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THE *AMIDA*'S BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS: SOME NEW PERSPECTIVES

The opening of the *Amida* owes more to a few Biblical passages than we customarily think. The goal of this article is to understand the magnitude of that debt and thereby deepen our comprehension of the opening and of the *Amida* as a whole. We hope to achieve this through careful consideration of the source-texts and history of the *Amida*'s beginning phrases, viewing them in light of both the approach of *Hazal* and the fruits of modern scholarship.

The Opening Phrase

Every *Shemoneh Esre* opens with “Blessed are You Lord, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.”¹ This *matbe’a ha-berakha* – blessing template – differs from that used in almost all other blessings in Jewish liturgy or ritual. Almost all others begin by addressing God in the second person – “Blessed are You Lord our God” – and then immediately continue with a description of God as the *Melekh Ha-olam*.² By contrast, *Shemoneh Esre*'s opening continues with a *reinforcement* of that second person intimacy as it addresses God, not as the remote “King of the Universe,” but as a familial “God of our fathers.”³

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¹ All translations of excerpts from the siddur are from Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur*, (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009). The *Amida*'s opening phrase quoted in the text is the one used in all *nuscha'ot* as well as in virtually all the texts from the Cairo Genizah that include the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esre*. See Yehezkel Luger, *The Weekday Amidah in the Cairo Genizah* (Jerusalem: Orhot Press, 2001), 41-43.

² There has been much discussion of how this second person/third person formula came to be. For an analysis and summary of traditional and modern scholarship on the issue, see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud – Forms and Patterns* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 104-122.

³ The power of this point is magnified if one adopts Rashi's understanding of the principle of *berakha ha-semukha le-havertah*, under which the remaining eighteen

The *Amida*'s opening phrase is noteworthy for a second reason: its separate invocation of each of the patriarchs and the separate association of each of the patriarchs with God – “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” a feature already discussed by *Hazal*.⁴

The Source of the Amida's Opening Phrase

These two unique elements of the *Amida*'s opening are found in – and are simultaneously justified by – the source-text that the opening quotes almost verbatim: Exodus 3:15.⁵ That verse reads:

And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, ‘*The Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and thus I am to be invoked in all ages.”⁶

Whenever you want to appeal to me, says God, from now until the end of time use this formulation: “*The Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*,” or, to formulate this phrase from the perspective of the Israelites, who will refer to “God of *our* fathers” (rather than from God’s perspective, who refers to Himself as “God of *your* fathers”), “*The Lord, God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*.”⁷

blessings “borrow” this opening as their own; see Rashi in *Berakhot* 46b, s.v. *ve-yesh me-ben hotem ve-lo poteah*. The pray-er is thus, in this view, addressing *each* blessing of the *Shemoneh Esre* not to a distant King of the Universe but to a familial Deity.

Interestingly, the *Amida*'s first blessing does eventually refer to God by the term “King,” but, instead of referring to Him as “King of the Universe,” it refers to Him as the “King Helper, Savior, and Protector,” again emphasizing the personal, direct relationship. This formulation – with occasional slight variations – is found in all modern *nuscha'ot* as well as in most of the texts from the Cairo Genizah that include the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esre*, Luger, 48-49.

How the lack of a reference to God as “King of the Universe” can be harmonized with the halakhic requirement that every blessing contain “*shem*” – God’s name – and “*malkhut*” – a reference to God as King – is a much discussed issue that is beyond the scope of this article. See, generally, *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, “Blessings,” 294.

⁴ See *Pesahim* 117b. This statement is best known through its citation by Rashi commenting on Genesis 12:2.

⁵ Much of *Shemoneh Esre* – and of our daily prayer – is of course a paraphrase of, or is clearly inspired by, verses from the Bible, and those Biblical source-texts often provide clues as to the meaning of the prayer. See n. 8 and accompanying text.

⁶ Translations of Biblical verses are adapted from *The New JPS Translation* and Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses – A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

⁷ For a similar change in perspective – from God’s (first person) to the pray-er’s (second person) – when a verse is adapted for use in the *Amida*, compare Jeremiah

And, of course, Jews follow God's instructions to the letter every time they begin their appeal: they begin each *Shemoneh Esre* by appealing to "Lord, [our God and] God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob." The only (other) change made to the quote is to add "our God" towards the beginning of the phrase, a point we discuss below.

