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On *Birkat Kohanim* (Numbers 6:24–26) and its Citation

Jack M. Sasson

In a paper offered in tribute and affection to an inspiring teacher and spiritual leader, Rabbi Moshe Shamah, I focus on the *birkat kōhănîm* (Numbers 6:24–25; henceforth *birkat*).[1] Ever since its delivery shortly after a fateful convocation at Sinai, this succession of hallowed benedictions has inspired Hebraic, Jewish and Christian worshipers. In the past half-century, however, a series of archeological and epigraphic discoveries have encouraged inspection of the *birkat*'s origins, language, and development. Among these finds are two amulets from Ketef Hinnom by Jerusalem that contain evocations of the *birkat*. The amulets' purported origin in the Second Temple period would make their versions of the *birkat* the earliest copies of Biblical writings found before the retrieval of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their recovery proved so seminal that it

1. Rabbi Shamah is a levi, so practically a cousin of a kohen, and to them both God assigned sacred tasks: "to carry the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, to stand in attendance upon the Lord, and to bless in his name" (Deuteronomy 10:9). The verse ends with עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, that is, even "into our own days." Rabbi Shamah has indeed observed that command.

   In truth, the *berakhot* have mesmerized me since my childhood in Beirut, when my father and older brothers would take me to *Maghen Abraham*, a few yards from our home. I thrilled over the remarkable vision (yes — I peeked!) of ghost-like figures at the *hekhal,* covered in their tallit, with arms spreading like wings, rhythmically intoning while swaying, seemingly landing on earth from other worlds. I now live among Ashkenazim, and they are very parsimonious and relatively undramatic when duplicating these moments. Too bad for me.

stimulated a lively scholarly and public debate.[2] Below, I review the finds in recent scholarly literature and comment on some of their implications.

The Plea

Early in the eighteenth-century BCE, King Zimri-Lim of Mari, a mid-Euphrates town just north of the Iraq-Syria border, petitioned the River god Nāru (Hebrew: נָהָר) in the following words:

> I am herewith dispatching a gold vessel to my Lord. When in the past I sent tidings to my Lord, my Lord showed me a sign. May my Lord fulfill the sign he showed me: May my Lord not fail to protect me; may my Lord not turn his attention elsewhere; may my Lord not favor anyone else but me.[3]

This brief note is in Akkadian, a Semitic language that flourished in Mesopotamia for over two millennia. It obviously conveys a desire by a king who might well have been distressed over events taking place in his own time. Nāru presided over judgments achieved through river ordeals, likely the source of this king's apprehension. As any pious worshiper, Zimri-Lim opens by reminding Nāru of previous signs of support. By offering his god a precious gift, he hoped to prod him into fulfilling them. The appeal is very personal, as is expected in the genre, with Nāru urged to ignore all other duties and commit to just one individual, Zimri-Lim. We may also notice that in phrasing the second wish

2. A full monograph on the subject is Smoak 2016. (Smoak gives a brief summary at http://asorblog.org/2016/08/02/new-light-priestly-blessing-ancient-judah/). Reading this book stimulated me to pen down my reaction to some of the major conclusions contained in it. For a more exacting philological and documentary study of the *birkat* (minus the recent discoveries), see Seybold 1977.
3. The document is published as *Archives royales de Mari* 26: 191. A relatively accessible notice about it is in Sasson 2017: 238, with relevant bibliographic details.

— that Nāru not "turn his face" to another (*ašar šani pānêšu ay usaḫḫir*) — the supplicant uses a metaphor that is natural to polytheism: A god, manifesting himself as an anthropomorphic statue, may either allow or deny a supplicant the opportunity to behold his countenance.

The king conveys his hopes (as well as his anxiety) in negative formulations, not at all odd for the language of supplication at the time. When transferred into positive expressions, we may render them as a triplet: Protect me; single me out; favor me. And if these wishes vaguely remind us of requests that are familiar in our daily worship, it is because they draw upon needs that are ageless, sentiments that are human, and hopes that are grounded in faith.

The Priestly Blessing

The charge. In the second year after exiting Egypt, on the first day of the second month, Moses receives a series of commands. He is to take a census of Israel, and especially to register those of arm-bearing age (Numbers 1–2). The tribe of Levi receives attention (3–4), dividing into priests (*kōhănîm*), direct descendants from Aaron, and Levites (*lĕvîyim*), the rest of that tribe. Moses is instructed on how to instill communal purity (5:1–4), to restore normalcy to individuals (5:5–10) or to home (*sotah*, 5:11–31), and to permit special commitment to God (6:1–21). On the tenth instruction of the series, yet loosely linked to what precedes (and for that matter what follows), Moses is to have Aaron and his sons confer a series of blessings on the whole Israel (6:22–27).[4] The purpose (v. 27) is for them to "set my name on Israel" (וְשָׂמוּ

4. Traditional exegesis treats this passage as a follow-up and expansion for Leviticus 9:22 when Aaron blessed the people at the conclusion of the priestly investiture (Leviticus 8–9). The rabbis offered their own reasons for the series (*Numbers rabbah* on Numb 10:25). Ibn Ezra found it appropriate that it follows discussions on another body of holy people, the Nazirs. There are diverse (and fragile) opinions on how the *birkat* connects with the previous series, most often focusing on the obvious: The powerful role of the priests as instruments between God and

אֶת־שְׁמִי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). In this way, Israel is to know that God himself is blessing them (וַאֲנִי אֲבָרֲכֵם). Elsewhere, it is God who selects the place and condition for the bestowal of blessings (at Exodus 20:24).[5] Here, the choice is reciprocal, requiring a personal will and desire to connect with God. As is common in Semitic languages, here we also have a metaphor built on a concrete notion ("to set something down") that clarifies and enhances an abstraction ("to bless").[6] In effect, the priests would be intermediaries, at once distancing and nearing a God too holy to shower benedictions directly on his Chosen People.

