The Birkat ha-Minim

The Twelfth Benediction of the Amidah

Text, New Testament and Patristic Witnesses, and the Modern Scholarly Debate

A sourced study, with the Hebrew recensions in parallel and an interlinear of the blessing

1. The Amidah and the Place of the Twelfth Benediction

The Amidah ("standing [prayer]") is the central prayer of the synagogue service, recited silently while standing and facing Jerusalem, three times daily on weekdays. Its older name, Shemoneh Esreh ("Eighteen"), reflects an original count of eighteen benedictions, though the weekday version today contains nineteen. The prayer is built in three movements: three opening blessings of praise, a block of petitions, and three closing blessings of thanksgiving (on Sabbaths and festivals the petitionary middle collapses into a single blessing). The number, topics, and order are traditionally said to have been fixed at Yavneh (Jamnia) about 90 CE under the patriarch Rabban Gamaliel II. The twelfth blessing—the Birkat ha-Minim, "the benediction concerning the heretics"—is, in form, not a blessing at all but an imprecation, and its insertion is the standard explanation for how "Eighteen" came to number nineteen.

2. Origin: Yavneh, Rabban Gamaliel II, and Shmuel ha-Katan

According to the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 28b–29a), the order of the benedictions was arranged before Rabban Gamaliel II at Yavneh by Shimon ha-Pakuli; Gamaliel then asked whether anyone could compose a benediction concerning the minim, and Shmuel ha-Katan ("Samuel the Small") composed it. This places the formulation of the blessing in the late first century C.E.—c. 80–110—though every rabbinic source that reports the event was redacted centuries later, a point that bears on the historical debate below. The same passage shows the special anxiety attached to this blessing: a prayer-leader who erred in it, or omitted it, was suspected of heresy and removed, since to recite it correctly was, in effect, to curse the heretics in the hearing of the congregation, whose "amen" ratified the curse.

3. The Text in Parallel: Geniza and Modern Recensions

The most important early evidence is the "Palestinian recension" recovered from the Cairo Geniza and first published by Solomon Schechter in 1898. It names Christians explicitly (ha-notzrim) alongside the minim. The Babylonian branch (e.g., Seder Rav Amram, ninth century) preserves a related form, and the modern printed rites—after centuries of Christian censorship—no longer name Christians at all, cursing instead the malshinim (informers/slanderers) and zedim (the insolent). The Hebrew below is consonantal; English renderings are my own.

Recension	Hebrew / English
Palestinian (Cairo Geniza); the Eretz-Yisrael rite, the form closest to the early benediction	למשומדים אל תהי תקוה, ומלכות זדון מהרה תעקר בימינו, והנוצרים והמינים כרגע יאבדו, ימחו מספר חיים ועם צדיקים אל יכתבו. ברוך אתה יי מכניע זדים. *"For the apostates (meshummadim) let there be no hope, and may the kingdom of arrogance be swiftly uprooted in our days; and may the Notzrim (Nazarenes/Christians) and the minim (heretics) perish in a moment, be*

Recension	Hebrew / English
	blotted out of the book of life and not inscribed with the righteous. Blessed are you, Lord, who humbles the insolent."
Babylonian (Seder Rav Amram Gaon, 9th c.); a related early form, still naming the minim	למשומדים אל תהי תקוה והמינים כרגע יאבדו וכל אויבי עמך מהרה יכרתו ומלכות זדון מהרה תעקר ותשבר ותכניע במהרה בימינו. ברוך אתה יי שובר רשעים ומכניע זדים. *"For the apostates let there be no hope, and may the minim perish in a moment, and may all the enemies of your people be swiftly cut off; may the kingdom of arrogance be swiftly uprooted, broken, and humbled in our days. Blessed are you, Lord, who breaks the wicked and humbles the insolent."*
Modern Ashkenazi (Nusach Ashkenaz); the censored form in use today—no Christians named	ולמלשינים אל תהי תקוה וכל הרשעה כרגע תאבד וכל אויביך מהרה יכרתו והזדים מהרה תעקר ותשבר ותמגר ותכניע במהרה בימינו. ברוך אתה יי שובר אויבים ומכניע זדים. *"And for the slanderers/informers (malshinim) let there be no hope, and may all wickedness perish in a moment; may all your enemies be swiftly cut off, and may you swiftly uproot, break, cast down, and humble the insolent (zedim), speedily in our days. Blessed are you, Lord, who breaks enemies and humbles the insolent."*

Internal wording varies slightly by rite; some Ashkenazi printings read "the kingdom of wickedness" (malkhut ha-rish'ah) for "the insolent." The Sephardi and Edot ha-Mizrach rites open la-minim ve-la-malshinim ("For the heretics and for the informers…"), retaining the word minim that the Ashkenazi rite dropped.

