Cursing the Christians?
A History of the Birkat HaMinim

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Introduction

1 Origins and Early History: Late Antiquity

2 Under Early Islam: The Period of the Ge'onim and the Geniza

3 The Birkat HaMinim in Europe of the High Middle Ages

4 Living with Censorship?: Early Modern Realities

5 The Modern Period: Changes by Choice to the Text

Afterword

Appendix 1: Geniza Texts of the Birkat HaMinim

Appendix 2: Evidence for the Birkat HaMinim in the Pre-Sephardized Rites of the Muslim World

Appendix 3: Uncensored Medieval European Texts of the Birkat HaMinim

Appendix 4: Censored Texts of the Birkat HaMinim, 1550 to the Present

Appendix 5: Texts of the Liberal Movements

Abbreviations

Notes

Glossary

Bibliography of Secondary Sources

Primary Source Index

Subject Index
Introduction

A decade ago, when scrolling through microfilms of medieval Jewish prayer book manuscripts, blacked out texts and erasures caught my attention. These were not scribal errors in the manuscripts, but rather bits of liturgy offensive to Christians that had been censored. The most consistent loci of this censorship were a small set of prayers: the morning blessing praising God “who has not made me a gentile”; the line in the concluding prayer, ‘aleynu, “for they bow down to emptiness and nothingness and pray to a god that does not save”; and the prayer called the birkat haminim (the blessing, or malediction, of the heretics), which is the focus here. This last, in its premodern forms, functioned in Europe as a curse of apostates to Christianity, Christians themselves, enemies of the Jews, and the Christian governing powers. It is easy to understand why it became a source of controversy.

From the Jewish perspective, the most serious loss to censorship of these three was also the last. The blessing “who has not made me a gentile,” while mandated in the Babylonian Talmud and therefore required, is a prayer originally meant for private recitation. For a while, prayer books simply substituted alternative language, often a positive phrasing “who has made me a Jew” or “who has not made me a foreigner,” but it is easy to imagine that individuals continued to recite the original. The second is not a mandatory prayer at all but rather a medieval supplement concluding the daily prayers, adopted from the High Holy Day liturgy where it functions as a poetic introduction to more important passages. Except in its original setting, it also functions as a private prayer and continues to be recited. The birkat haminim, though, is a mandatory weekday prayer, recited both privately by individuals and then out loud by the precentor for a total of five daily recitations, six days a week. Thus, while contemporary Jews who pray and attend synagogue only on Sabbaths and holidays rarely or never encounter this text, Jews who accept the rabbinic mandates for daily prayer cannot avoid it. While in the cases of the first two, changes could be cosmetic, or only to the printed prayer book but not carried through in actual practice, here something more substantive had to occur.

My initial questions on facing the censorship of the birkat haminim were: “How did Jews respond to this censorship and what was its impact on the prayer? How long did it take for the text to restabilize? How did the censorship itself affect Jewish attitudes to their Christian neighbors?” I quickly learned, though, that the questions were really much larger. Answering these questions required delving into the prehistory of the censorship itself, into the Christian polemics surrounding the prayer and the Jewish responses to them. Ultimately, too, as the scope of the study broadened, it became clear that intellectual currents within the
Jewish community itself, and the varieties of Jewish communities affected, themselves generated a shifting range of responses that emerged differently in different places and different times. These responses, embedded both in the texts of the *birkat haminim* and in the meanings and history ascribed to it, provide a window simultaneously onto the dynamics of liturgical change in Judaism and onto the realities of the shifting relationships between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors—especially the Christians—through the centuries. Unlike many such windows, it provides us with a single persistent Jewish text that for much of its history was explicitly anti-Christian; with periodic Christian polemics against this text; with Jewish apologetics for the text that are also periodic but not necessarily corresponding to known Christian polemics; and with modern resolutions to the issues that allow this prayer to cease functioning as a flash point in Christian-Jewish relations. The exploration of this multifaceted window is the focus of this book.

