.²⁸ It is of course possible that they are copies of much older texts, but for the moment, everything leads to the assumption that the revelatory frame is younger than the content of the text itself. We could even speculate that the creation of this frame happened in conjunction with the diffusion of the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, in which R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai plays a pivotal role, but further research is needed in order to confirm or abandon this hypothesis.

Going back to the parallels between the texts composing the “R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai complex”, two elements must be taken into consideration. First, together with the common traits mentioned above, these texts are characterized

by several differences too. Specifically, the final section of the *Prayer* is totally absent in the *Secrets*, in the *Future Events*, and in the *Order of the Signs*, while it shows interesting similarities with other literary products, such as *'Otot ha-Mašiah*.²⁹ Furthermore, the whole textual structure of the *Prayer* is very complex and almost disjointed. Therefore, our text seemingly consists in a collection of independent *derašot* that were put together at some point by someone who did not pay too much attention to the internal coherence of the final product.

The composite nature of the *Prayer* is confirmed by a homily that was published and studied by Ephraim Urbach, who noticed the strong connection between the two texts and suggested that the latter was a source for the former.³⁰ By synoptical comparison of the homily and the *Prayer*, Urbach highlighted that the author of the latter copied part of the homily, which deals with battles between Edomites and Ishmaelites on the plain of Acre. Here is a short passage in the *Prayer*:

²⁷ *Future Events of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai* could be considered as an early stage of the textual evolution that led to shaping of the revelatory frame, as the eschatological narrative is presented as a revelation to R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai, but the archangel Meṭaṭron is totally absent.

²⁸ To my knowledge, the most ancient complete manuscript of the *Secrets* is Ms. Munich hebr. 222, in Sephardic-Italian script, dating back to the 16th century. See the website Ktiv.org for further details and for the digitalization of the manuscript. The Cairo Genizah fragment Oxford Heb. d. 46/72-73 seems to be more similar to the *Order of the Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah* than to the *Secrets* with respect to the topic of the revelatory frame, which might then have been shaped between the 13th and the 14th century. However, one text edited by S. WERTHEIMER in *Batei Midrashot*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1894, pp. 24-26, could prove this hypothesis wrong. It is the beginning of the *Secrets of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*, in which, as in the *textus receptus*, everything is presented as a vision mediated by the archangel Meṭaṭron. Wertheimer (in the second edition of his volume, edited by his son Abraham Joseph in 1968 and reprinted in Jerusalem by Ktab Yad Wesepher in 1990, pp. 506-507) affirms that, for this text, he based himself on a manuscript found in Egypt, without providing any further in-

formation. The manuscript is nowadays irrecoverable. It is probable that Wertheimer, who in the last decade of the 19th century was involved in the trade of ancient manuscripts, had come across this manuscript, had copied it and then sold it to someone unknown. As far as I know, there is no trace of it in the collection Taylor-Schechter in Cambridge, nor in any other collection. In fact, the Cairo Genizah was discovered only a few years after the publication of Wertheimer's book. It is thus impossible to know if this was a medieval or a modern manuscript, and it is not convenient to take this source as evidence in favor or against my hypothesis.

²⁹ See REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., pp. 121-129 for an introduction and an English translation of this text. *'Otot ha-Mašiah* is a very widespread text and it survives in several manuscripts. See M. BUTTENWISER, *Outline of the Neo-Hebraic Apocalyptic Literature*, Jennings & Pye, Cincinnati 1901, pp. 37-38.

³⁰ E. URBACH, *A Midrash of Redemption from Late Crusader Times*, «Eretz Israel» 10 (1970-71), pp. 58-63. The manuscript of the homily is now preserved at Bodleian Library in Oxford, Ms. Opp. Add. 4° 128, ff. 26r-29v. See A.D. NEUBAUER, *Catalog of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and in the College Libraries of Oxford*, vol. 1, Oxford 1886, n. 2339. The website Ktiv.org dates the manuscript to the late 14th century, more precisely between 1372

“Ships from the coast of Kittim” (Num 24,22), these are the Edomites who are destined to arise in the last days. When they (eventually) emerge, they will come forth like robbers, as scripture predicts: “when robbers come against you” (Obad 1,5). They will do battle with the Ishmaelites and kill many of them and assemble themselves at the camp at Acco. Iron shall crumble clay, and its leg(s) will break down to the toes, and they will flee naked without horses.³¹