Hazal were very conscious of this 'borrowing,' as indicated by the statement in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* on Exodus 13:3 that cites Exodus 3:15 as the source-text for the opening of *Shemoneh Esre* – a statement we will look at later on to help complete our understanding of *Shemoneh Esre*'s message.

The Context of the Source for the Opening Phrase

The fact that God instructed Moses to use Exodus 3:15's formulation would be reason enough for the Rabbis to word the opening of *Shemoneh Esre* as they did. But that instruction took place in a particular context – and we cannot fully understand the opening blessing of the *Amida*, or *Shemoneh Esre* as a whole, unless we examine and understand that context. As Reuven Kimelman put it:

The claim that [a particular verse] is the intertext [for a given prayer] implies that the liturgical text is to be understood in light of [the Biblical source]. The correct construal of meaning takes place in the mind of the reader who juxtaposes both texts. It is through the superimposition of the biblical text on the liturgical text that the liturgical meaning coalesces. In other words, the meaning of the liturgy exists not so much in the liturgical text *per se* as in the interaction between the liturgical text and the biblical intertext. Meaning in the mind of the reader, takes place between texts rather than within them.⁸

Put slightly differently, we cannot truly understand a prayer merely by translating its words. Rather, it can only be truly understood if we know

9:23's "*haskeil ve-yadoa oti*" to its paraphrase in the fourth blessing of *Shemoneh Esre*: "*me-ittekha de'ah . . . ve-haskeil*." For a similar change in perspective – from God's (first person) to the pray-er's (second person) – when the last seven words of 'our' source-text are paraphrased later in the Bible, see Psalms 135:13: "*Ado-nai shimcha le-olam, Ado-nai zikbrekha le-dor va-dor*."

⁸ Reuven Kimelman, "The Shema Liturgy – From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation" in *Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World*, Joseph Tabory, ed., (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2001), 28.

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its Biblical source, and understand the message that *Hazal* were conveying with the selection of that source. And, if this statement is true about prayer in general, it is certainly true about *Shemoneh Esre*, the prayer *par excellence*, and its opening phrase.

The source-text for that opening, Exodus 3:15, is a continuation of a unit which opens with the last three verses of the second chapter of Exodus. Those verses read:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their bondage and cried out, and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Three points about these verses stand out. First, the verses record Israel's first collective prayer – “their cry for help... rose up to God.”⁹ Second, they are animated by four action verbs that describe God's response to His people's cry: “God heard;” “God remembered;” “God saw” Israel and its suffering; “God knew” – He understood His people's plight. Third, the verses link God's covenant with the children of Israel, of His promise to redeem His nation, with the separate mention of each of the patriarchs: “God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.”

This third point – the linkage with the (separately-named) patriarchs found near the end of the second chapter – is repeatedly emphasized in the following chapters. In chapter three, God appears to Moses and tells him that He has seen His people's affliction and heard their cries and He has therefore decided to redeem them. Moses then asks God (verse 13) “When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God responds with our source-text verse: “Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, ‘*The Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be invoked in all ages.”

Now, as if to make sure that Moses understands the importance of a formula that separately invokes each of the patriarchs and their relationship

⁹ See n. 15 for a discussion of how we know – and how we know that the Rabbis assumed – that the phrase “their cry for help rose up to God” refers to prayer and not (just) to a cry of desperation.

with God, this formula is repeated a third time in the very next verse, verse 16,¹⁰ and yet a fourth time in Exodus 4:5.¹¹

God's sudden engagement with the children of Israel and His invocation of the covenant with their patriarchs is especially remarkable in light of His seeming absence until now. Since God's revelation to Jacob on his way down to Egypt at the beginning of Genesis 46, God has not revealed Himself to, or (seemingly) involved Himself in the history of, Abraham's, Isaac's and Jacob's descendants. In fact, with one almost-offhand exception,¹² God's name does not even appear in the book of Exodus until the end of chapter two (in the verses cited above). As the Bible itself emphasizes,¹³ decades, then centuries pass as the Israelites sink deeper into exile and harsh servitude and God is seemingly nowhere to be found.¹⁴

