A BONE OF CONTENTION IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP: THE ‘BIRKAT HA-MINIM’ AND THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND SYNAGOGUE IN THE FIRST CENTURY AD

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ABSTRACT
Up to the present the Twelfth Benediction (better known as the Birkat ha-Minim) of the Jewish statutory prayer has figured prominently in discussions of the separation of church and synagogue and the development of Jewish Christianity. The aim of this paper is to provide a short overview of the present state of research concerning the role and function, if any, of the Birkat ha-Minim in the period between the destruction of the temple and the Bar Kochba revolt.

1 INTRODUCTION
Ever since the Talmudic period, the ‘Birkat ha-Minim’ (‘blessing against the heretics’) has constituted the Twelfth Benediction of the statutory prayer (the ‘Shemoneh Esreh’ or eighteen benedictions) of rabbinic Judaism. As one of the most important rabbinic prayers, along with the ‘Shema’, the ‘Shemoneh Esreh’ had to be recited three times a day in the synagogues by every Jewish man, women, child and slave (mBer 3:3). According to the Babylonian Talmud (bBer 28b), Samuel the Small, in response to a request from Gamaliel II, the head of the academy at Yavneh in about AD 80-110, composed this prayer against various kinds of Jewish heretics. Most scholars agree that the insertion of the Birkat ha-Minim took place at some time between AD 85 and 95 (cf Katz 1984:63; Wilson 1989:67). There, however, exists no firm evidence as to these dates, as Hengel (1989:115) correctly points out.

Up to the present the Birkat ha-Minim has figured prominently in discussions of the separation of church and synagogue and the development of Jewish Christianity (cf Pritz 1988; Kretschmar 1990; Hartin 1991). The aim of this paper is to provide a short overview of recent research concerning the role and function, if any, of the Birkat ha-Minim in the period between the destruction of the temple and the Bar Kochba revolt. In a publication of essays on the Jewish and Hellenistic background of early Christianity, Van der Horst (1988:229-239) provides a valuable overview of recent research on the Birkat ha-Minim. In 0254-8356/93 $4,00 © NTSSA
order to avoid any duplication, we shall follow a slightly different approach by presenting an overview of research on this benediction which has a direct bearing on the relationship between early Christianity and 'formative' Judaism (cf Neusner's use of this term—1980:141-156). In conclusion a few evaluative remarks and suggestions will also be offered.

2 THE TEXT OF THE BIRKAT HA-MINIM

Scholars are divided as to the original wording of the Birkat ha-Minim. According to the Talmud, not even Samuel the Small, the composer of this benediction, could remember the exact wording thereof a year after he had composed it (bBer 28b-29a). The Cairo Genizah version of the Birkat ha-Minim, published by Solomon Schechter in 1898, and commonly known as the Palestinian recension, is considered by some scholars to be the original, or at least closest to the original Yavnean formulation (cf Davies 1964:276; France 1989:85):

For persecutors let there be no hope, and the dominion of arrogance do Thou speedily root out in our days; and let the 'notzrim' and 'minim' perish in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of life and let them not be written with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the insolent.

References in the Gospel of John to the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue (cf section 2 below), and in patristic literature, such as Justin, Jerome and Ephiphanius, to the cursing of Christians in Jewish synagogues are often used to support this contention, since these references supposedly correspond to the text of the Cairo Genizah (e.g Rowland 1985:300).

In opposition to the aforementioned view a significant number of scholars, such as Kimmelman (1981:232-240), Finkel (1981:238) and Wilson (1989:69), maintain that the term 'notzrim' is a later interpolation (ca AD 150-400) to the Yavnean text which spoke only of the 'minim' (cf Katz 1984:66-69 for a comprehensive discussion of the relevant arguments). David Flusser (1983:33-34; 1988:637-643), who also shares the view that 'notzrim' is a later addition, furthermore maintains that the original form of this benediction was composed earlier in the first century AD by the Pharisees with pre-Christian dissidents in mind. According to him, Rabbi Samuel the Small only added the word 'minim' to the existing malediction against the 'dissidents, apostates and traitors' (1983:34), that is, people who separated themselves from the Jewish collectivity such as the Essenes, as well as informers to the Roman government.