Both the *Prayer* and the homily studied by Urbach continue with a description of the irruption of a heavenly voice (בַּת קוֹל) that incites the Israelites to march against Jericho/Rome and to enact God’s vengeance against Edom, thus fulfilling the verse “I will enact my vengeance against Edom by the agency of my people Israel” (Ezek 25,14). However, after describing the fall of the city walls under the cry “Šema‘ Isra’el”, the redactor of the *Prayer* suddenly abandoned his source and started a new section of his work with the words “Again I returned to my prayer”. Urbach suggested that the compiler decided to do so in order not to lose the grip on his narration. Interestingly, the above-mentioned *Order of the Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah* can be inserted in the synoptical analysis too, but this text follows the homily to its whole length, thus representing,

once more, a different stage of the transmission of the texts related to the *Prayer* and the *Secrets of R. Šim‘on b. Yoḥ‘ai*.

Having thus ascertained that our text is the result of the collation of several homilies, I will now try to understand in which context such an operation might have occurred.

Several scholars tend to consider the *Prayer* as the offspring of messianic expectations bound to the phenomenon of the Crusades.³² According to some eschatological interpretations, based on traditions preserved in the Talmud and elaborated by important figures as R. Sa‘adya Ga’on and R. Hai Ga’on, the Edomites (that is, the Christians) would conquer Jerusalem in the future.³³ This dramatic event would be a sign of the imminent redemption for Israel. Moreover, the statement in Isa 21,7 (*For thus did the Lord say to me: “Go, station the watchman. Let him report what he sees. And should he see chariotry of a team/pair of horses/riders, chariotry of asses, chariotry of camels, he must pay careful attention, a lot of attention”*)³⁴ was interpreted as a prophecy concerning the history of Israel and the foreign nations that would dominate upon the Chosen People and their holy city: the chariotry of riders was intended to mean the empire of the Greeks and of the Romans (and thus, the Christians); the chariotry of

and 1400. The script is Sephardic. The manuscript has been digitized and can be viewed on the website of the Bodleian Library.

³¹ Transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 99.

³² The first to connect the *Prayer* to the Crusades was its first editor, JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash IV*, cit., pp. VIII-IX. Other scholars followed this hypothesis: F. BAER, *Eine jüdische Messiasprophetie auf das Jahr 1186 und der dritte Kreuzzug*, «Monatschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums» 70 (1926), pp. 113-122; 155-165, esp. pp. 161-5; E. ASHTOR-STRAUSS, *Saladin and the Jews*, «Hebrew Union College Annual» 27 (1956), pp. 305-326, esp. pp. 321-23; STEINSCHNEIDER, *Apocalypsen*, cit., pp. 627-659, esp. pp. 635-36. According to Steinschneider, both the *Prayer* and the *Secrets* were reworked in the period of the Crusades, thus reaching the shape in which they have come down to us. However, BAER, *Eine jüdische Messiasprophetie*, cit., p. 161, note 6, pointed out that Steinschneider did not provide any certain evidence

for this hypothesis, and came to the conclusion that the *Secrets* do not mention events that occurred during the Crusades. Rather, the section which, according to other scholars (e.g. ASHTOR-STRAUSS, *Saladin and the Jews*, cit., p. 323), should be linked to the Mongol invasion in the mid-13th century, would find correspondence in ancient eschatological texts.

³³ See e.g. *bSanh.* 98b; *bYoma* 10a, *Midraš Genesis Rabbah* 42; SA‘ADYA GA’ON, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (transl. by S. ROSENBLATT, Yale University Press, New Haven 1989 [or. ed. 1948], p. 302; *Responsum of R. Hai Ga’on on Redemption* (transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., pp. 134-5). See also E. SIMCHA, *Chronology and Eschatology: A Jewish-Christian Debate, France 1100*, «Journal of Jewish Studies» 64, 2 (2013), pp. 264-82, esp. pp. 280-81. I hereby wish to thank prof. Simcha for sending me his interesting paper.

³⁴ English translation by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 7.

asses, usually rendered in the singular form as “the one who rides an ass”, was interpreted as the Messiah, according to Zacharias’ prophecy “Humble and mounted upon an ass” (Zech 9,9); the chariotry of camels symbolized the Arabs.³⁵ The whole verse would thus mean that Israel will be subjected to the domination of the Christians, but when the domination of the Arabs begins, then the Messiah will appear.³⁶ It is thus likely that the conquest of Jerusalem by the crusaders in 1099 and its subsequent fall into Muslim hands in 1187 alimented some sort of messianic expectation.