The language. Once they are to address the multitudes, the priests are to convey blessings to each as individuals, thus making the occasion direct and intimate. The language is lyrical, edging towards the poetic.[7] The verses are brief enough, so I cite them here:

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the people of Israel. Their roles in *sotah* and here are especially noted. Linkage with what follows the *birkat* is more difficult to discern.

5. Sacrifices are to be presented "Wherever I allow my name to be mentioned. I will then come to you and bless you בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַזְכִּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ)."

6. The phrase אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שִׂים/לְשׁוּם does not seem to differ from the better-known idiom לְשַׁכֵּן שְׁמוֹ, both having to do with God selecting a site where to connect with worshipers. Traditional exegetes involve the *shechinah*, "charisma," to distance any hint of physicality between God and humans; see Tigay's very fine study (2017). The linkage between this special space and bestowal of blessings also occurs in Deuteronomy 14:24, 16:15, and elsewhere.

   Some interpret this phrase literally, as a command to write down these blessings, so contradicting (supplementing?) that they should orally (v. 23) "declare to them (אָמוֹר לָהֶם)." It is possible that behind the phrase is an echo of a practice whereby priests wrote God's name on an object to keep close to the body. In the ancient world, writing the name of a deity on an object had talismanic value, as we know from the contents of our *mezuzot* and phylacteries (*tefillin*) (see more below), as per Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:8; and 11:18. An extension of the same principle occurs when a priest dissolves the name of God into ordeal waters to test a woman's fidelity (*sotah*, Numbers 5:11–21).

7. Even in this respect, there are scholarly arguments on whether to treat

יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ
יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם

The arrangement of the blessings is intricate, consisting of three sets displayed in a progression of three, five, and seven words, respectively using fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five consonants — surely not a fortuitous design.[8] *Setumot* separate the sentiments, requiring integral articulation for each set.[9] The full benediction has six verbs, three of which are elements in idiomatic phrases. God (using the Tetragrammaton throughout) is the subject for all of them. The fortunate object of the series of divine blessings is couched as a second person singular "you." The suffix is masculine; but when not addressing a specific individual, it supersedes gender or age identity to apply to women and children as well.

Two of the idioms use an anatomical feature, the face, as a direct-object element. Striking is that the face belongs to God, an apparent anthropomorphism. What exactly do the idioms mean? There are three ways to understand them:

1. Concretely. Many scholars who are aware of the culture of

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the *birkat* as poetry. It may not exhibit the strict parallelism that a purist might wish, but I imagine that the language is hypnotic enough to count as poetic. I hide behind the designation "lyrical."

8. Such a design suggests that literary minds are behind the inspired phrasing. Ever alert, some rabbis (*Bavli Megillah* 23a) found in the progression a clue to the number of readings from the Torah on two weekdays (3), festivals (5), and Sabbaths (7). *Mishnah Sotah* 6.7 discusses how the *birkat* was invoked in the Temple and in the synagogues; *Mishnah Sotah* 6.2 insists that they should be recited in Hebrew.

9. The scheme by which scribes allocated spacing via *petuḥot* and *setumot* is one of our earliest indication of how readers scanned and parsed Hebrew Scripture. Qumran shows that our system went back at least to the Roman period. Talmudic is the parceling of the Torah into weekly readings that chanted the five books over three years or just one. Assigning chapters and verses is a relatively recent phenomenon (the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, respectively), mostly due to Christian clerics.

the ancient Near East (to which Hebraic culture belongs) might refer to a world in which gods reveal themselves to their worshipers via anthropomorphic statues.[10] In Mesopotamia, a worshiper (normally a priest or a king) who is privileged enough to enter the inner sanctum of a temple where the image of the god or goddess is kept, might be allowed to behold the image's face. He might also hold its hand when taking oaths or making vows, or kiss its foot, especially when seeking healing from a dreaded illness. The "shine" on a god's face was the aura, the radiance that surrounded the head and often the body of the gods, in Hebrew often termed the "glory" of God (כְּבוֹד יְהוָה; perceived as a cloud, see Ezekiel 10–11, 40–44). In frescoes

10. Acts of devotion include dressing the statue in fine fabric and footwear, fashioning crowns and horns for its head, devising weapons to place in its arm, setting necklaces and weapons of precious metal on its body and limbs, and fabricating thrones and pedestals for it. Such pious acts continued in Byzantine, Slavic, and Catholic Christianity. Especially since the European Middle Ages, they may have influenced how the *sefer torah* is decorated, especially among Ashkenazim.

