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Yitz Landes

***Studies in the Development of Birkat Ha-Avodah* [Hebrew]**

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Yitz Landes is currently a PhD student in the Department of Religion at Princeton, studying Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity. The present book is a revised version of his MA thesis at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Talmud and halakah, reflecting his interest in Jewish liturgy and ritual.[1] The Institute of Jewish Studies of the Hebrew University publishes a wide array of journals, series, and occasionally collected studies, for the most part with Magnes Press of the Hebrew University. Magnes publishes many revised and rewritten doctorates, but it is a rare occasion when any publisher in Israel will publish a revised MA thesis. At best, selections of these are published in journals.[2] The publication of such a book then prima facie presumes excellence, at least in accordance with the standards and demands of a particular type of Israeli scholarship of Jewish studies.[3] Landes has not produced an easy book to read; the opposite is true. However, his work fits the model of excellence that the publication of the revised MA thesis would demand and is a serious contribution to scholarship.

1. The Hebrew title of the book adds the subtitle: *Studies in Versions and History*.
2. Israeli academia assumes, actually more often demands, that capable students in the humanities and Jewish studies interested in academic careers will publish long before the completion of a doctoral dissertation.
3. In the interest of full disclosure, I was schooled in that particular type of Israeli scholarship heavy on philology and steeped in the traditions of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

The book traces the history of the ant-penultimate blessing of the Amidah or Shemonah Esrei, the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy recited daily in morning, afternoon, and evening prayers, whether with a *minyan* or prayer quorum or when praying alone. The whole prayer is so important that it is simply called in rabbinic literature *hattefillah*, or "the prayer." The blessing in question generally relates to the reestablishment of the temple cult, or the Avodah, a word with many meanings, including work or labor, worship, or (temple) service (or cult). There is a certain fuzziness in the language of the blessing. It is difficult to establish its exact intent. Does it relate to the past, the present, or the future? Does it seek the restoration of sacrifice, or is it part of what was the temple Avodah worship? Or is it a combination of a blessing of the past and a prayer for the future? While many recite the blessing thousands of times in their lifetimes, few are those who actually attempt to unravel its meaning and intent. The blessing reads, in translation: "Be pleased, Lord our God, with Your people Israel and with their prayer (var. lec.: Be pleased, Lord our God, with Your people Israel and harken to their prayer),[4] and restore the (temple?) service (Avodah) to Your most holy Sanctuary. Accept Israel's (sacrificial?) offerings and prayers with gracious love. May the (temple?) worship of Your people Israel be pleasing to You. May our eyes behold your return in mercy to Zion. Blessed are You, O Lord, who restores Your divine presence to Zion."

Landes is, of course, not the first to deal with the Amidah or the Birkat Ha'avodah. As he points out in this introduction, the book is somewhat dependent on the work of Uri Ehrlich of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and his Prayer in Rabbinic Literature Database (http://w3.bgu.ac.il/hazal/project/). Ehrlich has also studied the Birkat Ha'avodah, particularly in relation to the versions of the blessing in the prayer books of the Genizah.[5] Landes, however, is interested not only in the various versions of the blessing and the relationships between these versions but in the reasons for changes and developments in a process from temple times and onward. However the blessing is interpreted, it is grounded in a reality that revolved around temple ritual, sacrifice, and cult and developed in a posttemple Judaism that sought replacements for the temple service. The blessing reflects a longing for the temple, but it was possible to make the shift from temple times only by imbuing a temple blessing with new meaning. All this also allows Landes to trace changes and developments in the meaning of the concept of Avodah.

4. There are, of course, numerous other different versions and readings, and Landes cites all of them. I refer here to the two standard, modern versions, the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi as reflected in the parentheses.
5. See Uri Ehrlich, "The Earliest Versions of the Amidah: The Blessing about the Temple Worship" [Hebrew], in *From Qumran to Cairo: Studies in the History of Prayer*, ed. Joseph Tabory (Jerusalem: Orhot, 1999), 17–38; Ehrlich, *The Weekday Amidah in Cairo Genizah Prayerbooks: Roots and Transmission* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2013), 219–38.

