

‘Amidah

The ‘Amidah (Heb. “standing” prayer) is the most important prayer text of Judaism. It is also called the Shemone ‘Esreh (Heb. “18” benedictions, al-

though later expanded to 19). It is recited at the obligatory times in the direction of Jerusalem (or the site of the Sanctuary).

1. Performance. The ‘Amidah is recited standing with additional gestures (especially bowing at the beginning and end; Ehrlich 2004), three times on weekdays (morning: Shaḥarit; afternoon: Minhah; evening: ‘Arvit), four times on Sabbaths (adding the Musaf that corresponds to the “additional” sacrifice at the temple, *yBer* 4:6, 8; and five times on the Day of Atonement (with Ne’ilah at the end of the day). If a quorum of 10 men is present, the ‘Amidah is recited by each member of the congregation in silence and repeated (except for the evening prayer) by the precentor. In cases of danger the ‘Amidah may be abbreviated, although it is always recited and formulated from the point of view of the whole people of Israel (cf. *bBer* 29b–30a).

2. Structure and Contents. The ‘Amidah consists of three initial and three concluding benedictions. After the quotation of Ps 51:17 (*yBer* 4:4, 8a) God is praised for protection of the patriarchs in the first benediction (I); in II for “might” with a reference to God’s provision of rain or dew (according to the season) and the resurrection of the dead; in III for holiness. This benediction probably quoted Isa 6:3 already in an early stage, which was expanded to become the Qedushah including Ezek 3:12 and Ps 146:10.

The 13 intermediate benedictions are intercessions asking for knowledge (IV); (V) that God may grant the return to the Torah (i.e., repentance; where the Palestinian rite quotes Lam 5:21); (VI) forgiveness (including Seliḥot on fast-days); (VII) redemption (including the prayer “Answer us” on fast-days); (VIII) the healing of the sick; (IX) the sustenance of the people; (X) the ingathering of the exiles; (XI) the restoration of justice; (XII) the destruction of Israel’s enemies; (XIII) the support of the righteous of Israel and the converts; (XIV) God’s return to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the city, and the restoration of the throne of David; (XV) the re-establishment of the Davidic dynasty; (XVI) that God may hear his people’s prayer. Private intercessions could be added here, cf. *bAZ* 8a.

Regarding the three final benedictions, XVII asks for the restoration of the liturgy at the temple (and the coming of the Messiah in the days of the New Moon and the lesser holidays of the festivals); XVIII expresses gratitude towards God. Ritualizing *bSot* 40a the precentor recites a slightly different version. During the repetition of the ‘Amidah in the morning service the priests bless the people (Num 6:24–26) here. XIX prays for peace. After XVIII the “miracles” of Ḥanukkah and Purim are mentioned on the respective festival.

On Sabbaths and festivals a single benediction (S.) is recited instead of IV–XVI. It is worded differently in each of the four prayers on Sabbaths. In

the Musaf of New Year (Rosh ha-Shanah) three benedictions with quotations of biblical verses are added to it, viz. “(verses regarding God’s) kingship” (actually combined with IV = S.), “remembrance (verses),” and “(rams’) horn (verses)” according to their topics. The horn is blown after each benediction. On the Day of Atonement litanies of communal confessions of sins are inserted into S.

3. Relationship to the Bible, Language, Precursors. The ‘Amidah can be analyzed as a witness to the continuation and/or interruption of customs of Second Temple times. Yet it also reworks biblical texts as such (Reif 2006: 72). Modern reconstructions of its early history differ in their assessment of the importance of these two patterns of relationship between the ‘Amidah and the Bible.

The language of the ‘Amidah uses biblical Hebrew roots, word-forms, and syntax in a post-biblical form, i.e., rather by the avoidance of typically biblical elements than by the use of post-biblical ones (Weitzman). Like prayer texts of Second Temple times the ‘Amidah uses biblical concepts and phrases. In shaping its religious identity, rabbinic Judaism also debated the relationship of the language of prayer to the Bible (Reif 2006: 80).

The extant data do not suggest that the ‘Amidah originated in Second Temple times. Nevertheless forms of communal prayer may have developed in the margins of the study of the Torah in synagogues and thus outside of the setting of the temple (cf. Reif 2006: 29). Biblical prayer texts provided later generations with literary patterns of a “democratic and egalitarian way of approaching God” (Reif 2006: 73) unlike the sacrificial cult. Even if they are attested only in younger (i.e., rabbinic) sources, the Ma’amadot, the context of the Shma-liturgy (*mTam* 5:1) and the liturgy of the Haqel (Deut 31:12, *mSot* 7:7–8), as well as the liturgy of fast-days, may have been among its precursors (Tabory). Reworking Ps 136 the Hebrew text of Sir 51 contains the topics of VII, X, XIV, XV, and I within a short litany. There is no indication that Sir 51 reflects a liturgy (Reif 2006: 51–69).