4. Interlinear of the Twelfth Benediction (Modern Ashkenazi)

Word-by-word, in Hebrew reading order. Vocalization is carried in the transliteration.

Hebrew	Transliteration	Gloss
ולמלשינים	*u-la-malshinim*	and for the informers/slanderers
אל	*al*	let there not
תהי	*tehi*	be
תקוה	*tikvah*	hope
וכל	*ve-khol*	and all
הרשעה	*ha-rish'ah*	the wickedness
כרגע	*ke-rega'*	in a moment
תאבד	*toved*	may it perish
וכל	*ve-khol*	and all
אויביך	*oyvekha*	your enemies
מהרה	*meherah*	swiftly
יכרתו	*yikkaretu*	may they be cut off

Hebrew	Transliteration	Gloss
והזדים	*ve-ha-zedim*	and the insolent
מהרה	*meherah*	swiftly
תעקר	*te'akker*	may you uproot
ותשבר	*u-teshabber*	and break
ותמגר	*u-temagger*	and cast down
ותכניע	*u-takhnia'*	and humble
במהרה	*bi-meherah*	speedily
בימינו	*ve-yameinu*	in our days
ברוך	*barukh*	blessed
אתה	*attah*	are you
יי	*Adonai*	LORD
שובר	*shover*	who breaks
אויבים	*oyvim*	enemies
ומכניע	*u-makhnia'*	and humbles
זדים	*zedim*	the insolent

5. The Terms Minim and Notzrim

Minim (מינים) means "kinds, species," and by extension "sectarians, heretics." It is a deliberately elastic category: in rabbinic usage it can denote Sadducees, dualists, gnostics, apostates, and various religious or philosophical opponents—some, but by no means all, of whom were Christians. Notzrim (נוצרים) means "Nazarenes," from Natzrat (Nazareth) / Yeshu ha-Notzri, and designates (Jewish-)Christians specifically. The explicit pairing "Notzrim and minim" in the Geniza text is what makes the benediction central to the question of the parting of the ways—though, as the debate below shows, whether notzrim stood in the earliest form or was added in the fourth century is precisely what is contested.

6. New Testament Witnesses

The classic New Testament link is the verb ἀποσυνάγωγος (aposynágōgos), "expelled from the synagogue." The word is otherwise unattested in Greek before John and occurs only three times in the New Testament, all in the Fourth Gospel. J. L. Martyn (*History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 1968) argued that these reflect the situation created by the Birkat ha-Minim; the connection is influential but, as section 8 notes, disputed.

Reference	Greek (critical text)	English
John 9:22	ταῦτα εἶπαν οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ ὅτι ἐφοβοῦντο τοὺς Ἰουδαίους, ἤδη γὰρ συνετέθειντο οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἵνα ἐάν τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσῃ χριστόν, ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται.	His parents said these things because they feared the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed him to be Christ, he would be put out of

Reference	Greek (critical text)	English
		the synagogue.
John 12:42	ὅμως μέντοι καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἀρχόντων πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τοὺς Φαρισαίους οὐχ ὡμολόγουν ἵνα μὴ ἀποσυνάγωγοι γένωνται,	Nevertheless, even many of the rulers believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they would not confess it, lest they be put out of the synagogue;
John 16:2	ἀποσυναγώγους ποιήσουσιν ὑμᾶς· ἀλλ’ ἔρχεται ὥρα ἵνα πᾶς ὁ ἀποκτείνας ὑμᾶς δόξῃ λατρείαν προσφέρειν τῷ θεῷ.	They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, an hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God.

Related synagogue-discipline passages

These are not direct references to the benediction, but they form the wider matrix of synagogue sanction against followers of Jesus that the Johannine notices presuppose:

• **Luke 6:22**—the Lukan beatitude on being hated, “excluded” (ἀφορίσωσιν), reviled, and having one’s name “cast out as evil” on account of the Son of Man—often read against synagogue exclusion.

- Matthew 10:17; Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12—being handed over to councils and flogged “in their synagogues,” the disciplinary setting in which such a curse would operate.
- Acts 9:1–2; 22:19; 26:11—Paul, before his call, pursuing and punishing believers in the synagogues and trying to make them blaspheme; 1 Thess 2:14–16—Judean persecution of the churches.

A note of caution: ἀποσυνάγωγος describes a formal, possibly local act of expulsion; the New Testament never quotes or names a liturgical curse. The identification of John’s expulsion with the Birkat ha-Minim is an inference—Martyn’s—not a statement of the text.