In the *Prayer*, some scholars have also detected references to the Mongol invasion of Palestine in the mid-13th century,³⁷ especially in the section that reads as follows:

Regarding (the phrase) “slave of kings” (Isa 49,7): there will be a slave of rulers who will rebel against his masters, and (other) men who had rebelled against their masters will be gathered to him and assemble themselves with them. They will make war with the Ishmaelites, kill their warriors, and take possession of their wealth and property. They are repulsive men, dressed in black, and coming from the east. They are cruel and impetuous, as scripture attests: “Lo, I shall rise up against (לֹא) the Chaldeans the nation cruel and impetuous” (Hab 1,6). All of them are horsemen, as scripture attests: “horsemen charging up” (Nah 3,3). They come from a distant land to take possession of dwellings that do not

belong to them, and they will ascend onto the height of the mountains – this refers to “the mountains of Israel” (cf. Ezek 17,23; 20,40; 34,14) – and demolish the sanctuary, extinguish the lamps, and split the doors.³⁸

Joshua Prawer, however, believes that this section refers rather to the Seljuk invasion of Jerusalem between 1071 and 1073.³⁹

Bernard Lewis has provided the most systematic study on the *Prayer* so far.⁴⁰ He divided the text into several sections, each one representing, according to the scholar, a different step in the historical evolution of the apocalypse. These phases are, namely, the period of the passage from the Umayyad to the Abbasid caliphate (8th century), the Fatimid invasion of Egypt and the campaign of the Byzantine Emperor John Tzimiskes in Syria and Palestine (10th century), and, eventually, the crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, which would be described as follows:

At that time the kingdom of the Kenites⁴¹ will come to Jerusalem, subdue it, and kill more than thirty thousand within it.⁴²

Lewis believed that the final redactor of the *Prayer* was a direct witness of the conquest.⁴³ Reeves, in his comment to our text, seems to follow Lewis’ hypothesis.⁴⁴

However, some aspects need to be considered. First, eschatological texts tend to be fluid,

³⁵ This proof-text appears in all the texts composing the “R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai complex”.

³⁶ For a deep analysis on this topic see REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., pp. 7-12.

³⁷ See E. ASHTOR-STRAUSS, *The Mongol Storm and the Jews. A Contribution to the History of Oriental Jewry from Arabic Sources*, «Zion» 4 (1939), p. 51 (Heb.). Ashtor-Strauss follows the hypothesis by H. GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. VII: *Von Maimunis Tod 1205 bis zur Verbannung der Juden aus Spanien und Portugal*, Leipzig 1863, pp. 408 ff. See also BAER, *Eine jüdische Messiasprophetie*, cit., p. 161, n. 6. BUTTENWIESER, *Outline*, cit., p. 41, was very critical against the position of Graetz and Ashtor-Strauss and claimed that “in this part of the apocalypse the reference is solely to the crusades, and could hardly be plainer”.

³⁸ Transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 96.

³⁹ See J. PRAWER, *The History of the Jews in the*

Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988, pp. 6-8.

⁴⁰ B. LEWIS, *An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History*, «Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London» 13, 2 (1950), pp. 308-338.

⁴¹ Even though, in other texts, the Kenites are usually identified with the Arabs (see P. CRONE - M. COOK, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, pp. 35-36), here they symbolize the Christians. See LEWIS, *An Apocalyptic Vision*, cit., p. 321; BUCHANAN, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, cit., p. 388, n. 132.

⁴² Transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit. p. 93.

⁴³ LEWIS, *An Apocalyptic Vision*, cit., pp. 310-311.

⁴⁴ REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 89, n. 78.

to be re-used, modified and restructured to respond to different needs in different historical periods, and to re-interpret eschatologically the events that came to pass throughout time. This makes the identification of historical events in the texts very problematic. What is more important, is that the manuscript that transmits our text was copied presumably two hundred years later with respect to the events it might allude to. In such a long period of time, the text could have gone through so many modifications as to frustrate any attempt at dating it. Even the possible textual transmission of the *Prayer* remains so far very difficult to reconstruct, as it has survived in a single manuscript. However, there are some clues that let us think that certain textual elements that we encounter in the *Prayer* might have been circulating in the Near East already in the 12th century.