The book begins with a methodological introduction and is followed by five chapters. Chapter 1, "Birkat Ha'avodah in the Temple," deals with the recitation of this blessing in the temple liturgy according to rabbinic sources. Landes compares the various forms of the blessing at this stage with similar liturgical texts from the Second Temple period. Chapter 2, "Birkat Ha'avodah in the Apostolic Constitutions," discusses forms of the blessing embedded in the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions, treatises on early Christian worship, doctrine, and discipline and purportedly the work of the Twelve Apostles. Chapter 3, "The Versions of Birkat Ha'avodah," discusses posttalmudic, late midrashic, and Geonic versions, both Palestinian and Babylonian, including some from the Cairo Genizah. Landes also examines *piyyutim* and various prayer books of different communities. Chapter 4, "The Lost Doxology of Birkat Ha'avodah," offers a close reading of *piyyutim* in order to reconstruct a lost version of the blessing's doxology. Chapter 5, "On the Language of רצה and עבודה and on the Understanding of the Blessing in the Middle Ages," examines the terms *rṣh* (be pleased) and *ʿavodah* (worship/service) in classical *piyyut* and in other medieval texts and their influence on the understanding of the blessing. The work ends with a conclusion chapter that ties it all together and presents a diachronic picture of the development of the language of the blessing. This further focuses our understanding of ritual and liturgy transforming itself from the world of sacrifice to the world of prayer. Landes concludes with methodological suggestions for further study of the prayer ritual.

As Landes states, we have no way to determine the original form of the blessing as a temple blessing. We have the noncontemporary to temple times rabbinic sources (m. Yoma 7:1; m. Tamid 5:1) that tell us what the rabbis thought was the Avodah blessing recited at the temple. The rabbis believed that the blessing recited at the temple was more or less what is written in their prayer books. Landes cites 2 Macc 1:23–29, which has a prayer recited by temple priests during the time of the restoration of Zion during the Persian period. The main thrust of the prayer was that God should accept the sacrifice being offered. While prayers for the acceptance of sacrifice were not common in ancient Jewish literature, they were rather common in the non-Jewish literary tradition. Attractive as the idea might be, the prayer in 2 Maccabees cannot be used as proof for what was said at the temple. It can be used, though, to show the types of prayers that might have been said at the temple.

The word *might* seems to be the key to understanding developments regarding the Avodah blessing. Landes, working backward from Genizah prayers and various medieval prayer books and traditions, cautiously reconstructs two possible ancient blessings: a Palestinian one that stressed the continued Divine presence in Jerusalem and the continuation of the sacrificial cult; and one of Babylonian origin that stressed the acceptance of sacrifice and prayer. Both versions might have been as early as Second

Temple times, and both would have been recalibrated to be acceptable for posttemple times.

Three models have been offered in past scholarship to explain both versions of the original blessing and the subsequent recalibration. In the first model, the blessing calls for the acceptance of sacrifice (and perhaps prayer), and the reworked blessing added the restoration of sacrifice and the return of the Shekinah, the divine presence, to Zion. A second model claims that the original version called for the acceptance of sacrifice and for the Shekinah to reside in Zion, and after the destruction the blessing was changed to call for the restoration of both of these elements lost in the wake of the destruction of the temple. A third model sees the revised version of the blessing stressing the substitution of prayers for sacrifice. Landes proposes a new and different model: at first there were two different blessings; one dealt with the acceptance of sacrifice and prayer, and the other called for the restoration of the Avodah service. These were combined into one blessing, that which appears in Babylonian prayer books. In the earlier versions, both sacrifice and prayer were included together as legitimate parts of the cult. The post-70 blessing would reflect the Second Temple period tension between this early prayer and sacrifice, the ultimate victory of prayer, but still call for the restoration of sacrifice. While all of this might be the regular fare of scholars, nary is the worshiper today who could keep track of these prayer developments and the implications for the understanding of the blessing being recited.

From time to time Landes uses his analysis of the Avodah blessing to shed light on other difficult issues in the study of Jewish prayer. Too much credence should not be given to differences based on Palestinian or Babylonian versions as reflecting actual practice in one place as opposed to another. Such versions are often interchangeable between Palestine and Babylonia, and it is impossible to be sure where they originated. Landes, who sees the Avodah blessing as existing already in Second Temple times and in various forms, views this reality in relation to this blessing as a stepping stone to further understanding of the question in general as to when formal prayer took shape. Did this happen as early as the Second Temple period, in one form or another, or only after the temple was destroyed? Finally, Landes shows that in general it is possible to trace the development of prayer blessing only through a macro, *longue durée* methodology with as many textual variants and traditions taken into account as possible. This may complicate things, but a minimalist approach will not provide any real solutions.

This is not an easy book to read. It is quite technical, and following textual variants is not often very riveting reading. In this, Landes follows and remains faithful to the book's MA thesis origins. But Landes is well aware that there is a world of study and understanding outside the narrow confines of philology and textual criticism, and he has shown that he

is well on the way to that world and to using it to unravel difficult questions in the development of prayer and liturgy. His beginnings are propitious. One can well look forward to the continuation.