To summarize, the source-text for the unique-in-Jewish-prayer opening of *Shemoneh Esre* draws our attention to the first several chapters of Exodus and the story they tell: Israel's descent into a long and harsh exile with no apparent evidence that God knows or cares – in fact, God seems conspicuously absent. As the burden of the exile becomes unbearable, the Israelites cry out to God in their first collective prayer and God responds, suddenly makes His presence known, and immediately begins their rescue because, God emphasizes, of the promises He made to each of the three patriarchs.¹⁵

¹⁰ “Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The Lord God of your fathers has appeared to me, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, saying, ‘I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt.’”

¹¹ “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”

¹² The exception is Exodus 1:15, where God blesses two individuals (the midwives) whom the text does not even identify as Israelite; see exegetes cited in *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108 on the verse.

¹³ The unit opens in Exodus 2:23 with “During those many days.”

¹⁴ I am grateful to Rachel Friedman, who first brought these points to my attention.

¹⁵ A Midrash commenting on Exodus 2:23 reinforces the point that *Hazal's* near-quote of Exodus 3:15 was intended to evoke that verse's context – the nation's first collective prayer and God's response to it in the closing verses of Exodus 2. That Midrash explicitly connects those closing verses and The Prayer *par excellence* that Jews recite three times a day:

When the children of Israel groaned and cried out to God and He heard their cry, as it says “and the people of Israel groaned because of their bondage and cried out, and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God,” [Exodus 2:23] immediately the ministering angels opened up and said “Blessed are You God, who listens to prayers [*shomea tefilla*].”

Midrash quoted in *Torah Shelema, Exodus* v. 1, 105, and J. D. Eisenstein, *Otsar Midrashim* (Israel 1915), 584. The Israelites cry out in their first collective

Having established what the context is for the *Shemoneh Esre's* opening source-text, we now must determine why *Hazal* wanted to evoke that context. We can answer this question once we (a) take into account key points about the history, narrative, and framework of the *Amida* that have been made by modern scholars and that are either made or alluded to by *Hazal* and (b) determine when the *Amida's* opening was composed.

The Amida's History, Narrative, and Framework

The first two points to be noted concerning the *Amida's* history are that (1) R. Gamliel and his colleagues in late first-century CE Yavneh created the institution of the *Amida*, its nineteen particular subjects,¹⁶ and the order of those subjects, though not their fully-fixed text,¹⁷ and (2) this creation was a critical part of the Rabbinic

prayer – “their cry for help rose up to God” – and the angels respond with “Blessed are You God, who listens to prayers,” the coda of *Shemoneh Esre's* petitionary blessings: that first collective prayer becomes the model for their future *tefillot*.

There are also two textual reinforcements of the relationship between the first collective prayer and that same *shomea tefilla* blessing. First, the opening words of that blessing in most *nusha'ot* are “hear our voice Lord our God” “*shema koleinu Ado-nai Elo-heinu*.” This opening evocatively paraphrases the recounting in Deuteronomy 26:7 (in the *hava'at bikkurim* ceremony) of God's response to that collective prayer: “We cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice” “*va-yishma Ado-nai et koleinu*.”

Second, a widespread early version of the *shomea tefilla* blessing, a version that survives in the *nusah* of Aram Tsova (Aleppo) and Persia, adds the phrase “*u-shema na'akateinu ka-asher shamata na'akat avoteinu*.” This phrase is unquestionably an allusion to Exodus 2:24: “And God heard their moaning [*va-yishma Elo-him et na'akatam*], and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” Thus, the last of the petitionary blessings explicitly loops back to the opening of the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esre*.