The manuscript IV.B.21, found in the Cairo Genizah and now preserved at the library of Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) in Paris, presents an oriental script and is dated paleographically to the 12th century.⁴⁵ The short section of text that has been preserved seems to be a mixture of several Jewish eschatological writings, such as *Aggadat Mašiah*,⁴⁶ *Secrets*

of R. Šim'on b. Yoh'ai, *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoh'ai*, and *Order of the Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah*. In the paper that I have dedicated to this fragment,⁴⁷ I have come to the conclusion that what we have here is not another version of the *Prayer*, or of any other text considered so far, but rather an independent text, showing strong similarities to other writings. This fragment demonstrates that the same eschatological *topoi* that we encounter in the *Prayer* were circulating already in the 12th century.⁴⁸

Even one of the most influential Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages and beyond, Moše ben Maimon (Maimonides), indirectly testifies for the circulation of such eschatological themes in his age. In his famous *Epistle to Yemen*, in which he dealt with the messianic topic with regard to a self-proclaimed Messiah appeared in Yemen toward 1170, Maimonides warned his readers against the interpretation of some events as signs of the beginning of the end.⁴⁹ In this context he mentions the fall of the Giron, a fact that he thought could not be considered as one of these signs. It appears that the Giron is one of the walls,⁵⁰ or maybe the oriental door of the yard of the mosque in Damascus.⁵¹ The *topos*

⁴⁵ See the description of the fragment on the website Ktiv.org. The manuscript has been digitized and can be viewed on the website of Friedberg Genizah Project (www.fjms.genizah.org).

⁴⁶ This is an eschatological text that was embedded within a large commentary on the Torah and on the Megillot known as *Midraš Leqah Tov*, written by R. Ṭuviyyah ben Eli'ezer, an important exegetist who lived in Thessaloniki between the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th century. *Aggadat Mašiah* was published by JELLINEK, *Bet ha-Midrash*, cit., vol. III, pp. 141-43. For an English edition of this text see Reeves, *Trajectories*, pp. 144-48. I have recently published an article in Italian with translation and comment on this writing: see S. CRESTANI, *La Aggadat Mašiah: traduzione e commento di un testo escatologico medievale ebraico*, «Liber Annuus» 70 (2020), pp. 291-326.

⁴⁷ S. CRESTANI, *Un testo escatologico ebraico medievale in un frammento della Genizah del Cairo*, «Materia Giudaica» XXVI/2 (2021), pp. 139-156.

⁴⁸ I am currently working on the hypothesis that ms. AIU IV.B.21 and other Genizah fragments (Oxford, Bodleian Library Heb. d. 46/72-73 and Cam-

bridge University Library T-S C2.70) all belonged to the same manuscript, and thus to the same text. If this hypothesis were confirmed, we would have a more complete writing showing strong similarities to the *Secrets* and the *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoh'ai*, and to *Order of Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah*. I will publish a paper on this topic in «Materia Giudaica» in 2024.

⁴⁹ See the English translation and comment on the letter in A. HALKIN - D. HARTMAN, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia-Jerusalem 1993 [1st ed. 1985], pp. 91-207, here p. 123.

⁵⁰ In the *Secrets* it appears first as western, and then as eastern Giron. According to REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 84, n. 51, the second version is the correct one.

⁵¹ Cfr. B.J. WALKER, *Commemorating the Sacred Spaces of the Past: The Mamluk and the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus*, «Near Eastern Archaeology» 67, 1 (March 2004), pp. 26-39, in which the scholar states (pp. 28-29) that Bab Jayrun is the oriental door of the mosque.

of its fall recurs in some Jewish medieval apocalyptic texts, especially in the R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai complex.⁵² After mentioning the Giron, Maimonides affirms that "Some (of the supposed signs of the end) are wrongly ascribed to the sages".⁵³ We could even suppose that here Maimonides was referring to an apocalyptic text somehow attributed to R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai. Though this hypothesis is merely speculative, it is evident that Maimonides did know at least one writing that was textually very close to the *Prayer*.

I now turn to investigate how writings of this kind were re-shaped and merged in a single apocalypse that we know today as *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*, a text that has come down to us in a Provençal manuscript copied in the mid-15th century.