Only few Qumran prayer texts recall passages of the text of the ‘Amidah (cf. Reif 2006: 38–39). If they contain liturgies that were preserved in order to be performed at the temple and not prayer as a substitute for the temple or independent of it (cf. Falk), textual similarities reflect the independent use of the Bible, in cases where the rabbis’ access to traditions of the temple cannot be substantiated.

The names of the times of prayer, the text of the ‘Amidah, and some rabbinic theories about its origins (e.g., *tBer* 3:1 ff.; *yBer* 4:1, 7a; *bBer* 26b; for a different approach: *bBer* 32b) interpret its performance as a substitute for the sacrifices after the destruction of the temple (cf. Kimelman). Although the ‘Amidah is based on older patterns and texts, it emerged as such as part of the rabbis’ response

to it. Thus *mBer* 4:3 contains Rabban Gamaliel's precept that "Everybody prays 18 (benedictions) each day." Fleischer (as summarized and discussed by Langer 1999, 2000) understands this tradition as a testimony to Rabban Gamaliel's promulgation of the 'Amidah firstly as a standardized text and secondly as the innovative demand for every Jew to abide by this performance on a regular basis. Fleischer's critics agree that a general obligation to perform the 'Amidah was conceived in rabbinic times. They doubt that a single original text of the 'Amidah stood at the beginning of its history.

The Talmud attributes the creation of the 'Amidah also to mythic authorities of the distant past (like the Men of the Great Assembly, *bMeg* 17b). It also records more recent developments (*bBer* 28b): "Simon the flax-worker laid out (or: performed) 18 benedictions in front of Rabban Gamaliel according to the order (i.e., as it was usual) in Yavne." This text may indicate that tannaim reformed preexisting customs. Yet the marginality of "Simon the flax-worker" (who is not mentioned again in rabbinic texts) rather suggests that Simon is asked to perform the 'Amidah in order to prove the viability of Rabban Gamaliel's precept, that just anybody was actually able to pray 18 benedictions (Cohen). This precept was probably not heeded by many (Langer). A spread of this practice beyond rabbinic circles is unlikely before the 3rd or even 4th century CE, as there are no traces of the 'Amidah in Samaritan liturgies (Langer 2004: 428–29). A version of the 'Amidah was likely reworked by the Christian compiler of the Apostolic Constitutions (in ch. 7, ca. 380 CE; van der Horst; Langer). At least by that time Greek-speaking Jews apparently knew basic patterns of the 'Amidah.

Several debates in rabbinic texts presuppose that the 'Amidah was not performed as recitation of a fixed text but that it required a certain degree of improvisation in both the private (silent) and public contexts (cf. *mBer* 4:3–4, *tBer* 1:6, *tBer* 3:26, *yBer* 4:4, 8a): "One who makes his prayer fixed, his prayers are not supplicatory" (*mBer* 4:4). The high degree of coherence of the medieval texts of the 'Amidah does not exclude an originally flexible way to formulate prayers. While Fleischer interprets the later textual differences as the result of the corruption of an original text, it seems more likely that differing traditions converged towards greater uniformity. Moreover the emerging pieces of standard text were replaced (later only expanded) by liturgical poetry (*Piyyuṭ*) which would have been unlikely, if the Yavnean rabbis had created and successfully promulgated a standard text.

Most of the text of the extant versions emerged in the later geonic period. Contemporary scholarship focuses on the Genizah manuscripts of the 'Amidah. Taking into account that most of the texts are only extant in fragments Luger classifies

the traditions and variants for each benediction separately. This approach reduces the importance of the distinction between a Palestinian and a Babylonian rite of the rabbanite liturgy – a model in use since the first publication of the text of a Palestinian 'Amidah in 1898 (text: Elbogen 396). In several studies Ehrlich shows how this distinction is still valid for the classification and description of the extant sources in spite of their fragmentary character.

Processes of convergence and differentiation of rites continue until today as new prayer books are published according to new ways of understanding Jewish prayer (cf. the Musaf in the 19th-century Reform Movement; Petuchowski 240–64).

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