Such adoration of the gods through human figures was repeatedly mocked by our prophets, psalmists and in Jewish tradition: How could anyone believe in the power of divinities made of stone or wood when, among other faults, they had mouths yet cannot speak, ears yet cannot hear, and so forth (as in Psalms 115: 4–7; 135:15–17)? In fact, in ancient times, only the ignorant equated an image with the divinity. Images of the gods achieved sacrality only after time-consuming rituals that included formal disavowal that human hands were ever responsible for their creation. Upon completion, what might look like a statue to an undiscerning mind had become a visible manifestation of the unknowable, a palpable transfiguration of a "cosmic implosion," in which all the power that ever could be was rendered accessible to the human senses. Similar elaborate ceremonies took place when a statue was decommissioned, turning it into elements bereft of divinity. Whether Israel, especially outside of Jerusalem, approached God via images is debated endlessly because pre-Exilic archaeology has uncovered many human and animal-shaped figurines in Israel. (For some of these issues, see Sasson 2002.)

and paintings, we see them as light, similar to the halos hovering over the heads of Christian saints. In statuary, however, the glow that encircles deities converted into a visible crown or, more commonly, up to four sets of horns bursting from the skulls of the gods.[11]

2. Symbolically. It is also possible to understand references to God's face as vestigial of Israel's earliest religion when it had not yet fully moved toward an abstract definition of the divine.[12] There is a hint of that phase in the phrase לֵרָאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה that occurs over half a dozen times in the Tanakh (among others in Exodus 23:15, 1 Samuel 1:22, Psalms 42:3). It has been a problem for generations. The Masoretes certainly kept in mind Exodus 33:20 (God to Moses, "You cannot see my face, for someone may not

11. The number of sets has to do with rising levels of godhood. Humans who are touched by divinity (such as King Naram-Sin of Agade) display just one set. It is often speculated whether, on coming down from the presence of God (Exodus 34:29–35), Moses displayed a similar transfiguration, when the text says, "the skin of his face was "horned," often rendered "became radiant" (קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו). When creating "Moses," one of his many masterpieces, Michelangelo took his cue from the Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate), with a literal translation of the Hebrew. (Image at <https://tinyurl.com/ydf4ezs7>.)

12. There are traces of those vestiges in Scripture, betraying the many layers of traditions that, over time, came to shape our Tanakh. Even the most famous article of faith crafted by Israel, שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד (Deuteronomy 6:4), proclaims the incomparability, the supremacy, and the singularity of God; but not (yet) his uniqueness. Commonly rendered as "Listen Israel, The Lord is our God, The Lord is One," this credo suggests a crafting when Israel was still in a stage of the development of religion termed "monolatry": The worship of one god exclusively in one's region, but without challenging the existence of other deities in their own areas. Indeed, Israel dents its conviction about God's uniqueness when it chants מִי־כָמֹכָה בָּאֵלִם יְהוָה, "Who compares to you among the gods, Lord?" (Exodus 15:11); when it invokes God as אֵל אֱלֹהִים "god of gods" (Joshua 22:22; Psalms 50:1; fullest at Deuteronomy 10:17); or when the first of its Ten Commandments privileges the Hebrew God over any other god (Exodus 20:2–5).

see me and live"). As well, they tried to avoid any notion that God has anthropomorphic features. They therefore imposed the vowels of a Niphal on the verb, and thus forced translators to give grammatically flawed renderings of the phrase such as "appearing before God."[13] In all instances, however, the passages can make good sense with the verb as a Qal, suggesting that people actually faced God, probably not as a statue, but through a symbolic representation, much as we stand today in God's presence when facing the *hekhal* with its splendid array of Torah scrolls.[14]

3. Metaphorically. As is well known, Biblical Hebrew (among many other Semitic languages) reaches for the abstract by frequently creating phrases based on anatomy.[15] Many compound prepositions are so constructed, such as אֶל-פְּנֵי/עַל, עַל-יַד/אֶל, and many others. Such expressions for sentiments and emotions connect bodily parts (hand, face, womb, nose) to verbs of action. In such cases, neither we nor the ancient Hebrews are expected to literally parse

13. את, normally a particle linking to a direct object, works best with an active verb and can be vestigial when used with a Niphal. Moreover, in all but two cases (Genesis 32.10, 30), treating את as equivalent to the preposition עם ("with"), would not be helpful. Striking is Genesis 33:10 in which a fearful Jacob uses hyperbolic language to mollify his brother Esau, "…for to see your face is to see the face of God (כִּי עַל-כֵּן רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים)." The verbal forms there are Qal.
14. Even in Mesopotamia, where access to the image of a god was normal among the elite, "to look at the face of a god (Akkadian, *pān ilim naplusum*)" had come to mean "to worship" that god; see Veenhof 1995.
15. The best exposition remains Dhorme 1923; but many great comments on the same subject are in Gruber 1980. I might add that the limitations of Biblical Hebrew have activated many issues that remain fully ours to disentangle. A major one is the problem of invoking God. Hebrew does not have a neuter pronoun, and when it tackles a subject in which sex or gender is not at stake, it regularly defaults to a masculine pronoun. The construction invites the false notion that the Hebrew priesthood conceived God to be a male.