Full discussion of these points is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁶ Discussion of the variations that had seventeen or (even post-*ve-laMalshinim*) eighteen blessings is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁷ With the possible exception of the *hatimot* and – as discussed in the text – the opening of the *Amida*, the overwhelming scholarly consensus reflected in the sources just cited is that the text of the *Shemoneh Esre* remained fluid for an extended period after the time of R. Gamliel. See, e.g., Joseph Tabory, “Prayers and Berakhot” in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter Tomson, eds., (Amsterdam: Royal Van Gorcum Fortress Press), 308-311; Richard S. Sarason, “Communal Prayer at Qumran and Among the Rabbis: Certainties and Uncertainties,” in *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Esther Chazon, ed. (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2003), 168; Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 548-549. But see the contrasting (and singular) views of Ezra Fleischer, “On the Origins of Mandatory Prayer in Israel”

response to the great theological challenge posed by the Second Temple's destruction and the ensuing exile: how to account for God's seeming abandonment of His people, and how to sustain hope for the future.¹⁸

The next point follows naturally from the first two. The overarching theme of Jewish prayer – and especially of The Prayer, the *Amida* – is the keystone of that Rabbinic response to the *hurban*: an unshakable belief in Israel's ultimate redemption. Joseph Heinemann put it this way: “the central motif in the world-view of the prayers is unquestionably the belief in the Redemption, and the longing for its realization.”¹⁹ Even a superficial examination of the *Shemoneh Esre*'s blessings reveals the truth of Heinemann's statement when applied to The Prayer: (i) most of the ‘heart’ of the *Amida* – the middle, petitionary blessings – are explicitly devoted to the final redemption and (ii) a majority of the ‘framework’ blessings – the three introductory and three concluding blessings – have the Redemption as either their explicit subject (for example, the revivication of the dead, mentioned six times in the second introductory blessing, and restoration of the Temple service and the return of the Divine presence to Zion, the subjects of the first of the three concluding blessings) or as a very important subtext (for example,

in *Likkutei Tarbiz VI Studies in Jewish Liturgy*, Hananel Mack, ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003). Put slightly differently (and *pace* Fleischer) R. Gamliel likely mandated the order of the blessings, and the text of the *hatimot* and (we maintain) the opening, but not the text of the individual blessings. That there was not a mandated text seems almost self-evident from the multiplicity of *nuscha'ot* found in the Cairo Genizah and in use in many communities to this day. See discussion of related points in the following footnote and n. 20.

¹⁸ Key questions concerning *Shemoneh Esre*'s composition – including when it was (or specific elements of it were) composed, who composed it (or a given element thereof), whether there was a full “ur-text” of *Shemoneh Esre* (as opposed to merely a mandated schematic outline), what (if any) is the relationship between “our” *Shemoneh Esre* and (what some see as) pre-*hurban* partial proto-*Shemoneh Esres* found in Qumran, Ben Sira and elsewhere, and what the role of R. Gamliel and his colleagues was in this process – are probably the most discussed ones in the study of Jewish prayer. Except to the limited extent discussed in the following sections of the article (concerning the opening phrase of the *Amida*), resolution of these questions is not necessary for establishing the validity of the statements made in the text; for a summary of and references to many of the sources that discuss this subject, see Levine, chapters five and sixteen.

¹⁹ Heinemann, 33. For a citation to, and discussion of, early Rabbinic sources emphasizing the idea of the *Amida* as a prayer for redemption, see Kimelman, “Daily Amidah,” 178-179, 194-196.

the invocation of God, in the opening blessing, as the One who will bring the redeemer: “*u-mevi go’el le-venei veneihem*”).²⁰

²⁰ Many modern scholars in fact extend this understanding of *Shemoneh Esre* as an articulation of the yearning for the future redemption and of Israel’s confidence in its inevitability to each of the (a) framework blessings – the first and last three that begin and end every *Shemoneh Esre* – and (b) middle (petitionary) blessings of *Shemoneh Esre*. One succinct summary (by Ezra Fleischer) summarizes all the middle blessings as “a chronologically organized plan, in logical sequence, for the rebuilding of the nation from its post-[Second Temple] destruction historical reality to its spiritual and political restoration in the ideal future.” Ezra Fleischer, “The Shemoneh Esre: Its Character, Internal Order, Content and Goals,” in *Likkutei Tarbiz VI Studies in Jewish Liturgy*, Hananel Mack, ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), 198; translation from the Hebrew is from Kimelman, “The Penitential Part of the Amidah and Personal Redemption” in *Seeking the Favor of God Vol. 3: The Impact of Penitential Prayer Beyond Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 81. Kimelman (and others), while still strongly endorsing the overall ‘redemption-centric’ view, disagree with the way Fleischer relates blessings 4 (*honen bada’at*) through 9 (*mevarekh ha-shanim*) to the redemption. See Kimelman, “The Penitential Part of the Amidah,” 83.