**WHAT IS THE *BIRKAT HAMINIM***?

According to the tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, at the academy gathered in Yavneh (Jamnia) in the decades following the 70 CE destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the rabbinic patriarch, Rabban Gamliel, called for the establishment of the *birkat haminim* within the central prayer of eighteen benedictions. All later evidence suggests that this *birkat haminim*, literally “a blessing of the sectarians,” was some sort of curse asking that God eliminate the “kinds” of people causing the rabbis trouble. In reality, though, we know neither who these *minim* were, nor what they were doing, nor even whether this report, which appears in no early rabbinic sources, represents history or not. It is best, then, not to translate the word *minim*, as its literal meaning “kinds or sorts” lacks any useful specificity. In early rabbinic texts, the term can apply to Christians, but it can also apply to various kinds of Jewish heretics who are not Christians. Thus, the question of the original intent of the prayer remains very much a matter of mystery, albeit an intriguing one.

“Blessing” is another misleading term in this context. While in both English and Hebrew, blessing and curse serve as polar opposites, within the world of Jewish liturgy, the word *berakhah*, “blessing” or “benediction,” also serves as a technical term pointing to a prayer constructed with a certain formula that begins with the word *barukh* (blessed or praised). This formula signals a statutory liturgical act and structures all the central required prayers of Jewish life. Thus, while to a certain extent the word *birkat* (blessing of) should be read here as pointing to its inverse, imitating Job’s wife’s, “bless God and die” (Job 2:9), it functions equally as a technical term for this sort of liturgical unit, regardless of its specific content.

This central prayer of eighteen benedictions in which the *birkat haminim* is embedded has a variety of names, the most neutral of which is *amidah*, describing the standing posture in which the prayer is recited; this is also a common technical name for the prayer and what I will employ here. The *birkat haminim* is
the twelfth benediction of this complex prayer, part of the series of petitions that constitute its middle section on weekdays. Among these petitions, it forms part of the subset that asks God to enable the messianic restoration of the Jewish state. The logic of the location of the *birkat hamamin* within this list is clear. The preceding blessing petitions for the restoration of right systems of justice. With this in place, there are mechanisms for controlling troublemakers, and this is the function of the curse of the *birkat hamamin*. The following benediction can then address the opposite concern, asking God to bless the righteous and others doing God’s will. This part of the *amidah* thus asks God to ensure that the justice inherent in the messianic world will manifest itself first in the punishment of people who seek to harm the Jewish community, and then in the reward of those who act correctly. Cursing as a means of social control and boundary construction was common in ancient and medieval societies, including among Jews. Thus, even though this petition is anomalous among the benedictions of the *amidah* in its tone, it probably functioned as a more normal mode of discourse in its earlier social contexts.

The forms of this prayer that became dominant in Europe of the High Middle Ages follow a single basic structure, with variation in their specific wording. A common version of the medieval uncensored Rhineland rite appears below in Table 0.1.

There are four lines to the body of this blessing, followed by its concluding benediction. This structure, including most of the verbs, remains largely intact throughout the entire medieval and modern history of the prayer. Censorship affects most directly the objects of the verbs, the words that begin each line in the Hebrew. All four of these objects are understood in Europe, at least in popular discourse, to refer to Christians: apostates are baptized Jews; *minim* in the medieval world are often born Christians; enemies of the Jews are their Christian persecutors; and the empire of insolence (or arrogance in many of today’s translations) refers to the current governing powers, whether ecclesiastical or secular. The verbs all petition God for the death and destruction of these categories of miscreants,

| לַפְּשָׁמְתוֹא אֶל הַעְוָה הַקָּה | May there be no hope for apostates; |
| לַפְּלָשָׁמְתוֹא כְּעָמֶּךָ אֲפֶּרָד | and may all the *minim* immediately perish; |
| לֶכְּל אָאָמֲרִיָּא כְּעָמֶּךָ אֲפֶּרָד | and may all the enemies of Your people speedily be cut off; |
| בְּלֹא הַזָּזָא מִדְּרֵד הָעֵשֶׂרֶךְ הָשָׂפֶר הָאָמָרֶךְ הָשָׂפֶר הָעֵשֶׂרֶךְ מִדְּרֵד | and may You speedily uproot and smash and defeat the empire of insolence; and humble all our enemies speedily in our day. |
| בְּרִכֵּה יְהֹוָא לְשֵׁר יִוְרֵיָא וַכְּעָמֶּךָ הָיָה | Blessed are You, Eternal, who breaks enemies and humbles the insolent. |
either in this world or in the next. Medieval and early modern Christians understood themselves to be cursed by this prayer, and there is ample evidence that many Jews understood it this way, too. Thus, this mandatory prayer embedded a Jewish anti-Christian curse that Christians, not surprisingly, found offensive, especially when they ignored the anti-Jewish elements of their own tradition.