7. Patristic Witnesses

Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho (c. 155–160)

Justin repeatedly charges the Jews with cursing Christ and his followers in synagogue prayer. In *Dial.* 16.4 he says they are “*cursing in your synagogues those that believe on Christ*”; cf. *Dial.* 47, 93, 95–96, 108, and 137, where he speaks of those who “anathematize” Jesus “in the synagogues.” Justin does not name a specific benediction, and he writes from Asia Minor / Rome; how far his “cursing” reflects the formal Birkat ha-Minim, rather than a more general malediction, is debated (so Kimelman).

Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion 29.9.2 (c. 374–377)

Writing against the Nazoraeans—Torah-observant Jewish believers in Jesus—Epiphanius reports that the Jews “*stand up at dawn, at midday, and toward evening, three times a day… and curse and anathematize them*,” saying, in his words, “*May God curse the Nazoraeans*.” This thrice-daily cursing of the Notzrim, set in synagogue prayer, is the closest patristic match to the Amidah’s structure and to the Geniza wording; Epiphanius, a Palestinian by birth, is a weighty witness.

Jerome (c. 404–410)

In his letter to Augustine (*Ep.* 112.13 = Augustine, *Ep.* 75), Jerome reports a sect "*in all the synagogues of the East… called the sect of the Minei*," condemned by the Pharisees and usually called Nazarenes. In his commentaries he is blunter: on *Amos* 1:11–12 he writes that to this day they "blaspheme the Christian people in their synagogues under the name of Nazarenes," and on *Isaiah* (5:18–19; 49:7; 52:4) that "three times each day… they anathematize the Christian name under the name of Nazarenes." Jerome thus supplies both the term minim (Minaei) and notzrim (Nazaraei), the very pair of the Geniza text.

8. The Modern Scholarly Debate

Few short texts have generated so large a literature, because the benediction is widely taken to mark—or to fail to mark—the moment Judaism and Christianity definitively separated. The main positions:

The older consensus (J. L. Martyn; W. D. Davies). The Birkat ha-Minim was a late-first-century instrument deliberately crafted at "Jamnia" to expose and expel Jewish-Christians from the synagogue, and it stands behind John's expulsion language. This reading shaped a generation of Johannine scholarship.

The revisionist challenge (Reuven Kimelman, 1981). In "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," Kimelman argued that the benediction was aimed at Jewish sectarianism broadly, not at Christians as such; that minim did not mean "Christians" specifically; that the notzrim clause is likely a later (fourth-century) addition; and that there is no good evidence Christians experienced it as an anti-Christian curse before then. The tidy "Council of Jamnia" is itself largely a modern construct.

The defense and the nuance (W. Horbury 1982; J. Marcus 2009). Horbury (JTS 33) argued the early anti-Christian function is more defensible than Kimelman allowed. Marcus ("Birkat Ha-Minim Revisited," NTS 55) defends the core of Martyn's reconstruction while conceding the rabbis did not yet control all synagogues, and suggests the prayer's ancestor may have been a Qumran-style curse on the Romans ("the kingdom of arrogance"). He also stresses that cleanly separating "Jewish" from "Christian" is a modern anachronism—the Nazarenes were Jews.

The textual turn (U. Ehrlich & R. Langer 2005; Langer 2012; Y. Teppler 2007). Ehrlich and Langer's edition of the earliest texts (HUCA 77) maps the Geniza evidence across some sixty-five manuscripts and at least ten versions, finding a very stable structure with significant openness to addition and deletion. Langer's *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat ha-Minim* (Oxford, 2012) traces the prayer from a medieval curse of Christians, through Christian censorship, to its modern transformation into a general petition that God remove evil. A fair summary: the medieval prayer unquestionably cursed Christians; whether the first-century original did so specifically remains open.

9. Censorship and the Modern Forms

From the high Middle Ages, and decisively under sixteenth-century Christian (especially Catholic) censorship, the explicit notzrim and other pointed terms were struck from printed siddurim. The result is the text now standard in the Ashkenazi rite, which opens "And for the malshinim (informers)" and curses zedim (the insolent) and "all wickedness," naming no religious community; the Sephardi rite preserves the older minim in its opening. The arc is from a named curse of Christians to an abstract petition against informers and evildoers.

10. Do Jews Still Recite It Today?

Yes. The Birkat ha-Minim remains the twelfth blessing of the weekday Amidah and is recited three times daily in Orthodox practice and, in similar wording, in Conservative/Masorti practice. But the words are the censored, generalized ones above: no Christians, Nazarenes, or any named group—only malshinim, zedim, and "all wickedness." The Reform and Reconstructionist movements, from the nineteenth century onward, either removed the blessing or rewrote it as a universal plea against evil and slander. So the prayer a Jew says today against the minim is the lineal descendant of the one that once read notzrim, but the explicit curse of Christians survives only in the manuscript record (the Geniza) and in the complaints of the Church Fathers.

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