For discussions of the ‘redemption-centric’ view, see Kimelman, “Daily Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption”; Fleischer, “The Shemoneh Esre”; Lawrence Hoffman, *My People’s Prayer Book, Vol. 2 – The Amidah* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 32-34; Maurice Liber, “Structure and History of the Tefilah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 40 (1949), 331; and Leon Liebreich, “The Intermediate Blessings of the ‘Amidah,’” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 42 (1952), 423.

It is important to emphasize that a ‘redemption-centric’ understanding of the *Amida* is held by scholars who have very different views as to the time of the composition of the prayer. It is held, for example by Ezra Fleischer, perhaps the most prominent member of the ‘redemption-centric’ school, who asserted that “there existed at [the end of the Second Temple period] no sort of verbal worship that resembled the liturgy that was established at Yavneh... At the time it was promulgated at Yavneh, the *Shemoneh Esre* was an utter innovation on all levels, whether institutional, functional, or theological.” Ezra Fleischer, “On the Origins of the ‘Amidah: Response to Ruth Langer,” *Prooftexts* 20:3 (2000), 381. See also Fleischer’s seminal article, “On the Origins of Mandatory Prayer in Israel.” The ‘redemption-centric’ understanding is held by Maurice Liber – the inspiration for Kimelman’s ‘redemption-centric’ understanding (see Kimelman, “Daily Amidah,” 181 n. 57) – who sees at least significant parts of “our” *Shemoneh Esre* as predating the Second Temple’s destruction. Maurice Liber, “Structure and History of the Tefilah,” 353 ff. Even Heinemann, who is at the opposite end of the authorship debate from Fleischer – believing that “[t]he custom of reciting precisely eighteen benedictions must have crystallized sometime during the century before the destruction of the Temple (at the very latest)... [though] the exact content and order of these benedictions... was not yet uniform” (Heinemann, 224) – noted (in the words quoted in the text) the centrality of the redemption in Jewish prayer and would not, I believe, see any inconsistency between his views on authorship and a redemption-centric understanding of *Shemoneh Esre*.

That is, even Heinemann’s ‘minimalist’ understanding of R. Gamliel’s and his court’s contribution is consistent with the view that they reorganized and rewrote

Dating the Composition of the Amida's Opening

In the absence of an explicit statement of authorship – something that, with the possible exception of *ve-laMalshinim*, the *Amida's* blessings lack – or a datable text – something that does not exist in the case of the *Amida* before the time of the Cairo Genizah texts and the siddurim of Amram Gaon and Saadiah Gaon (9th century C.E. and later) – the attribution of authorship of the *Amida's* opening to a particular time period must rely on circumstantial evidence. There are, however, several pieces of strong circumstantial evidence, all of which point to or are consistent with conclusions that

- The incorporation of Exodus 3:15 into the liturgy postdates the Second Temple's destruction.
- This liturgical incorporation took place in the *Amida's* earliest days, in the decades immediately after the Second Temple's destruction.
- The incorporation was, in the standard liturgy, exclusive to the *Amida*.

The principal evidence that Exodus 3:15 was first incorporated into the liturgy post-*hurban Bayit Sheni* is perhaps most accurately characterized as evidence of absence: we know of no instances of the liturgical use of Exodus 3:15 before the Second Temple's destruction. That is, although we have many examples of pre-*hurban Bayit Sheni* prayers, blessings, and other precursors to significant portions of the *Shemoneh Esre* and to the standard liturgy, none of those examples invoke Exodus 3:15.²¹

either pre-existing groups of, or individual, benedictions so as to lay out the redemption narrative in the way that the *Shemoneh Esre* now does. Cf. Lee Levine's conclusion (Levine, 548): "there can be little doubt that the obligatory daily '*Amidah*' prayer... was first implemented in the post-70 period under the auspices of Rabban Gamliel. However... these prayers were not created ex nihilo. There were many precedents, and the Yavnean *tannaim* incorporated earlier materials, reworking, reformulating, and structuring them so as to fashion a prayer that would be obligatory for Jews everywhere."