In spite of intensive and imaginative efforts to reconstruct the original Yavnean benediction (if there ever was one 'official' version!), Emil Schürer's remark that the wording of the 'Shemoneh Esreh' can no longer be recon-
structured in detail (1979:459) is still very valid, as scholars are forced to admit (cf van der Horst 1988:238). In his comparison of different versions of the Birkat ha-Minim, Peter Schäfer (1978:45-64), however, offers an acceptable explanation for this state of affairs. He demonstrates how the wording of the different versions of the Twelfth Benediction fluctuated from 'notzrim', informers, 'minim', delators and evildoers to apostates, and then concludes that the wording at this critical point varied according to the local situation where it was originally written down. At present we are thus left with a very elastic textual tradition with regard to the Twelfth Benediction (cf also section 2.2 below). Maier (1982:140) is therefore probably correct when he states:

Es gab keine 'Urfassung.' Es kann nach dem gegenwärtigen Stand der Forschung nicht davon ausgegangen werden, dass in früher Zeit, jedenfalls gewiss noch nicht vor 135 n. Chr, die Gebete auch im Wortlaut bereits fixiert waren.

3 THE BIRKAT HA-MINIM AND THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND SYNAGOGUE IN RECENT STUDY

3.1 The anti-Christian interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim
Towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century most scholars, according to Vermes (1975:175), regarded 'minim' as the rabbinic name for Judeo-Christians. This view has prevailed amongst scholars up to the present (eg Neusner 1968:12-16; Schiffman 1981:149-155). They interpret the Birkat ha-Minim as an official curse directed primarily against Jewish Christians. According to this view, the reformulation of the Shemoneh Esreh at Yavneh ca AD 85, not only occurred at a specific point of time, but, as a watershed in early Jewish-Christian relations, also brought an abrupt end to these. Baron (quoted in Wilson 1989:66) gives typical expression to this interpretation when he says that the Twelfth Benediction represented the formal recognition by official Judaism of the severance of all ties between Jewish Christianity and the national body of Judaism.

Many New Testament scholars, such as Davies (1964) and Van Tilborg (1972), in one way or another relate the historical setting of the Gospel of Matthew to the official excommunication of Jewish Christians at Yavneh, and to the so-called 'intra muros/extra muros' debate between Judaism and early Christianity (cf an overview of this discussion in France 1989:98-102). References in the Gospel of John to Christians being put out of the synagogue (cf 9:22; 12:42 and 16:2) are also directly related to the Birkat ha-Minim, and consequently also to the expulsion of members of the Johannine community from the synagogues. In particular J Louis Martyn's well-known thesis (1968: 18-41) that
(a) the picture of the Johannine community presented in the Gospel reflects important aspects of the trauma of the ejection from the synagogues after Yavneh, and
(b) that the Gospel was consequently written to console this community after their expulsion,

had an important impact on Johannine studies. Strong supporters of his views include scholars such as Brown (1979:40-42), Wengst (1981:80); Gnileka (1983:78), Sanders (1987:312), and Du Rand (1990:54-56).

On the other hand, some scholars are of the opinion that the Twelfth Benediction applied to all Christians. In an elaborated discussion, Horbury (1982:19-61) states that, although no surviving version of the Birkat ha-Minim can be assumed to reproduce a specimen form of the Yavnean prayer, Gentile as well as Jewish Christians were prominently in view when the benediction was officially approved at the end of the first century (cf also MacLennan 1990:67-70). Maddox (1982:184) is also of the opinion that the Twelfth Benediction was inserted into the prayers of the synagogue as a rejection of Christianity in general. According to him, Luke-Acts was written during this time when the church, with a predominantly Gentile membership, and Pharisaic Judaism each in exclusivistic fashion lay claim to the fact that they alone were the true ‘people of God.’