The Talmud and earlier rabbinic texts, however, do not provide the specific language of most prayers, including of the birkat haminim. The oral nature of rabbinic prayer meant that written texts of this liturgy probably only emerged around the ninth century. No earlier manuscripts are known. Jewish communities either presumed that the version of the prayer that they had received was "correct" and directly reflected the Yavnean text, or, aware of variant traditions of other regional rites, were not deeply concerned about this question. However, censorship of the birkat haminim in Christian Europe created a situation in which Jews knew with certainty that the texts in their prayer books for this mandatory prayer were not correct. The shifting and various implications of this realization will be a major focus of the second half of this book.

**HISTORICAL AND ACADEMIC QUESTIONS: CONSIDERATIONS OF METHOD**

As Jews entered modernity, though, the concern developed a new dynamic. The question of what to recite in daily prayers remained (with enormous complexity, as we will see in Chapter 5), but for some, another only partially related scholarly question emerged: that of reconstructing liturgical history and speculating about what was instituted at Yavneh. These "scientific" questions began as Leopold Zunz and others in the nineteenth century applied methods of Protestant biblical scholarship to Jewish texts, including the liturgy. However, they pursued this question with little data beyond the texts of the rabbinic canon and scattered medieval liturgical manuscripts until, in 1898, Solomon Schechter published the first findings from the Cairo geniza, a recently discovered treasure trove of discarded medieval manuscripts. The manuscripts he transcribed and described in his initial article included two texts of the birkat haminim that named Christians explicitly. Many have since presumed that these texts reflect that which was composed at Yavneh.

The list of scholarly works trying to reconstruct the original text of the birkat haminim and its history is voluminous and ongoing. As Steven Fine writes, "Almost every major European or American scholar of rabbinic literature and history has voiced an opinion regarding the identification of the minim, in no small measure reacting to the significance of this questions for early Christian studies" and because of the connections to the birkat haminim. On the assumption that the birkat haminim was anti-Christian in its origins, this list includes a significant number of scholars of early Christianity as well, not all of them sufficiently versed in the study of Judaism to separate the wheat from the chaff.
However, one of the reasons so many scholars have contributed to this discussion is simply that we do not have enough solid evidence on which to base demonstrable conclusions about the origins of the *birkat haminim*. Too much depends on the preconceptions with which one approaches the few hints that can be gleaned from the texts. It is possible that the rabbinic narrative of the institution of the *birkat haminim* may be more myth than history. In addition, evidence that the rabbis succeeded in spreading their liturgical system beyond their own narrow circles is lacking for several centuries after the destruction of the Temple, meaning that it may have been possible for liturgical texts to remain quite flexible and responsive in their specifics to changing circumstances. There is no indisputable evidence that Christians knew of or reacted to the *birkat haminim* until the end of the fourth century, and even then, they responded only to what became the second line of its text. Thus, uncritically to retroject Schechter’s geniza texts, probably dating from the early second millennium, back a thousand years to Yavneh and presume that they represent original texts, as so many scholars have done, is methodologically unjustified. The conclusion to be drawn from the geniza manuscripts’ explicit mention of Christians is simply that, at least in Arab Cairo in the early second millennium, Jews did not hesitate to embed an anti-Christian polemic in their prayers. That Church Fathers knew something of this in the late fourth century enables us only to retroject this mention of Christians to three hundred years after Yavneh, in the era of emerging Christian supremacy. Thus, we can reconstruct the history of the *birkat haminim* from the period of the geniza forward with reasonable certainty (although with substantial gaps in the non-European evidence), but reconstruction of an “original text” is not possible.

The impossibility of reconstructing an original text only shifts our focus of attention. There is no reason to presume that the original purpose of a text has significant or even any bearing on its meaning in subsequent times and places. This is particularly true of a text embedded in a ritual context. A set of received, fixed words like the *birkat haminim* recited multiple times daily inevitably becomes something performed, where the specific meanings of individual words and phrases often do not register through their simple denotative meanings. The rabbis recognized this and struggled early with the tension inherent in requiring universal participation in a complex verbal daily liturgy while expecting perfect mental and spiritual focus (*kavanah*), i.e., attention to the meanings of the prayers. It is highly likely that many Jews participating faithfully in the daily prayers did not focus regularly on this specific blessing or wonder about its intent. Their focus may have been instead on the performance of the *amidah* as a whole and its petition for redemption. Indeed, as we will see, medieval mystics had difficulties with the *birkat haminim* precisely because it did not fit easily into their interpretative context for the more important overarching liturgical structure into which it is embedded. Particularly in times of trouble, though, this blessing was likely recited with full intentionality, invoking God’s curse on specific individuals or categories of people. The meaning of the prayer text and its performance,
therefore, is deeply contextual. Once embedded in the liturgy, it becomes available for attention, but not with an invariable meaning. Thus, while uncovering the origins of the *birkat hamainim* may be an intriguing quest, the question has limited relevance, and it does not help us understand the subsequent, equally intriguing history of the prayer.