Finally, it should be noted that viewing R. Gamliel's and his court's role as the reworking and re-ordering of pre-existing prayers and benedictions is consistent with the Talmud's discussion of *Shemoneh Esre's* composition. See, e.g., *Megilla* 17b & 18a.

²¹ For a summary of (what assorted scholars see as) the precursors to the *Amida*, see Heinemann, 219-220 and Daniel Falk, *Daily, Sabbath & Festival Prayers in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill 1998), 76-78. For a list of secondary sources that discuss those precursors, see (in addition to the Heinemann and Falk references just cited) those cited in Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 346 n. 19.

Conversely, there are a number of examples of the liturgical use of Exodus 3:15 (outside of the standard liturgy), all of which are post-Second Temple.²²

If, as we contend, the liturgical use of Exodus 3:15 post-dates *hurban Bayit Sheni*, we must determine when in the post-*hurban Bayit Sheni* period that use arose. The answer to that question is suggested by the near-identity of the opening words of the *Amida* in all *nusha'ot* – an identity that exists with almost no other portion of the *Amida* (other than with many of the *hatimot*). This near-identity points to an early standardized use of Exodus 3:15 and pushes the time of the composition of that opening back toward the earliest days of the *Shemoneh Esre* – the decades immediately following the Second Temple's destruction. This is consistent with an assumption that even if the text of (many of the) individual blessings remained fluid for some time – as it appears was likely the case²³ – R. Gamliel would have standardized the opening of the *Amida*.

The dates of the earliest attestations to the use of Exodus 3:15 to open the *Amida* are also consistent with the early post-*hurban Bayit Sheni* hypothesis. Explicit attestations date from the early decades of the third century CE,²⁴ while strong allusions to the use of Exodus 3:15 date

For a discussion of the one (or perhaps two) pieces of evidence that imply a pre-*hurban Bayit Sheni* existence of an *Amida* – though with no indication as to what the text (or at least the opening text) of that *Amida* might have looked like – see Fleischer, “On the Origins of Mandatory Prayer in Israel,” 425; Falk, *Prayer in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 249 n. 102; David Levine, “A Temple Prayer for Fast Days” in *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Esther Chazon, ed. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 102; Heinemann, 96 n. 26; Lee Levine, 549 n. 80.

²² Kimelman, “Daily Amidah” n. 57. This is not to say that pre-*hurban Bayit Sheni* prayers separately invoking each of the three patriarchs by name are unknown – on the contrary, it would appear that such invocations were fairly widely used, see Martin Rist, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: A Liturgical and Magical Formula,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57 (1938), 289. Given the frequent use of the “three patriarch” formula in the Bible, these usages are not at all surprising. What is somewhat surprising – and what the text focuses on – is that the opening of the *Amida* is the only source in the standard liturgy (and one of the few liturgical sources anywhere) that couches the invocation in language that consciously evokes Exodus 3:15.

²³ See discussion in n.17 and sources cited there.

²⁴ See *Sanhedrin* 107a, which quotes a statement from R. Yehuda in the name of Rav that contains the opening words of the *Amida*. Rav died in 247 CE. Three other attestations date from perhaps several decades later. One is the quote of the *Amida*'s opening words found in *Pesahim* 117b (noted in the text accompanying n. 4). The statement is attributed to Resh Lakish, who died in 299 CE. The next two are the *Midrash Tanna'im le-Devarim*, 33:2 (sometimes referred to as the *Mekhilta le-Devarim*) and the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* on Exodus 13:3 cited towards the beginning of this article (and discussed in more detail towards the article's conclusion). Each of the two *Mekhiltot* explicitly quotes the opening words of the *Amida*, and the compilation

from the early to mid-second century CE.²⁵ These sources would provide us with a *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the *Amida*'s opening that (while after the time of R. Gamliel de-Yavneh) would be considerably before the earliest date-certain for the composition of almost all other specific wordings of the Prayer.