3.2 The anti-heretical interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim
The above-mentioned anti-Christian interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim no longer commands universal assent. As a matter of fact, most recent studies in this regard point out that there is no conclusive evidence that Jewish and/or Gentile Christians were the sole focus of this malediction (eg Cohen 1987; Thornton 1987). They maintain that the Twelfth Benediction was formulated against all those whose adherence to certain interpretations of Jewish traditions was questionable. This viewpoint is, amongst others, based upon recent investigations into the use of ‘minim’ in Jewish literature (eg Urbach 1981:288-293; Finkel 1981:239-242), which indicate that the term ‘min’ refers to various forms of heresy which threatened post-temple Judaism at various stages. Therefore the term ‘minim’ is not synonymous with Jewish Christians, but rather signifies sectarians of various kinds. These Jewish dissenters denied elements which were (or were becoming) essential to the development of formative Judaism, such as the normativity of the Torah or the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of believers. At the same time Maier (1982:137-140) also relates the ‘minim’ to the Roman-Hellenistic culture and to Rome as a world power which threatened the social and religious development of Judaism.

On the basis of the aforementioned view of ‘minim’, a few interpretations of the Birkat ha-Minim are offered which differ from one another in accentuation
and focus. The first group of scholars maintain that, although the Twelfth Benedic­tion was not directed solely against Jewish Christians when promulgated sometime after AD 70, it nevertheless also included them (cf Kimmelman 1981:232; van der Horst 1988:237). Kretschmar (1990:20-21) is representative of this view:

Sicher wenden sie ('the Birkat ha-Minim'—SJ) nicht exklusiv und gezielt gegen Judenchristen. Mann kann auch sehr wohl über das Gewicht gerade dieser Formeln für die Trennung von Kirche und Synagoge verschiedener Meinung sein. Aber sie weisen doch auf das besondere umkämpfte Gebiet, in dem die Scheidung von Kirche und Synagoge sich vorbereitete und am Ende fest wurde.

In this regard Katz (1984:76) points out that there was no official anti-Christian policy at Yavneh before the Bar Kochba revolt. However, Jewish Christians would also have been included among the ‘minim’ or heretics and detractors of the Jewish community in the last two decades of the first century (Katz 1984:73). Other scholars, such as Rowland (1985:45) and Segal (1986:150), who also share the same contention, however imply that the ‘minim’ included all Christians.

Another group of scholars have doubts as to whether the Birkat ha-Minim was originally directed against any form of Christianity at all. According to Urbach (1981:288), it was only after the Bar Kochba revolt, when the separation of Christians became final, that they were included amongst the ‘minim’ for the first time. And according to Maier (1982:141)

es ist möglich, dass die Rabbinen auch Judenchristen zu den Minim rechneten, doch weisen die meisten minim-Stellen darauf hin, dass nichtchristliche Personen gemeint waren, vor allem antirabbinisch und synkretistisch-assimilatorisch orientierte Juden.

Those who interpret the Birkat ha-Minim as an anti-heretical prayer, albeit from the above-mentioned different perspectives, usually also view it as part of the larger process of social and institutional developments within Judaism in the post-70 period. According to Overman (1990:51-56), this period was marked by intensified efforts to forge a coalition amongst the many Jewish factions with their competing points of view (cf however Kraabel 1992:21-34). The Birkat ha-Minim, as an important stage in the process of consolidation and definition of formative Judaism, was therefore directed against any person or group that would disrupt efforts to forge this coalition. However, this process of communal self-definition, and the criteria for expulsion from the Jewish community developed over a long period of time, which varied from place to place and according to local conditions (cf Hengel 1989:115). The traditions about Yavneh also did not just suddenly appear in toto at a given point in time. As a matter of fact
according to Overman (1990:52)

Yavneh is a foundation myth which depicts the gradual and protracted process of the development of the rabbinic school functionaries in one crucial meeting.

Many scholars share Overman's contention that the exact wording of the Twelfth Benediction was not yet fixed by the end of the first century (eg Kimelman 1981; Wilson 1989). Other scholars point out that even if the rabbis at Yavneh did in fact create a benediction against heretics which also included Jewish Christians, this did not mean that all Jewish synagogues suddenly started expelling Christians. 'Synagogues were not beholden to any central body; every community ran its synagogue its own way' (Cohen 1987:227). The authority of the rabbis at Yavneh was thus not necessarily acknowledged by all Jewish communities by the end of the first century.