Two hundred years before the copying of our text, in the 13th century, the region of Provence was rich with messianic expectations, probably fueled by the news of Saladin's victories in the Holy Land and the crisis of the crusaders' kingdoms, as Avraham Grossman point-

ed out.⁵⁴ The scholar has connected this kind of expectation to the 'aliyah of the rabbis (300, according to the tradition), who left southern France in 1210 ca. and settled in Jerusalem and in Acre.⁵⁵ This emigration was due, among other reasons, to their will of hastening the beginning of the messianic age, as they believed that a certain amount of people respecting the precepts of the Torah would be necessary in order for the Messiah to be revealed in the Holy Land.⁵⁶ Furthermore, strong eschatological hopes characterized the period around the year 1240, when the end of the fifth millennium from the creation of the world was expected. In fact, in the sabbatical scheme, after 1240 the sixth millennium would begin, a millennium dedicated to the messianic kingdom, which would lead to the seventh millennium and to universal judgment.⁵⁷ It is thus possible that apocalyptic and eschatological texts started to circulate in this period in southern France and, more generally, in Europe, because of the messianic expectations bound to the events mentioned so far, but also to a situation

⁵² The Genizah fragment Oxford Heb. d. 46/72-73 mentions the Giron too. On this particular element of medieval Jewish apocalyptic literature, see also STEINSCHNEIDER, *Apocalypsen*, cit., pp. 638-645. The Giron appears in some Islamic eschatological texts too: the door Jayrun is mentioned in the 9th century work known as *Kitāb al Fitan* by Nu'aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī. See the text in English translation in D. COOK, *The Book of Tribulations: The Syrian Muslim Apocalyptic Tradition: An Annotated Translation by Nu'aym b. Hammad al-Marwazi*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017.

⁵³ HALKIN - HARTMAN, *Epistles*, cit., p. 123.

⁵⁴ A. GROSSMAN, *Saladin's Victories and the Aliyah of the Jews of Europe to the Land of Israel*, in Y. BEN-ARIE - E. REINER (eds.), *Ve-Zot le-Yehuda: Studies in the History of Eretz Yisrael: Presented to Yehuda Ben Porat*, Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 362-382 (Heb.).

⁵⁵ An interesting document on this emigration was edited by S.D. GOITEIN, *Geniza Sources for the Crusader Period: A Survey*, in B.Z. KEDAR et al. (eds.), *Outremer: Studies in the History of the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem. Presented to Joshua Praver*, Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 306-22, here p. 319. For a discussion on this topic, see A. CUFFEL, *Call and Response: European Jewish Emigration to Egypt and Palestine in*

the Middle Ages, «The Jewish Quarterly Review» 90, 1-2 (1999), pp. 61-101.

⁵⁶ Cf. GROSSMAN, *Saladin's Victories*, cit., p. 376; I.J. YUVAL, *Two Nations in your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, University of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 2008 (or. ed. Tel-Aviv 2000 [Heb.]), pp. 270-74. However, E. KANARFOGEL (*The 'Aliyah of "Three Hundred Rabbis" in 1211: Tosafist Attitudes toward Settling in the Land of Israel*, «The Jewish Quarterly Review» 76, 3 (1986), pp. 191-215) pointed out that the motivations for the 'aliyah were connected to the need of some tosafists to fulfill completely the precepts of the Torah, which was only possible in the land of Israel. For a summary of the main hypothesis on this topic, see CUFFEL, *Call and Response*, cit., pp. 61-101.

⁵⁷ Cf. YUVAL, *Two Nations*, cit., pp. 257-295. See also a document that was published by S. ASSAF (*New Documents Concerning Proselytes and a Messianic Movement*, «Zion» 5, 2 (1940), pp. 112-124, esp. pp. 115 ff. [Heb.]). This is a letter that was sent to the Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt concerning a prophet that had appeared in France. This prophet had foreseen the gathering of the exiles and the revelation of Elijah in 1227, the coming of the Messiah in 1233 and the beginning of the redemption of Israel in 1240.

of persecution and of progressive worsening of the relations between Christians and Jews.⁵⁸ In fact, polemical traits against Christianity are strongly present in this kind of literature.

