

PRAYER, SACRED SONG, AND ANGELIC PRAISE IN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

An Introduction

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What is prayer? How does one pray? What words do you use? How do you know your prayer is reaching divine destinations? Ancient Jews and Christians struggled with these questions for centuries, turning to biblical models, later written traditions, and perhaps even each other for inspiration. In the visions of Isaiah, where winged seraphim praise God, both Jews and Christians found the perfect model for imitation, though they each incorporated the angelic praise in their own creative way.

In the first half of this session, I will outline the fundamentals of the Jewish and Christian liturgy, its shared sources, differing forms, and parallel, sometimes intersecting lines of development, especially in the Byzantine East. Students will learn what prayer meant to ancient people and how it may differ from our conceptions of prayer today. In the second half of this session, I wish to shed light on the introduction of sacred songs (also termed hymns or liturgical poetry) to late antique synagogues and churches in the Byzantine east. The sixth century witnessed the flourishing of the genre of sacred song, in which Christian and Jewish composers inspired their communities to join the angels in prayer. In these poeticized prayers, singers made biblical figures come alive, expound on their individual triumphs and sorrows all the while conveying proper theology. Like the composers of sacred song, synagogue and church leaders taught their respective congregations how to imagine themselves in prayer, what gestures to make, and how to join the chorus of angels, whether it was on high or right beside them.

The commonalities between these performances in churches and synagogues have long puzzled scholars. Though we will not be able to solve this mystery, an overview of this field will introduce students to the aspirations, anxieties, and imagination of Jews and Christians in the ancient Greek East and how they expressed them in religious song. Once the main attraction of Jewish and Christian religious institutions, the profile of these poetic compositions has declined in the last millennia. However, hymns are still an integral part of the Greek Orthodox liturgy and their Jewish counterpart, *piyyut*, can still be found in the Jewish prayer book. I hope this session will give these once popular compositions the attention they deserve and give students another entryway to understanding how people pray and connect to the divine.