the verbs associated with them; rather, we too reach for an appropriate meaning. To be literal with them risks getting mired in issues on Hebrew religion or culture that are gratuitous.[16]

פָּנִים ("face," almost always in the plural) readily enters into such idiomatic expressions and often references God's action or reactions, for and against humans.[17] In most Semitic languages, when faces beam, they indicate pleasure. Gods beam when they are pleased with the person or the object that gave them satisfaction. When their faces lift toward someone, they figuratively indicate a willingness to favor or to forgive that person.[18]

The meaning. With these considerations in mind, it is appropriate to translate by adhering to the progress of verbs in the benediction, all of them delivering beneficial hopes: God will bless and protect; he is to "shine his face (= be pleased with someone") and be kind; he is to "lift his face (= to favor") and to "instill peace." However, Hebrew grammar allows a rendering in which the second verb or idiom in each set of the series is the *result* of the action in the first set. This alternative proves plausible when considering Psalms 67:2. There, the sequence for the second sentiment is reversed as well as fleshed out: "May God be kind to us by blessing us and by beaming at us, Selah" (אֱלֹהִים יְחָנֵּנוּ וִיבָרְכֵנוּ יָאֵר פָּנָיו אִתָּנוּ סֶלָה). This way, in the *birkat*, God's generous actions yield

16. It would be foolish to imagine a world full of people with red-hot noses (חרון אף) when they get angry. Ditto for looking for pregnant men just because in Hebrew their insides (מעים) move within them.
17. The exact meaning depends on the use of verbs: With "to seek (בִּקֵּשׁ)," the idiom yields "to plead;" with "to weaken (חִלָּה)," it gives "to mollify;" with "to give, (נָתַן)," it signifies "to resolve (for or against)," and so forth. A full list of expressions is in Simian-Yofre 2001: 597–605.
18. One may argue that this particular phrasing likely reflects a gesture in a legal setting when judges raised their faces to express partiality.

the happiest of conditions: Protection, compassion and, best of all serenity.[19]

Ancient Petitions

Because our earliest copies of the Hebrew Bible do not come to us until the Roman period and because our earliest translations of the *birkat* (Greek and Aramaic) do not show many differences from what we have, debates about the origin and purpose of these singularly powerful invocations have been limited to internal inspection of our received Hebrew text.[20] For most traditionalists, the issues are irrelevant, as Scripture reveals the context from

19. Therefore, it is possible — albeit not as lilting — to understand the *birkat* this way:

> May the Lord shelter you by blessing you;
> May the Lord be gracious to you by beaming at you;
> May the Lord grant you peace by favoring you.

Fishbane (1983) and Cohen (1993) argue strongly for a variation of this position. They would render, for example, the first benediction as "May God (benevolently) bless you and (consequently) protect you."

20. We know that the *birkat* was fully functioning as priestly benedictions long before the destruction of the Second Temple. Writing in Jerusalem during the Hellenistic period (around 200 BCE) Ben Sira (Sirach, Ecclesiasticus) tells how the High Priest Simon "came down and lifted up his hands over the whole congregation of the sons of Israel. With the blessing of the LORD on his lips (בשפתיו יי׳ וברכת), he gloried in the name of the LORD" (at 50:20). [Text online at http://www.bensira.org/navigator.php?Manuscript=B&PageNum=38.]

None of the *Numbers* manuscripts from Qumran that cites the *birkat* has survived, so we cannot tell how they read it in the Roman period; but no one presumes that they differed from what we have. One fragment (4Q374) has "When he caused 'his face to shine upon them' for healing, they were made strong again…," obviously referring to Numbers 6:25. Another (1QSb =1Q28a), termed "Rule of the Blessings," cites Numbers 6:26 ("May God lift us his face…") in a collection of blessings addressing the population, the High Priest, priests, secular leaders, and messiahs. For the texts in translations, see Wise, Abegg, and Cook 1996: 148, 335–36.

which the blessings originate. Jews in particular relish visiting the *birkat* as part of their daily prayer.[21] In recent decades, however, archaeology has unearthed several kinds of inscriptions to enrich the discussion.

Dedications. From Ekron, a Philistine city (now at Tel Miqne, 22 miles west of Jerusalem), comes an inscription once embedded in a temple wall. In it, a seventh-century BCE ruler (Akayush, whose father, Padi, was a contemporary of Hezekiah) dedicates this building to his goddess. Because of his devotion, the hope is that she will "bless and protect him, increase his life and protect his land" (תברכה.ותשמ[ר]ה.ותארך.ימה.ותברך.[א]רצה).[22] The sequence of verbs was particularly striking for its reminiscence of the *birkat*'s opening lines.

