



Cursing the Christians?: A History of the Birkat HaMinim

Ruth Langer

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Ruth Langer offers an in-depth study of the birkat haminim, a Jewish prayer for the removal of those categories of human being who prevent the messianic redemption and the society envisioned for it. In its earliest form, the prayer cursed Christians, apostates to Christianity, sectarians, and enemies of Israel.

Drawing on the shifting liturgical texts, polemics, and apologetics concerning the prayer, Langer traces the transformation of the birkat haminim from what functioned without question in the medieval world as a Jewish curse of Christians, through its early modern censorship by Christians, to its modern transformation within the Jewish world into a general petition that God remove evil from the world. Christian censorship played a crucial role in this transformation of the prayer; however, Langer argues that the truest transformation in meaning resulted from Jewish integration into Western culture. Eventually, the prayer shed its references to any specific category of human being and lost its function as a curse.

Reconciliation between Jews and Christians today requires both communities to confront a long history of prejudice. Ruth Langer shows through the birkat haminim how the history of one liturgical text chronicled Jewish thinking about Christians over hundreds of years.

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