How the Scholarship and Historical Evidence Informs our Understanding of the Amida's Opening

We have seen that:

- (a) The *matbe'a ha-berakha* that opens the *Amida* is unique to the *Amida* and, in sharp contrast to that used in virtually every other blessing in the Jewish liturgy, emphasizes the relationship between God, Israel, and its founding ancestors²⁶
- (b) This *matbe'a ha-berakha* is a near quote of Exodus 3:15.
- (c) The biblical context of Exodus 3:15 is the response of a heretofore seemingly absent God to Israel's despairing cry to rescue it from a long and harsh exile.

of each is dated to around the middle of the third century CE, with much of the material considerably older than that. It must be noted, however, that some scholars date the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* passage that includes the attestation to the *Amida*'s opening somewhat later than the rest of the *Mekhilta*, although they do not see this later dating as bearing on the antiquity of the composition of the *Amida*'s opening. See Binyamin Katzoff, "God of our Fathers': Rabbinic Liturgy and Jewish-Christian Engagement," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99:3 (Summer 2009), 306.

²⁵ See Mishna Bikkurim 1:4 and Mishna Rosh Hashanah 4:5, which refer to the opening blessing of the *Amida* as "Avot."

²⁶ The implicit assumption in the text is that the liturgically-ubiquitous phrase *melekh ha-olam* was already in use in the first century CE Yavnean era, and that the use of Exodus 3:15 – with its emphasis on God as a familial Deity – was thus intended as a sharp contrast to the standard *matbe'a ha-berakha*'s emphasis on God as King of the Universe. In fact, we now have strong evidence, based on a recent archeological find in the Judean desert, that this was the case – that is, that *melekh ha-olam* was in fact in use at that time; see Kister, "Liturgical Formulae in the Light of Fragments from the Judean Desert," *Tarbiz* 77 (2009), 331-356. This conclusion is at odds with the tendency among some scholars to date the standard *matbe'a ha-berakha* – especially the phrase *melekh ha-olam* – to sometime in the second century CE – see Heinemann, 94 – or perhaps as late as the opening decades of the third century – see Reuven Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy" in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue – Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer*, Ruth Langer & Steven Fine, eds., (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005) – both dates, of course, being after the late-first century C.E. period of R. Gamliel. It should be noted, however, that Heinemann's and Kimelman's statements were made before the aforementioned archeological discovery came to light.

- (d) The Midrash and the text of the *Amida* acknowledge and play off this context.²⁷
- (e) The institution of the *Amida* and its content were critical elements of the Rabbis' response to the theological challenge posed by the destruction.
- (f) The overall and pervasive theme of the *Amida* is the keystone of that response: an unshakable belief in Israel's ultimate redemption.
- (g) The *Amida*'s basic framework was put into place in the decades following the Second Temple's destruction.
- (h) As best we can tell, the opening of the *Amida* was written in that same post-Second Temple destruction era, even as much of the rest of the *Amida*'s text remained fluid.

These eight points, taken together, make it clear that Exodus 3:15 was chosen to open the *Amida* not 'merely' because that is what God instructed, and not just because so doing invokes Israel's first redemption. Rather, it was chosen because the context of Exodus 3:15 – the unfolding of the first exile and redemption in the last chapters of Genesis and the first chapters of Exodus – paralleled the nation's current condition and foretold its future one: the children of Israel – then (in Egyptian bondage), as now (after the *hurban*) – find themselves in harsh exile; then, as now, God has seemingly abandoned His people and yet they remember the promise that God made to their ancestors; then, as now, Israel cries out to Him, invoking that promise and emphasizing the relationship with each of the patriarchs. And His people express their confidence that God will hear their prayers, remember them and His promise now, as He did then, and end their suffering and redeem His people; that God is, as the Midrash states, the *shomea tefilla*²⁸ – the one who hears His people's prayers – even as His seeming absence and the suffering of His people might cause them to think otherwise.