From the period represented by the Cairo geniza, though (roughly the beginning of the second millennium), there is rich evidence as to both the textual history of the *birkat hamainim*, its interpretations within specific Jewish communities, and the polemics and apologetics surrounding it. These form the solid data on which this book rests. Most of this evidence comes from Christian lands, with two significant exceptions: the texts of the geniza itself and the discussions among early modern and modern Jews living in Muslim lands. Although a few scholars have surveyed the polemical discussions or pieces thereof,16 none have done this in conjunction with establishing the textual history of the blessing. Thus, over a series of four chronological periods, this book breaks new ground, bringing the documental history of the liturgical texts into discussion with questions of meaning and context. This then allows us to ask and offer answers to a broadened cluster of questions: How does the *birkat hamainim* in its various manifestations reflect Jewish and Christian perceptions of their respective identities and the boundary between them? How were Jewish children taught to recite and understand this prayer? Did the altered text imposed by Christian polemics and ultimately censorship affect its meaning? Do the polemics and apologetics reflect the inner liturgical reality of the Jewish community? The answers to these questions, and even our ability to offer answers, obviously vary with time and place and with the lived experiences of Jews and Christians living in each others’ presence.

Underlying all of these is the function of this text as a curse. Aspects of the medieval *birkat hamainim* functioned for Jews themselves as a preemptive curse, reinforcing the boundary between Jews and Christians and warning Jews who might cross this boundary that they risked serious divine punishment. Baptized Jews understood themselves to have crossed the boundary; the preemptive curse in their case became an actual one. Other aspects of the prayer had the potential of functioning as actual curses of the Jews’ Christian neighbors’ religion and society, similarly reinforcing the social boundary. Born Christians came to understand the prayer this way, often encouraged in this perception by baptized Jews. Jewish discussions themselves are more ambiguous; it is often difficult to distinguish between legitimate denials of accusations and apologetics. It is clear, though, that particularly in times of tense intercommunal relationships, Jews did understand this prayer to be an active curse.

Consequently, from the late Middle Ages into modernity, Christian polemacists voiced concern about the subversive presence in their midst of Jews who were petitioning God to undermine Christianity and Christian hegemony. Complaints about the *birkat hamainim* often mixed with complaints about Jewish blasphemy against Christ and Mary or other Jewish anti-Christian practices. This perception
was a primary factor in the Christian censorship of the prayer. However, this act of censoring presumed that removing the written words that constituted explicit references to Christians and Christianity would eliminate the curse. There was no need (and perhaps no practical possibility) to eliminate the prayer altogether. However, the polemical texts of the early modern period provide strong evidence that even in the wake of censorship, the actual meanings taught to children and even the performed texts recited remained unchanged for at least a century and perhaps more. Learned Jews never forgot that the text had been censored and, at least in Europe itself, seem to have had no problem finding examples of the original text.17

However, by the time censorship ceased to be a factor and restoration of the original text was politically possible, other dynamics transformed the context in which Jews lived and functionally changed the meanings of the prayer. Lurianic kabbalah placed the real meaning of the prayer (for the most part) outside the human realm. Thus, it could no longer refer to Christians and Christian dominion. Equally significant, albeit in different communities, was the experience of the Enlightenment and Jews’ emancipation. Being citizens of Western society instead of outsiders to it, seeking full acceptance and integration, meant that curses of one’s neighbor were embarrassing and counter to the community’s own mentalité. Thus, for example, the chief rabbi of England, Joseph Hertz, writes in his commentary on the blessing in the 1940s that although the prayer originally was directed against a specific community of (unnamed) human beings who “wrought division and havoc in the religious camp of Israel” after the destruction of the Second Temple, “[i]n its present form [the benediction] has a universal and timeless application. The statement that in this prayer Jews of today utter an imprecation against those of another Faith is baseless calumny.”18 For him, the accusation that Jews curse the Christians still lurks, but he denies it vehemently in a text written to educate his community about prayer.