The elements considered so far lead to the hypothesis that different homilies of a mainly eschatological content were used and reworked between Eretz Israel and Egypt in the 12th century. These *derašot*, some of which had probably been circulating for decades, if not for centuries, were copied and re-adapted in an age of strong messianic expectations caused by the struggle between Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. These events were interpreted, in the light of ancient prophecies, as signs of the approaching redemption of Israel. I have come to this conclusion not only because we have evidence of the circulation of such texts in the Near East in the 12th century, which is mainly due to the discovery of the Cairo Genizah. In fact, very few Hebrew manuscripts produced in Europe before the 13th century have come down to us. Thus, the older dating of the manuscripts found in Egypt cannot be taken as proof that these texts emerged there and not in Europe. In my opinion, however, the environment in which these eschatological writings were redacted was the Near East because of the accuracy of the geographical indications.⁵⁹

I believe that texts of this kind, maybe already merged in a single product somehow related to R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai, arrived in Europe between the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century, giving birth to the various versions of the *Secrets of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai* (among which I considered here *Order of the Signs that will Anticipate the Coming of the Messiah*), and finally to the *Prayer*. The initial environment in which these texts circulated could have been southern France, which was rich in messianic expectations, but also Aškenaz, where persecutions against the Jews at the time of the Crusades might have raised hopes for redemption.

In the period that separates the beginning of the circulation of our text in Europe and the

first witness that has come down to us (i.e. the 15th-century JTS manuscript), further modifications might have occurred. For example, the *Prayer* is the only text in which the Christians are accused of sacrificing babies to Jesus:

[The Romans] will enter it [i.e., Jerusalem] and slaughter many Ishmaelites and cast down numerous corpses in it. They will capture a great many Ishmaelite women and dash out the brains of the children. Each day they will sacrifice children to Jesus.⁶⁰

What we have here is probably a Jewish response to the blood libel that started to be addressed to the Jews between the 12th and the 13th century.⁶¹ Likely, it is not by chance that the *Prayer*, in its final section, shows many points in common to *'Otot ha-Mašiah*, a very widespread text in Medieval Europe, as confirmed by the large number of manuscripts that preserve it (mostly dating back to the 14th century).⁶²

One last element that needs to be considered is that a synoptical comparison of the *Prayer* with other related texts (for example *Secrets of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*) clearly shows that our apocalypse lacks the most eschatological section of the narrative, the one describing the resurrection of the dead, the messianic banquet, and the final judgment. The impression that the properly eschatological section was omitted from the text is confirmed by the comparison with the two Parma manuscripts of the *Order of the Signs*, whose text runs parallel to the “historical” section of the *Prayer*, but then continues with the description of the *eschaton*, whereas the *Prayer* adds a new section with other prophecies *ex eventu* and polemical elements against Christians, and then ends quite abruptly, with just a brief mention of the Lord fighting against Armilos:

Armilos will hear that a king [i.e., the Messiah] has appeared in Israel, and he will collect the

⁵⁸ A paper of mine on this topic will be presumably published in the journal *Henoch* in 2024.

⁵⁹ SHACHAR (*A Pious Belligerence*, cit., pp. 130-152) proposed that these texts were compiled by the members of the Jewish community of Acre in the course of the 13th century.

⁶⁰ Transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 101.

⁶¹ The fact that this is a later addition to the text is confirmed by the two Parma manuscripts, in which this detail is absent.

⁶² See above, n. 29.

forces of all the nations of the earth, and they will advance against the King Messiah and Israel. The Holy One, blessed be He, will fight on behalf of Israel. He will say to the Messiah: "Sit at My right hand" (Ps 110,1), and the Messiah will say to Israel, "Assemble yourselves and 'stand aside and witness the Lord's deliverance'!" (Exod 14,13). Immediately the Holy One, blessed be He, will go forth and do battle with them, as scripture promises: "The Lord will go forth and do battle with those nations" (Zech 14,3), and it is recorded in scripture: "At that time I will bring you, and at that time I will gather you; for I will make you famous and an object of praise for all the peoples of the earth" (Zeph 3,20). Amen! May that time and that occasion be soon!⁶³

Thus, the focus of the *Prayer* seems to be the listing of events still that will lead Israel to liberation from foreign yoke, represented by Edom and Armilos, rather than a speculation on the *eschaton* itself. This might be taken as a further clue as to where the *Prayer* was originally edited and circulated, a context of persecutions against the Jews during the last crusades and the exacerbation of the relationship between Jews and Christians.

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SUMMARY

In this article I focus on one of the most interesting and complex texts of the Jewish apocalyptic production in the Middle Ages: *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*. The paper can be divided into two sections. In the first part, I paint a picture of the manuscript in which the *Prayer* has been preserved and I focus on its textual aspects. In the second part, I try to reconstruct the cultural, historical, and literary milieu in which our text could have been redacted and in which it circulated.

KEYWORDS: *Prayer of R. Šim'on b. Yoḥ'ai*; Crusades; Jewish Eschatology.

⁶³ Transl. by REEVES, *Trajectories*, cit., p. 105.