Invocations. Slightly earlier in date are remarkable inscriptions inked on fragments from large pithoi (jars) used for storage of grain. They were found in the rubble of a crossroads stronghold at Kuntillet ʿAjrud in the northern Sinai, for good reasons believed to be a stopover for merchants. Who fabricated or commissioned the pithoi is a mystery. As well, it is difficult to decide whether the inscriptions were original to the jars' fabrication or added intentionally for this stop. Moreover, the jars carried grotesque drawings of bovine figures as well as caricatures of processions with musical instruments, their linkage with the inscriptions very murky.[23]

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21. The *birkat* is invoked at the reader's repetition of the *ʿAmidah*, also known as the *Shemone-ʿesre,* "The Eighteen (blessings)," or simply as *Ha-tefilla*, "The Prayer."
22. In these early scripts, no special symbols differentiated between the final forms of some consonants (*kaf, mem, nun, pe, ṣade*). I have nonetheless updated them for convenience. We notice, too, that *vav* and *yod* do not yet serve to indicate long vowels.
23. An enormous literature is available now because of the sensational (and sensationalized) nature of the discoveries. The official volume on the excavations is Meshel 2012. A recent (4/4/2018) *Haaretz* notice reviews some of the issues (Nir Hasson, "A Strange Drawing Found in Sinai

Two of the jars bear inscriptions invoking divine blessings. In addressing individuals (kin or partners), the writer of Jar A conveys his own sentiments "I bless you by YHVH of Samaria and by his Asherah (ברכת.אתכם.ליהוה.שמרן.ולאשרתה)."[24] Jar B bears several inscriptions, not all of them obviously related. Among these are a list of names, an alphabet (with *pe* preceding *ayin*), and a wisdom message about the generosity of YHVH of Teman and his Asherah: "All that is asked of a man, if he is gracious (חנן) and if he is generous [see Psalms 37:21], YHV (יהו) will give him what he desires." Another message is from an Amaryav to "my lord," "I have offered a blessing for you by YHVH of Teman and by his Asherah." This is followed by citing the blessing itself, "May he bless, protect you, and be with my lord [...] (יברך וישמרך ויהי עם אדני)".

Amulets. Amulets (*ḥirz* in Arabic) are ubiquitous in most cultures, albeit frowned upon by established religion. From natural objects (stones or metals, precious or otherwise) of specific shapes or hues (often black or blue), they take many shapes, such as eyes, hands, or the like. Strategic arrangements (in multiples

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Could Undermine Our Entire Idea of Judaism" <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-a-strange-drawing-could-undermine-our-entire-idea-of-judaism-1.5973328>). A popular (and provocatively titled) book on the subject is Dever 2005. I should add that many readings of the texts are in contention, and therefore also how to understand them.

24. In the Canaanite pantheon, Asherah is the wife of the god El. In Scripture, she is an associate of Baal (in the singular or plural) as seductress of Israel. Stimulated by her pairing with the Hebrew God, a great amount of scholarship has resulted in searches to recover her mention in published documents, and to reevaluate the evidence on the existence of a consort for the Hebrew God, from Harran to kabbalistic lore about the *shechinah*.

However, other scholars believe that, at Kuntillet ʿAjrud as well as in the Bible (2 Kings 21:3 for example), אשרה refers to a wooden pole that had sacred symbolism beyond and before the consecration of the Jerusalem Temple. Tigay (1990: 218) offers a parallel in Talmudic lore (see *bSukkah* 45a) about offering blessing to "the Lord and to you, O Altar."

of fives among Jews from Aleppo, for example) on the body or on walls enhances their efficacy. Amulets are for the living; but in antiquity, they also accompanied the dead, giving them protection beyond the grave. There are echoes of their prevalence in the Hebrew Bible and nice examples occur in Qumran.[25] The most potent among them bear inscriptions that ward off evil and ease transitions into the beyond. Of interest are several Phoenician and Punic (North Africa and Mediterranean islands) artifacts found mostly in burial sites: A few plaques, some rolled silver leaves, inscribed with combinations of the verbs ברך, שמר, and נצר.[26] They cover several centuries, the earliest from the seventh or sixth century BCE. A remarkable example from Judah is a tomb inscription from the Hebron area (Khirbet el-Qom) from the late eighth-century BCE. Lightly and clumsily incised over a large open hand that accentuates the spread of its five fingers (shade of the *khamseh*!) is a text "written by wealthy Uriyahu." It wishes, "Blessed was/be Uriyahu to God (YHVH) and from his enemies by his Asherah. He saved him, (namely) Daniyahu": (ברך.אריהו.ליהוה. המצריה.לאשרתה.הושע לא לדניהו).[27]

The Ketef Hinnom amulets. Yet no amulets have provoked as many associations with the *birkat* as the two tiny silver leaves recovered from a burial site around Jerusalem. Centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple, a bereaved family entered its burial vault to lay to rest recently departed member(s). They attached or laid out two rolled silver amulets on the dead, made

25. See Lewis 2012, with several biblical citations.
26. Several Aramaic mortuary inscriptions from Persian period Egypt asks for blessings from pagan gods.
27. The identity of Daniyahu is in dispute. Some think it is the scribe, and such an addition occurs, albeit rarely, in ancient inscriptions. In any case, the scribe was hardly an expert in language or script. As a result, there is much dispute in reading certain of the consonants, hence also establishing the meaning of the words and their implication. See Aḥituv 2008: 220–24, with bibliography 233.

their goodbyes, and then rolled a stone to block the entrance.[28] Excavating at Ketef Hinnom a generation ago, archaeologists located the amulets; but their casings in wood or cloth did not survive the ravages of time. When unrolled and treated, they measured, respectively, 4×1 and 1×0.5 inches. The conjecture is that different hands, maybe even at different periods, scratched on the leaves consonants in Old-Hebrew (variant of "Phoenician") script.