3.2.1 The anti-heretical interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim and the New Testament

3.2.1.1 The Gospel of Matthew

The anti-heretical interpretation of the Twelfth Benediction has strongly influenced recent studies on the Gospels of Matthew and John, the two New Testament documents most frequently associated with this malediction. Recent studies on the setting of the Gospel of Matthew in particular, which are still very much concerned with the 'extra muros/intra muros' debate, are noticeably much more hesitant to ascribe any significant role to the Birkat ha-Minim with regard to the separation of church and synagogue than most previous publications (cf Saldarini [1991] and Stanton [1992] who do not even refer to this problem in their discussions of the social context of Matthew).

According to Schmithals (1987:375-378) and van Aarde (1989:224-225) the Gospel of Matthew mirrors a situation of conflict between the Matthean community and the synagogue in the post-70 period. But this struggle has not yet reached the stage where the former's members have been finally excommunicated. Van Aarde in particular, who wholeheartedly agrees with Katz's view that the Birkat ha-Minim did not signal a decisive break between Jews and Jewish Christians (including the Matthean community), claims that due to the latter's belief in Jesus' miraculous conception and resurrection from the dead, the Yavnean rabbis regarded them as heretics and threatened them with excommunication. This implies that Judaism still wielded authority over the Matthean community. Van Aarde even finds indications in the Gospel that Matthew wanted to avoid the final rupture with Judaism (1989:225).

Against this Luz (1985:70-71) maintains that Matthew wrote his Gospel in a
period (not long after the year 80 - 1985:76) when the break between synagogue and the Matthean church was final. Luz does not find any 'direkte Spur des Ketzersegens' in the Gospel, or, for that matter, any form of discussion between the synagogue and the Matthean church. He also rejects the well-known viewpoint of Davies that the Gospel of Matthew is a Christian reply to Yavneh.

Es ist vielmehr eine christliche Antwort auf Israel's Nein zu Jesus bzw. der versuch, dieses Nein in einer grundsätzlichen Standortbestimmung zu verarbeiten (1985:71).

In a recent monograph on the social world of the Matthean community, Overman again argues that Matthew wrote his Gospel in a context of serious conflict with the Jewish leadership in the post-70 period. Matthew's community did not understand themselves as Christians. On the contrary, they were Jews. But, as a typical sectarian movement within formative Judaism in the post-70 period, they totally rejected the Jewish leadership ('one had to choose between these movements'—1990:160), and understood themselves as the 'true Israel' and as fulfillers of the divine law (1990:149). As a result they seperated from the synagogue, developed their own gathering place (the *ekklesia*), and also stablished their own roles and offices (1990:56; 113-140). Although Overman clearly states that the Birkat ha-Minim in its earliest form was directed against Jewish schismatics, and that early Christians would have most likely felt the impact of this banning practice along with many other groups in their setting (1990:51), he does not give any explicit indication as to whether the Jewish leadership actually banned the Matthean community (as a typical Jewish sect according to his own description) from the synagogue.

France (1989:100-101) is however of the opinion that the whole 'intra muros/extra muros' debate is an artificial one which is based upon an unrealistic understanding of the way Jewish/Christian relations are likely to have developed in the first century. At the same time he also rejects the interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim (even if it could be reliably dated) which assumes that this Benediction signalled the beginning of a totally new situation before which relations between Christians and Jews were more or less untroubled, and after which no meaningful contact was possible. In other words, the transition to 'outside' the synagogue is not a once-and-for-all development which involved the whole Jewish Christian movement at the same time. France argues that Matthew's community was rather a community in transition with dual citizenship. They were both 'inside' (in the sense of seeing themselves as Jews) and 'outside' (in the sense of a fierce repudiation of official Judaism) at the same time.
3.2.1.2 The Gospel of John

Turning to some recent studies on the setting of the Gospel of John, we also find opposing points of view concerning the role and impact of the Birkat ha-Minim (if any) on the ‘separation’ of the synagogue and the Johanine community. According to Meeks (1986:109) the Gospel of John presupposes a Christian community within the orbit of Jewish communities who claimed that Jesus was equal to God. The leaders of the Jewish communities became very hostile to this sectarian community’s blasphemous claims, while leaders of the Johanine community on their part again despised secret believers in Jesus who remained in the mainstream Jewish community. By the time the Gospel of John was written, this period of controversy was something of the past and the separation complete. Meeks (1985:120), however, dismisses any formal correspondence between the Birkat ha-Minim and the Johanine community’s separation from the synagogue. This benediction is rather the product of later rabbinic literature.