As an Orthodox rabbi, Hertz taught a received (censored) text of the prayer. More liberal Jews understood that they could avoid this same embarrassment by omitting the prayer entirely or by revising its text, sometimes radically. As a result, in the modern period, the meaning of the birkat haminim changed for most Jews from a curse of specific evil people, all of whom were understood in the European context as Christians, to a more generalized abstract curse of negative ethical categories. Many of the specific substitutions introduced when Christian censors forbade the original objects of the birkat haminim opened the door to this shift. However, in the modern period, petitioning God to abolish abstract qualities like “evil” and “insolence” become the positive purpose of the prayer, with even the most traditional Jews making further theologically-based changes to prevent the prayer’s cursing a more concrete category of “evildoers” in general. Thus, the birkat haminim, in the modern period, becomes only of historical interest for Christian-Jewish dialogue and not a matter of legitimate ongoing concern. The question mark in this book’s title applies most adamantly to our contemporary world.
This book will move through a number of stages, each with its appropriate methodologies and questions. Those interested in discussions and documentation of the developments in the text of the birkat haminim should look to the relevant appendices for each chronological period. The body itself of the book will focus on questions of context and interpretation. Chapter 1 offers a methodological analysis of the questions of the origins and early history of the prayer, evaluating the conclusions most commonly cited in the literature. Here, although I am generous in my critique, I refrain from offering my own conclusions. We simply cannot say with any certainty that the birkat haminim became part of Jewish liturgy as a specific response to Christianity. All we can say is that Jerome and Epiphanius understood it to have that role in their time but that they did not connect its curse of (Judeo-) Christians with a curse of the ruling powers. A few more, nonspecific categories can be documented from rabbinic texts themselves. Chapter 2 holds at its core the earliest textual evidence for the birkat haminim, the texts of the geniza. Reading these texts against the teachings of the talmudic corpus that was by then normative in the rabbinic world and the preserved literature of the period of the geniza itself, I present an analysis of the meanings of the early medieval prayer and its language.

Chapter 3 moves to the world of Europe in the High Middle Ages, first discussing the evidence for the meanings of this prayer and its language in the literature of the period, and then tracing the gradual emergence of Christian polemics and Jewish apologetics around the text, especially in the Dominican and Iberian context. Chapter 4 continues this narrative, focusing mostly although not exclusively on the German-speaking world and its rich polemics in the early modern period. The textual history behind this chapter traces the impact of censorship and the gradual emergence of a consensus of sorts around proper versions of the prayers. However, it is only toward the end of this period, as we move toward the eighteenth century, that we can suggest that the censored text really lies at the center of Christian or Jewish discussions.

Chapter 5 examines the complex transformations of the prayer in its various modern contexts, beginning with the eastern Sephardi world and its struggles to retrieve an authentic text, then looking at similar dynamics among some Hasidim. Neither of these communities is terribly concerned about Christians, the first because its context is primarily Muslim. The teachings of Lurianic kabbalah also shape meanings in both significantly. Another direction entirely emerges in the central and western European context (including America). Emancipation results in significant transformations of the prayer's meaning, transformations that continue today. Thus, the book's afterword will look to the future, with a particular emphasis on the role of this prayer in Christian-Jewish misunderstandings in the past and reconciliation today.

Throughout this all, there are several threads that deserve to be named. On the one hand, this book is a liturgical history. Looking at the history of a prayer has
usually been done based on some combination of standard, easily accessible rabbinic sources, a few prayer books, and, if possible, the few manuscripts accessible to the author. This is particularly problematic in dealing with a question like ours, where all these genres of texts were censored. Even tracing meanings of the terminology in the uncensored birkat haminim floundered regularly on presumptions about both its text and the text of the rabbinic sources being consulted. For this book, not only have I documented the liturgical texts (see the appendices), but I also discuss the rabbinic and medieval texts with which they were in dialogue reference, using as much as possible, uncensored versions of these texts.

