

ABSTRACT

‘BERIKH SHEMEH’: THE HISTORY OF AN ANONYMOUS ARAMAIC PRAYER
THAT FOUND ITS WAY INTO SEFER HA-ZOHAR AND THE PRAYER BOOK

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The Aramaic prayer ‘*Berikh Shemeh*’ (= Blessed be His Name) whose source is commonly identified as *Sefer ha-Zohar*, began to be included in *siddurim* (prayer books) during the seventeenth century. Until now it was thought to have been first introduced by individuals circa the mid-sixteenth century, with a direct connection to the distribution of the *Zohar*, and that it gradually spread, following practices instituted in Kabbalistic circles, until it reached many communities and was included in *siddurim*. However, this article shows that this process took place much earlier.

According to the documents discussed in the article, the practice of reciting ‘*Berikh Shemeh*’ began long before the middle of the sixteenth century, and at first it was not related to *Sefer ha-Zohar*, its distribution, or its reception. In fact, the character of this Aramaic prayer is foreign to *Sefer ha-Zohar* and was artificially embedded in it. Using manuscripts, the author reconstructs the ancient versions of the prayer and tracks the historical and liturgical context in which it might have been created, evolved, copied alongside the *Zohar*, and eventually entered *siddurim*.

‘*Berikh Shemeh*’ is first documented as a late prayer, whose origin remains unknown, present in various geographical areas, in the margins of regular and high-holiday prayer books or as an appendix to them, originally without attribution. Later, the prayer began to be associated with R. Shimon Bar Yohai and copied as an apostil alongside Aramaic passages on the customs relating to the Torah scroll in the *Zohar* on *Parashat Vayakhel*.

The last part of the article raises conjectures regarding the ancient sources of ‘*Berikh Shemeh*’ and examines its relation to prayers familiar from the liturgical canon and to other prayer customs whose origins are obscure.

An edition of the early versions of the prayer is presented in the appendix to the article.