Overman (1990:54), who agrees with Meeks’ interpretation of the Birkat ha-Minim, points out that references in the Gospel of John to the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue only reflect an initial stage of the Jewish banning process. He therefore rejects Martyn’s influential views of the Twelfth Benediction (cf section 2.1 above) as an anachronistic effort to impose a shape and uniformity to the practice of banning which did not emerge till much later in the development of rabbinic Judaism. Although there is no certainty as to what exactly transpired historically in the Johanine community, there are clear signs of conflict between this community and the Jewish community. Contrary to the Matthean community, who has already separated from the synagogue, the Johanine community’s members still go to the synagogue though they have formally parted with its leadership (Overman 1990:56; 63).

Okure (1988:13-14) also rejects Martyn’s interpretation of the events at Yavneh. She argues that ‘departures from the Johanine community’ were caused by internal and doctrinal factors (such as the Johanine Jesus’ teaching on birth from above—3:1-21—and the Eucharist—6:26-66), rather than being the result of external pressure such as ejection from the synagogue (1988:259-261). Rensberger (1988:26) and Ashton (1991:165; 197), who are also well aware of new research on the Birkat ha-Minim, and who also have doubts as to whether the Birkat ha-Minim was the means by which the Johanine Christians were excluded from synagogue fellowship, nevertheless claim that John 9:22; 12:42, and 16:2 incontrovertibly point to the fact that this community experienced such an expulsion. And although Rensberger admits that not much is known about the details of this expulsion, it undoubtedly played a central role in the Johanine community’s life, and should therefore be taken into account in the reconstruction of the background of the Fourth Gospel.

Painter (1991:102-103), in a recent monograph, also shares the opinion that
the Johanine community, a group of diaspora Jewish Christians, experienced a violent rejection by the synagogue. The Gospel is therefore a reaction to their 'religious rootlessness.' Painter, however, does not link this expulsion to the Birkat ha-Minim at all.

4 THE BIRKAT HA-MINIM, EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND FORMATIVE JUDAISM: SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

From the afore mentioned discussion of recent interpretations of the Birkat ha-Minim, it is evident that:

1 Until well into the 1970's a significant group of scholars interpreted the Birkat ha-Minim as an official Jewish curse directed primarily against Gentile and/or Jewish Christians. Many New Testament scholars who shared this viewpoint regarded the Gospels of Matthew and John as Christian responses to the events at Yavneh. This view is still popular among some Johanine scholars in particular who interpret the Gospel of John mainly against the background of the excommunication of Christians at Yavneh.

2 Contra to the small group of academics who still claim that the Cairo Geniza version is the original, or at least closest to the original, Yavnean formulation of the Birkat ha-Minim, the majority opinion is that the wording thereof was not fixed yet by the end of the first century. This implies that there was not only one 'official' version of this benediction which once-and-for-all caused the separation between Judaism and Jewish Christianity; its wording varied according to local situations.

3 According to the prevalent view, the Birkat ha-Minim in the period between AD 70-135 was directed against all schismatic persons and groups whose adherence to certain interpretations of Jewish traditions were questionable. Most scholars agree that Gentile and/or Jewish Christians, amongst others, would also have fitted into this category.

4 The majority of recent studies on the setting of the Gospels of Matthew and John do not relate the apparent conflict (and separation) between the synagogue and the Matthean and Johanine communities, to the Birkat ha-Minim at all.

The above mentioned findings on the Birkat ha-Minim directly (and indirectly) challenge many 'traditional' views on early Christianity and Judaism in New Testament scholarship. The general viewpoint that early Christian-Jewish relations developed along a continuum from a phase of 'continuing' Jewishness...
and mutual tolerance before the year 70 to one of mutual rejection in the post-70 period, can no longer be accepted uncritically. In this regard the majority of recent publications have proven that the Birkat ha-Minim does not reflect a watershed in early Jewish-Christian relations in the post-70 period.