28. Burial in Israel during the First and Second Temple eras differed markedly from how it is practiced today among traditional Jews. Biblical evidence gives some details, although they pertain mostly to the elite: People were buried within hours of death, minimizing public decomposition, in caves (as among the patriarchs), but also in chambers cut out in rocks. In family tombs, where space was at a premium, a secondary burial occurred: Upon the body's reduction to bones, the remains were added to those of ancestors. The metaphor was to be "gathered to (or to sleep with) ancestors (or people)"; see Genesis 25:8; Judges 2:10; and 2 Kings 22:20. By the Hellenistic and Roman periods, when (non-Biblical) issues of bodily resurrection began to take hold, it was necessary to avoid mixing body parts. Family members therefore transferred the bones of each individual into an ossuary (a box or clay container, some shaped as houses). With or without a name incised on them, these receptacles were set alongside others from the same family. In many areas, tunnels were cut into soft limestone (catacombs), with superimposed berths (*loculi*, about 1.5 by 5 feet each), receiving the dead or their ossuaries. They could be sealed by slabs with decorations (etrog, menorah, shofar), and/or inscriptions that identify the dead.

Beginning with the seventh century of our era, open-air community cemeteries began to proliferate. Graves would welcome the body, clothed or otherwise. Placing the body in a coffin was a later innovation; it was sporadic and generally not practiced among Mizrahi Jews until recent centuries. While *maṣṣebot* (pillars) and later *nefashot* (cupolas) occur near or in burial sites since Biblical times, the use of headstones began in the diaspora, likely under local influence. Citations in Hebrew carved on tombstones began in the medieval period. (Nice overview at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14442-tombstones.) Burial brotherhoods (*chevra kadisha*) were institutionalized in the late medieval period.

Time has eaten away at them, with most lines suffering damage.[29] If they once registered names, those are now gone.

When they were fabricated is difficult to say, with opinions covering as many as three centuries. A consensus is that they originate at the tail end of the First Temple period, late seventh-century BCE. Both open on a series of Scriptural quotes, the first (A) seems to include phrases akin to Jeremiah 32:18 (invoking the Lord of Hosts), Deuteronomy 7:9 (calling on the steadfast God who upholds covenants through generations), as well as to other uplifting citations that evoke, rather than cite, sentiments reflected in books other than the Pentateuch. The script of the smaller roll (B) is more elegant, but the leaf has sustained damage on all sides. Its opening lines mention God as a helper and as a rebuker, likely of evil spirits, a notion typically associated with post-exilic language (Zechariah 3:2 and Isaiah 54:9).[30] Both amulets had additional texts that cannot be deciphered or be made to give full sense as of now.

Of the language reminiscent of the *birkat*, in each leaf we have the following lines that are reasonably clear:

Larger amulet A (lines 14–18)	**Smaller amulet B (lines 5–12)**
יברך יהוה [וי]שמרך .... [יא]ר יהוה פנ[יו	יברך יהוה ישמרך יאר יה[ו]ה פניו [אל]יך וישם לך ש[ל]ם...

Damaged remaining lines notwithstanding, there are many divergences from the *birkat*: The script is archaic, so there are no final forms for *kaph* and *mem*, conjunctions (*vav*) may be missing and *plene* writing (the use of *yod* and *vav* to indicate long vowels) is haphazard. In יברך the *kaph* does double-duty, representing the

29. The handiest edition of the two documents is Aḥituv 2008: 49–55.

30. There are many suggested proposals on how to complete damaged lines, not always compatible with each other. The most recent compilation of these conjectures is Smoak 2016: 22–42.

third consonant of the root ברך as well the second person suffix.[31] In B, it is obvious we meet with a tightening of the familiar phrases, skipping the notions of God being gracious (ויחנך) and showing favor (ישׂא יהוה פניו אליך).

Incantations. Amulets are objects citing words or (holy) verses with a proven power to act. They work passively and eternally, as long as they are placed on the body. Incantations also depend on the written word, but they gain traction through recitation. The words often rhyme and can be nonsensical to their hearers; but they achieve their ability to summon (or restrain) occult powers when launched (or recited) by an exorcist (חֹבֵר), diviner (קֹסֵם), or sorcerer (מְכַשֵּׁף).[32] The Hebrew Bible forbids them, yet by combatting them as well as by banning their practitioners, it also acknowledges their prevalence.

There are Qumran fragments that emulate incantations.[33] Our best examples are the *incantation (or "magic") bowls* that were popular after the establishment of rabbinic Judaism and of Christianity. Hundreds of them sold in Mesopotamia to Jewish, Christian and Muslim patrons. These bowls were made of pottery, and their inner space had many concentric lines of invocations and powerful imprecations inked in (mostly) Aramaic dialects.

