

THE ARGUMENT THAT שמונה עשרה WAS COMPOSED AFTER חורבן בית שני

Professor Ezra Fleischer of Hebrew University is one of the few scholars who argues that שמונה עשרה was composed after the destruction of the Second בית המקדש. His full argument can be found in the journal 223-179 'עמ' סב, תרבי"ץ שנה סב. The article was also included in a compendium of articles on תפלה that was published by תרבי"ץ. Although the original article was published in Hebrew, a summary of Dr. Fleischer's arguments written by Dr. Fleischer himself in English is available in the journal Prooftexts, Volume 20, 2000. He wrote the article in response to a critique of his position by Dr. Ruth Langer of Boston College. The pertinent parts of Dr. Fleischer's response are reproduced below:

Both positions agree that it was the sages of Yavneh who promulgated the requirement that all Jews pray three times a day, either privately or communally, and that they recite on this occasion a prayer of eighteen blessings, i.e., עמידה. Yet standard scholarship assumes that they did not fix the text of this compulsory prayer, considering, as Dr. Langer puts it, that the people had already "developed linguistic registers for appropriate prayer to God. . . and were capable of composing, and expected to compose, their own prayer in it". Implied in this argument is the assumption that long before the Yavnean period, necessarily during the period of the Second Temple, people were already accustomed to reciting prayers that resembled in character the עמידה that the Yavneh sages sought to institutionalize.

I have demonstrated in my published articles that this assumption is mistaken. Examination of the large corpus of literary and other evidence that reflects the realities of life in Erets Israel at the end of the Second Temple period (the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, Philo, the New Testament, and more) proves that there existed at this time no sort of verbal worship that resembled the liturgy that was established at Yavneh. To be sure, Erets Israel was filled with synagogues during the Second Temple period; however, these were not houses of prayer but rather places where people gathered to hear the Torah read and expounded, never to pray. Jews in those times would pray individually, each in his own way and language, and at times or places they desired. Prayer was considered neither an obligatory nor a communal endeavor. As with prayer from time immemorial, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, it was man's intimate and personal communication with God.

Close inspection of the characteristic structures and themes of the שמונה עשרה as attested by all available sources from the earliest layers of the tannaitic corpus to the canonical form familiar to us today demonstrates that the עמידה was not meant to be a prayer in the common meaning of the term, but rather a ritual of collective worship, a divine service in the strictly formal sense: its recitation is compulsory; it is performed at set times in a solemn cultic setting; its contents are fixed and concern exclusively the welfare of the collective; and it must be recited in the presence of the community. The שמונה עשרה then, does not resemble the kind of prayers uttered by individuals before (and, of course, after) the Destruction; it resembles instead the sacrificial worship conducted by the priests in the Sanctuary. This new kind of verbal worship was conceived at Yavneh as a way to offer the nation, in the absence of the sacrifices, an alternative form of worshiping God. At the time it was promulgated at Yavneh, the שמונה עשרה was an utter innovation on all levels, whether institutional, functional, or

theological. The "linguistic registers" that people used while the Temple stood -if indeed, such existed -- were utterly inappropriate to this new purpose.

The assumption put forward by standard scholarship, namely, that the Sages created *ex nihilo* this new form of ritual prayer, mandated its recitation three times a day, required it to be said in Hebrew, fixed the exact number of its components and established their subject and order, but did *not* also fix its precise wording, is highly illogical. No ancient religion left room for improvisation in cultic matters. Nor did the Sages leave room for improvisation in halakhic matters. There is therefore no way to imagine that they left the nation's new way of worshiping G-d to be shaped by the free will and inspiration of common people. Anyone who examines the abundance of evidence in the talmudic corpus, beginning with the earliest tannaitic strata, will quickly discover that these sources speak of the עמידה as of a precisely worded text, repeated again and again by the worshipers.

In Leviticus Rabba (23:4), for example, we find the tanna Elazar Hisma, a disciple of Yehoshua ben Hananya (one of the older sages at Yavneh), leaving the synagogue in shame because he was not sufficiently familiar with the text of the עמידה to serve as שליח ציבור. In B. Berakhot (28b-29a), we learn of the congregaton waiting "two or three hours" for Shemu'el Hakatan to recall the proper wording of *birkat haminim* (which he himself had composed!). Then there is the amora Rabbi Yonah, who used to raise his voice while reciting the prayer so that members of his household would learn the wording of the עמידה (P. Berakhot 4:1). Elsewhere, the sages take up the case of whether a man who "finds himself" at שומע תפלה while reciting the עמידה should repeat the prayer or not (ibid., 2:4); they also discuss the question of whether reciting the עמידה requires כונה, (ibid., 2:5). R. Matanyah commends his head for automatically bowing at the מודים prayer. Amoraim confess that they have never said the עמידה with כונה and, to the contrary, that any time they tried to do so they thought about extraneous matters (ibid., 2:4). R. Zeira admits that each time he sought to introduce an innovation into the עמידה he got confused (ibid., 4:3; see also B. Berakhot 29b). And how are we to explain the fact that the references to the wording of the עמידה that occur in talmudic literature (and these are many more than we are accustomed to think) are familiar to us from recognizable, canonical versions of the liturgy?

The conclusion that the language of the עמידה was formulated in a binding version at Yavneh (B. Berakhot 28b; Megillah 17b) is thus an inescapable outcome of the analysis of the nature and status of prayer during the Second Temple period, as compared with the specific nature and purpose of the עמידה. It is also attested by the explicit and implied statements made in a multitude of ancient sources. It also offers a key to clarifying many of the cruxes that have long existed in the study of the development of Jewish prayers. It explains not only why the עמידה was established but also why it was meant to be performed in public; why it is obligatory upon both the individual and the congregation; why the individual uses the language of 'we' in reciting it; what accounts for its literary, stylistic, conceptual, and ideological unity; how its appearance in the synagogue gave birth to the קדושה and how it influenced the system of Torah reading and the status of the דרשה; how later additions to the liturgy came about; how it enabled and influenced the emergence and development of liturgical poetry; and even how, over time, its own wording changed and diversified, until it became what it is nowadays. Such is the explanatory power of the conception I have developed, and I would be happy to have it compared with that of the conventional approach.

לעלית נשמת הרב שנתתי שלמה אליהו בן הרב רפאל, יהיה זכרו ברוך