That the liturgical use of Exodus 3:15 was reserved for the *Amida* alone reinforces and dovetails with the points just made: the most logical explanation for the reservation is that Exodus 3:15 was set aside for the prayer most related to the context in which the quoted words originally appeared – a prayer whose wording and order took shape in the aftermath

²⁷ See discussion in n. 15; see also the penultimate paragraph of this article (highlighting the eschatological context of the *Mekhilta*'s connecting the opening of the *Amida* to Exodus 3:15).

²⁸ See the Midrash on Exodus 2:23 quoted in n. 15.

of (and largely in reaction to) the Temple's destruction, and a context that had special resonance in that post-*hurban* period: God's appearance as Israel's Redeemer from an oppressive exile after His seeming abandonment of His people.

Two further points need to be made to round out this portion of our discussion. First, we need to explain why "our God" is inserted into the quote/paraphrase of Exodus 3:15 in the opening of *Shemoneh Esre*: "Blessed are You our Lord, *our God* and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob."

On the most obvious level, the insertion preserves the standard *matbe'a ha-berakha* to a greater extent than would be the case without that insertion.

On a more fundamental level, the insertion reinforces Israel's faith that it has a continuing relationship with He Who spoke the words of Exodus 3:15 3,300 years ago: God is not 'merely' the God of generations past, but is the God of every following generation as well – a reinforcement that was particularly necessary in the post-Second Temple destruction period in which *Shemoneh Esre* took its current form. Additionally, and related to this point, the insertion picks up on the phrase "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*" "I Will Be What I Will Be" that appears in Exodus 3:14 – the verse that precedes our key source-text of Exodus 3:15 – and, specifically, *Hazal's* understanding of Exodus 3:14, quoted by Rashi in his comment on that verse: "I am with them in this affliction as I am with them in all future exiles" – precisely the point that is emphasized by the insertion of "our God."²⁹

We complete this discussion by noting the context in which the *Mekhilta* observes that Exodus 3:15 is the source-text for the opening of *Shemoneh Esre*. It is not a coincidence that the immediately preceding part of the *Mekhilta* contains an extended discussion – much of which is familiar to many thanks to its inclusion (in a variant form) in the Haggadah – of the relationship between the redemption from Egypt and the future redemption:

13:3 And Moses said to the people, etc. Until now, I am only aware of an obligation to remember the Exodus from Egypt during the day. Whence the obligation to remember it at night? As it is written "so that you should remember the day you went out," etc. "the days of your life" – telling me of an obligation to remember it during the day. "*All* the

²⁹ The reasons given in the text for the insertion of "our God" in the paraphrase of Exodus 3:15 that opens the *Amida* also apply to – and explain – the insertion of "our God" in the paraphrase of Deuteronomy 26:7 – "hear our voice Lord *our God*" – that opens the last of the *Amida's* petitionary blessings. See n. 15.

days of your life” – to include the nights, as Ben Zoma stated. And the Sages say: “the days of your life” refers to this world; “*all* the days of your life” comes to add the days of the Messiah . . . And how do we know that we recite “Blessed are You Lord, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob”? As it is written, “And God said further to Moses, ‘Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, “*The Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*”’”

This juxtaposition of the future redemption, the Exodus, and the source-text for the opening of the *Amida* reinforces our thesis that the selection of Exodus 3:15 to open *Shemoneh Esre* is intended to connect the people’s first, past, redemption with their final, future one.³⁰

Conclusion

We examined the source-text for the opening words of *Shemoneh Esre*, and the context of that source-text, and saw how that examination allowed us to see this most-familiar of prayer openings with fresh eyes. We then looked at the message of the *Amida* as a whole and its history as they are understood by many contemporary scholars, and discussed the evidence pointing to the post-Second Temple destruction composition of the opening of the *Amida*. We saw how these elements reinforced and deepened our understanding of the relationship between the opening of the *Shemoneh Esre* and the body of the prayer. It is hoped that, in the process, we have at least partly lifted the veil of familiarity that can obscure the meaning of this most familiar of Jewish liturgical routines.

³⁰ See Eliezer Halevi, *Torat Hatefilah* (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zioni, 1967), 104-105, for a full discussion of this point.