Today's world of technology enables much greater scope and accuracy in reconstructing the history of the liturgical text. Jewish liturgical manuscripts in vast number from libraries around the world are available on microfilm in the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library in Jerusalem. Where the numbers are small, I checked everything available. Where they are vast, I consulted a significant selection (as from the Italian rites); for the most part, I did not survey manuscripts from the age of printing systematically.19 Accessing printed editions of prayer books presents more of a challenge, but increasingly these are also being digitized, and I consulted what was available at the National Library in Jerusalem, either from their own collection or in microfilm from other libraries, as well as the collections of Harvard University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Brandeis University. The presentation of geniza texts is that which I published with Uri Ehrlich, based on his research.20 Thus, the textual history of the birkat haminim in this volume is based on vastly broader evidence than has previously been possible. Additional data may exist but should not shift the picture presented here in any significant way.

This sea of data demonstrates the significant degree of variation that existed even in uncensored rites. While censorship destabilized these prayers, so did disruptions of communities and new technologies, especially printing. While only with the advent of deliberate reform in the nineteenth century did Jews change prayers for the sake of doing so, time and time again, especially in modernity, traditional Jews "corrected" the language, theology, or grammar of the prayer or otherwise retrieved what they believed to be an authentic text. In spite of perceptions to the contrary and the desires of various communities to freeze the text, Jewish liturgy has been throughout its history a living organism, affected by its community and context.21

On the other hand, along with this inner-Jewish liturgical history, this book pays constant attention to questions of Christian-Jewish relations. From the perspective of a Jew engaged in the contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue, the birkat haminim is what has come to be termed a "difficult text."22 These are texts and teachings that are integral to our religious traditions but that embed within them elements that we today find troublesome, particularly because they contradict our contemporary theological or ethical understandings. For Christians, today's "difficult texts" include elements of the New Testament that are or have
historically been read in anti-Jewish ways, many liturgical traditions, and for some
Protestants, the anti-Jewish rants of Martin Luther. Christians engaged in post-
Holocaust dialogue have, in recent decades, struggled deeply and passionately to
develop methods of reinterpreting and reteaching these texts, many of which stand at the center of their faith.

For Jews engaged in dialogue, it has been much easier to identify the problems
within Christianity than to turn that scrutiny back on our own heritage. Jews, after
all, were very much the victims, not just of the Holocaust, but also of centuries of
Christian anti-Jewish venom and oppression. Consequently, traditions developed
among those studying Judaism in the wissenschaftlich mode to obscure embarras-
ing elements of the tradition rather than to confront them.23 True dialogue, though,
requires partnership, mutuality, and adjustment of attitudes on both sides. Chris-
tian anti-Judaism in its many expressions led to Jewish responses and attitudes
that were equally vicious; the power relationships between the two communities
prevented Jews from expressing this with physical violence, but Jews still lacked
respect for their neighbors.24 Thus, full Jewish participation in reconciliation with
Christians requires that Jews similarly examine and take responsibility for their
own traditions, especially where, as in the case of liturgy, these traditions affect
daily life and are not simply dusty books on a shelf.

As I argue here and elsewhere, though, most of the truly difficult texts in Jewish
liturgy were removed by Christian censorship, and this is true of the birkat
haminim. This prayer, in its medieval European manifestation, was very much a
curse of the Christians. Censorship removed the offensive language, and gradually,
the meanings of the prayer conformed to its new words although the potential
always remains for reverting to prior meanings. Liberal Judaisms, once they
emerged, understood themselves to have the option and even the mandate to
make deliberate changes to liturgical language, and they defanged the prayer even
further, to the point that it became a text that responds to no intergroup context,
let alone a specific one.

In our time, Jewish publishers are restoring uncensored versions of many texts,
reclaiming a difficult heritage. While from an academic perspective, this has merit,
there has been all too little discussion about its impact on the Jewish community.25
However, the challenge still arises in interfaith contexts about the degree of reci-
procity necessary for true dialogue. After Christians (especially Catholics and
Lutherans) have struggled to address issues in their liturgy, should Jews not do the
same?26 This study, thus, functions both as an acknowledgment of the historical
situation, of the legitimate status of the birkat haminim as a "difficult text" through
much of its history, and, I hope, as a nuanced explanation of its function and
meanings in today's liturgy. No contemporary prayer book that I have seen
retrieves a legitimately original text of the birkat haminim. In all my perusals of
discussions of this prayer, I have found only one that suggests that it is permissible
to reintroduce specific mentions of Christians into this prayer—but it does not
advocate such a move.27
Origins and Early History