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31. See Levine 1993: 239 for other explanations.
32. Deuteronomy 18:9–12 reviews a whole coterie of banned practitioners. Isaiah (30:22) mockingly uses their techniques by summarily banishing idols. Likely not recognized is the extraordinary forces we unleash when we pledge with Psalms 137: 5–6, "May my right hand wither, should I forget you, Jerusalem (אִם־אֶשְׁכָּחֵךְ יְרוּשָׁלִָם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי)…." Typical of such imprecations is the play on two different meanings of the same verb (שָׁכַח), "to forget," but also to "to dry up, wilt," as in Psalms 31:13, "I am as withered as a dead man…" and (maybe) Psalms 102:5, "My heart is stricken and withered like grass; too wasted to eat my food."
33. One example is 4Q560 (cited from Wise, Abegg and Cook 1996: 442–43), "…I adjure you by the name of the Lord, 'He who removes iniquity and transgression' [Exodus 34:7], O Fever-demon and Chills-demons and Chest Pain-demon… You are forbidden to disturb, by night using dreams or by day using sleep…"

Occasionally, they also had caricatures of noxious creatures. Customized by adding the names of their purchasers, they were destined for burial under thresholds, bedrooms, barns, even graves, usually upside down to entrap demons.[34] A few bowls feature the *birkat*, citing it along with extracts from Isaiah 44:25 (מֵפֵר אֹתוֹת בַּדִּים וְקֹסְמִים יְהוֹלֵל…) and from Canticles 3:7 (הִנֵּה מִטָּתוֹ… שֶׁלִּשְׁלֹמֹה). A conspicuous series stitches the following citations: Exodus 15:3; Exodus 15:18; Psalms 10:16; and Psalms 24:8. The vocabulary of Ps. 91 (יֹשֵׁב בְּסֵתֶר עֶלְיוֹן) was also favored as a source, with extracts found on clothing, shoes, as well as amulets.[35]

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34. The magic bowls feature citations of Biblical phrases, extracts from contemporaneous *siddurim* and from *hekhalot* literature, appeals to angels and to (in)famous rabbis (especially the *tanna*, Ḥanina ben Dosa), magical spells, and virtuoso abracadabra displays. Many errors suggest that the scribes drew on memory rather than by copying from scrolls or from a codex. A large collection of translated texts is in Shaked, Ford, Bhayro (2013). M. Morgernstern's introductory chapter there (pp. 1–27) is especially valuable. An accessible online overview is Dan Levene's "Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowl," posted at https://jnjr.div.ed.ac.uk/primary-sources/biblical/jewish-aramaic-incantation-bowls/.

35. For Biblical citations in these incantations, see Müller-Kessler 2013 and Korsvoll 2018.

    Psalm 91 likely was recited over me when, as a child of about ten, I fell ill in Beirut. Hakham Nissim Tabbakh came to our home and, laying his hand over my forehead, performed a *ri'ya*. The word is likely from Arabic *ruqya* (the *qāf* regularly attenuating into *'alif* in Syrian dialects), meaning, "charm" or "incantation," although some derive it from Arabic *ra'we*, "consultation" or "calming." The hakham may well have also chanted the *birkat* as, in such matters, it is not reserved for kohanim. At any rate, it obviously worked.

    In Beirut of those years, Frida el-Barsa, (for her outlandish makeup and red hair), specialized in such occult practices. (Information courtesy Henri Maknouz, Milan). In his book *Minḥat Yehuda* (reprint 2010), Yehuda Fetaya (Baghdad, 1859–1942) featured similar magical applications. Rabbinic battles against such pervasive activities were common in Halab. Most famous among the combatants was Mattloub Menashe Sutton (Sittehon, –1876), who wrote several books, among them, *Kenisiya leshem shamayim*.

What to Make of all This?

Traditionally, the *birkat* is a series of public benedictions God imposed on priests when Israel was transiting into the Promised Land. Among other benefits, they mean to reassure ex-slaves that, apart from the commitments God had made to Israel as a future nation, to each worshiper he has also pledged favor, prosperity, protection and safety. With all the insights drawn from the epigraphic discoveries marshaled above, do we learn anything new about the language and purpose of the *birkat*? I offer the following observations:

Context. The first is that bestowing and receiving blessings do not originate among just one people or at only one particular time. I opened by citing a Mari letter with such a petition that, by all reckonings, was written centuries before the Hebrews coalesced into tribes or as a nation-state. Its pleading language — words as well as idioms — remained constant in Akkadian for millennia. It has strong parallels in Ugaritic lore, with literary turns that are strongly reminiscent of what appears in the *birkat*.[36] Yet, this is not evidence of influence, for the desires and sentiments they express and the divine promises they elicit undoubtedly have echoed through the ages — though, admittedly, not as elegantly. In fact, some elements of these blessings — and in particular the formula יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה — are so ubiquitous in Hebrew that they actually serve as polite greetings (among others, as in Jeremiah 31:22; Ruth 2:4).

Priority. The second reflection is that trying to unravel a trajectory of inspiration for the *birkat* is not a fruitful enterprise. For anyone attached to the traditional understanding of Israel's historical development, no argument needs to develop around the primacy of the Torah's *birkat*. According to the *Seder Olam Rabba,* it came to us within a couple of years after the Exodus, so around 2450 post-Creation, roughly around 1310 BCE. Only the Mari letter cited above precedes such a moment.