Studies on the Birkat ha-Minim have also shown that scholars should be more careful to generalise about concepts such as 'Jewish Christianity', 'diaspora Judaism' and 'post-'temple Judaism', as if they were in fact clearly identifiable, unitary movements each with a set of neatly worked out, and officially formulated) dogmas, roles and offices, rules, rituals, symbols, institutions, etc (cf the nuanced discussions in this regard in Kraft & Nickelsburg [1986:9-30], and Overman [1992:63-78]). Post-temple Judaism was deeply involved in a process of social and religious (re)construction of the fragmented Jewish society. This process of consolidation and reorganisation of Judaism was a difficult and protracted one where different factions struggled to gain the upper hand. Yavneh, and whatever occurred there (cf Cohen 1984:42), symbolised the initial efforts in the post-70 period to forge a coalition between the different Jewish groups. In this struggle the Pharisees, who possessed a comprehensive social and religious program which did not require the temple, and who showed remarkable flexibility in adapting the halakah to the post-temple circumstances, however enjoyed the support of many of the Jewish people.

The development of relevant criteria for the exclusion of offenders and heretics, which varied according to the needs and problems of local Jewish communities, served as an important aspect of communal self-definition in the post-70 period (cf Kimmelman 1981) At the same time the Pharisees and Jewish communities during this time not only created new, but also reinterpreted existing symbol systems, practices, traditions and rituals which gave expression to their symbolic universe(s), and which served to distinguish them from competing interpretations of reality. In some instances competing 'symbolic universes' could have been specific Christian communities; in other instances Christian communities who still met the halakic criteria set down by the Pharisees, could again have been considered as still being part and parcel of the Jewish people.

The same processes of community formation and institutionalisation were also underway in early Christianity, of course at a different rate in different places. Due to various interpretations of the Christ-event, Christians were in many ways involved in creating their own lifeworlds. In this process they developed 'mechanisms' to identify and expel threats to their communities. They also developed shared values and norms, as well as rituals to deal with formative group experiences such as initiations and stages of transition. These developments were, however, not only limited to the post-70 era. Long before the destruction of the temple these processes of community-formation already had
an impact on Jewish-Christian relations. Some Christians, particularly from Pauline circles, for instance were severely critical of the Jewish law, which of course caused tension with Jewish communities. Many early-Christian symbols and rituals, such as their confession of Christ as Lord and their prayers in his name (cf Kretschmar 1990:16-22), also hampered Jewish-Christian relations in the pre-70 period.

Jewish and Christian self-definition, and for that matter, Jewish-Christian relations, developed at a different rate in different areas before and after AD 70. This meant that while one Christian community might produce anti Jewish slander, and vice versa, another community still endorsed Jewish religious symbols and rituals, and kept friendly relations with their Jewish neighbours. But at the same time Jewish and Christian communities experienced these 'relations' differently. In the words of France (1989:100):

Is it not possible to envisage a growing separation, even in the period before AD 70, so that hostility with the synagogue 'across the street' might develop and express itself in the language of mutual rejection long before the Christian group found it necessary to cease thinking of itself as a part of Judaism, indeed as the true expression of Judaism?

Recent research on the Birkat ha-Minim has once again accentuated the complexity of early Jewish-Christian relations, especially in the post-70 period. One simply cannot trace the separation of church and synagogue solely to the Twelfth Benediction anymore, since it was just one of the ways in which Jewish communities reacted to threats to their symbolic universes. In this regard recent studies which employ social-scientific theories have contributed to a new awareness of the impact of social factors and forces on the ideologies of early Christian and Jewish movements (eg Horsley 1989; Neyrey 1990). Further social-scientific analyses of the documents of these movements will undoubtedly help to form a more comprehensive picture of aspects which are relevant to the understanding of early Jewish-Christian relations, such as their self-identity, social location, processes of community formation, understanding of other 'symbolic universes'; etc (cf Neyrey 1991).

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