Late Antiquity

The vast majority of scholarly studies of the *birkat haminim* ask what motivated its formulation and what was its original text, limiting their horizons to the world of late antiquity. Scholars offer a variety of conflicting answers, with their differences deriving primarily from the different methods and presuppositions inherent to their approaches to the limited evidence available. In contrast, this chapter will argue that we cannot answer these questions. We can neither fully reconstruct what motivated the institution of the *birkat haminim* nor can we know its original text, if there was one. Instead, we can establish only that something existed by the third and fourth centuries, something about which we know only a few scattered details. However, the conflict between this agnostic claim and so much of the scholarly consensus itself requires discussion.¹

Only a handful of texts (and no material evidence²) from late antiquity speak specifically to the origins and early history of the *birkat haminim*. These few texts cannot include the earliest preserved liturgical manuscripts of the prayer, found in the Cairo geniza, and dating from approximately a millennium later than its putative origins. Because of this chronological gap, the widespread but indiscriminate use of these geniza manuscripts (and usually just one of them) to reconstruct the early history of the prayer is not justified. However, the interrelationships and interpretations of the data legitimately dating from late antiquity are far from obvious. In what follows, I apply a series of methodological approaches to the available data, indicating what knowledge we apparently gain by reading these texts in these different ways, and, as the discussion develops, allowing these methods to critique each other. The end result of this process is not a definitive answer to the questions of the origins of the *birkat haminim*, but rather what I suggest is a responsible reading of the evidence that allows us to identify the limits of our knowledge of it.

I begin with a conventional Jewish studies approach, with what has been called a “positivist” reading of the rabbinic texts. This method presumes that these late antique texts in their manifest content accurately preserve facts and it is the historian’s task to discern and interpret them.³ This reading presents the data that formed Jewish halakhic and historical understandings of the *birkat haminim* from the medieval period on, including the overwhelming majority of modern commentaries and academic discussions. Almost all of these modern academic discussions also take into account the body of extra-rabbinic evidence preserved in early Christian sources.
As the previous chapter’s discussion makes abundantly clear, we have no ability accurately to reconstruct the “original” text of the birkat haminim or even to date its origins precisely. Claims to do so are based on negligible evidence mixed with generous doses of supposition. Scholars present what “must have happened” as historical fact and then often use this as the basis for further layers of theorizing. The demonstrable fact that the birkat haminim was firmly ensconced in rabbinic liturgy by the middle of the first Christian millennium becomes too often the lens by which to read earlier hints and to reconstruct a reality distant in time, culture, and often also location. Such methods interpret the later evidence against the world to which it “should” apply rather than the world in which it appears.

The story of the birkat haminim really begins reliably with the texts that actually cite it, i.e., in fragmentary fashion with Epiphanius and Jerome in the late fourth century. The talmudic evidence, with the possible exception of the Tosefta, also is best read as reflecting this period and later, given that, particularly in the case of liturgical texts, talmudic transmitters and editors reworked traditions to fit their experienced reality. This is also the period in which rabbinic authority begins effectively to influence other sectors of the Jewish world, including implementing its liturgical system. It is thus not surprising that the only Church Fathers who without question knew the birkat haminim spent substantial time in Roman Palestine, in the home of rabbinic Judaism. Otherwise, in the vast library of adversus judaeos (anti-Jewish) literature that the Church generates in its early centuries, we hear a deafening silence about this prayer, including in its critiques of synagogue practice. ¹ The same can be said about anti-Jewish legislation at both the imperial and local levels after the Christianization of the Roman Empire.² While not proof, this silence suggests several possibilities: the prayer was not widely recited among Jews; the prayer was not perceived as addressing Christians, especially gentile Christians; or that these Church leaders understood Jewish prayer to be ineffective and thus immaterial. We can quickly reject the last, as such well-known texts as John Chrysostom’s famous sermons against the Jews or Justinian’s Novella 146 do indeed treat Jewish prayer as a serious issue for Christians.³ The first two possibilities are more likely.

However, as we move into the post-talmudic world, we need to frame these two possibilities differently. By the end of the first Christian millennium or the early centuries of the second,⁴ rabbinic Judaism had definitely spread to the entire Jewish diaspora, and rabbinic prayer and Jewish liturgy had largely become synonymous entities. Thus in this period, any Jew who recited weekday prayers included