36. Cohen 1993 is a very fine contribution that underscores this point.

However, the matter is more complicated in modern Biblical scholarship, where conjectures abound regarding when the *birkat* achieved its final form. The *birkat* could easily have reverberated in Israel during its monarchic periods if not earlier. Yet, the written version that is in our received Torah displays orthographic features (such as the use of consonants *yod*, *vav*, and *he* to render long vowels) that are typical of the (later) monarchic period. Some scholars link the *birkat*'s sentiments to material in Psalms (particularly Ps. 67; see above), which are generally dated later, but again with suggestions that their own thoughts circulated much earlier.[37] Securing a date and source for the *birkat* has, therefore, not proven a confident venture.

The same applies for the Ketef Hinnom amulets, the most prominent extra-biblical texts so far discovered with language that evokes the *birkat*'s. The discoverer (G. Barkay) and many others date them from before the Exile, so possibly contemporaneous with the recording of the *birkat* in Numbers according to Bible scholars. Yet, the amulets were found in rubble rather than in a securely dated context, generating contentious opinions on the script, spelling of words, and the compilations of scriptural citations. This has led some scholars to place the amulets deep in the Persian period, if not later.[38] There is a notion that the clipped phrasing in Amulet B, where there is skipping from God beaming (האיר פנים) to granting peace (שלום שים), is an indication that it was created before the *birkat*. This is because a venerable scholarly belief holds that over time phrases tend to expand rather than shorten. To my mind, such an argument is specious, not least because amulets meant for the afterlife may simply focus

37. In scholarly literature, the ascription on many psalms לְדָוִד is taken to mean "for David," that is, in his honor, and so does not imply that he was the author nor does it settle the questions of time and origin.

38. Contrast, for example, the arguments in Na'aman 2011 and the response of Aḥituv 2012.

on divine preservation and eternal peace rather than on earthly advances.[39]

When thinking about the issue of priority, I would rather assess amulets in their entirety than judge them on any correspondence one of their lines may have had with Scriptural citation. When done so, two matters stand out: First, the familiar phrases in the amulets are among others that draw on material from throughout the Tanakh, some of which stem from late in the Exilic period and obviously post *birkat*. Among these are extracts from Psalms and the prophets, both early and late.[40] Second, as formulated, the Ketef Hinnom amulets compile Biblical quotes and misquotes, a feature that does not become fashionable until relatively late in Hellenistic and Roman times.

Language. The third notion is that the *birkat* may not have had a wider purpose other than what is stated: Blessings for the multitudes. Admittedly, its formulation likely drew on traditional benedictions that resonate through the ages and that easily adapt to shaping the language of dedications, incantations, and talismans. As we saw, Sinai merchants (or their patrons) and a king of Ekron relied on them to enhance their lives on Earth.[41]

Funerary inscriptions, too, readily call on the formulation of blessings. For this reason, I cannot agree with a conjecture that has become fashionable in scholarship that the *birkat* is a beautifully crafted adaptation of language familiar to mortuary rituals,

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39. From all evidence, the Ketef Hinnom amulets belong to an age when synagogues had not yet developed as centers for community discussion of the Torah. If so, we need to ask how conversant amulet scribes were with its teachings.

40. Good accounting of diverse allusions can be found in Lewis 2012.

41. The phrasing is familiar enough for modern forgers to use it when hawking "authentic inscriptions." The final line of the inauthentic "Jehoash Inscription" (allegedly from Judah of the late ninth century BCE) has this oddly worded sentiment, וצו.יהוה.את.עמו.בברכה, "May the LORD charge his people with a blessing." See discussion in Greenstein 2012: 87–88; summarized at <http://asorblog.org/2016/02/03/the-so-called-jehoash-inscription-a-post-mortem/>.

its original application having been to ward off evil from the death that overtakes us all.[42]

Conclusion

I cannot say that this excursion into the *birkat* in light of recent epigraphic discoveries has resolved any of the major questions about its origins, inspiration or influence. I am optimistic enough to await the discovery of a nice cache of priestly writings, preferably from the First Temple period, that might decide some of these issues. Without it, scholarship on the *birkat* will continue to be speculative even when occasionally also thrilling. To my mind, the *birkat*'s magic is hardly because it was early or because of the circumstances of its delivery. Rather, it has kept (and will continue to keep) its power to inspire through its artfully cascading series of divine promises that charter a path for us to achieving inner peace.[43]

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42. See Smoak 2016: chapt. 3 and Levine 1993: 236–44. Such an opinion might follow expansions on the *birkat*, such as found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, where vs 24 is rendered, "The Lord bless you in all your business, and keep you from demons of the night, and things that cause terror, and from demons of the noon and of the morning, and from malignant spirits and phantoms." (*Adapted* from *Sefaria*, https://www.sefaria.org/Targum_Jonathan_on_Numbers.6.24?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.)

    Even less likely is Smoak's notion (Smoak 2016: 110–113) that the placement of the *birkat* just before the consecration of the Tabernacle gives clue to its dedicatory purpose. There were plenty of sacrifices on that occasion (Numb 7:1–89, the longest chapter in the Torah) to fulfill that purpose.

43. I gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments on an earlier draft by my nephews Jacob and Joseph Sasson.

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