The *birkat ha-mazon* prayer,\(^1\) recited at the conclusion of every meal,\(^2\) occupies a primary place within Judaism’s liturgy for the home. It is therefore unsurprising that the manuscripts of the Cairo Geniza, representing daily Jewish life in the Mediterranean between the 10th and 13th centuries, abound with copies of this prayer. These documents are especially significant in light of the fact that Rabbinic sources, while specifying the prayer’s overall structure, do not delineate a specific prayer text.\(^3\) Thus, the Geniza documents afford us an opportunity to examine the *birkat ha-mazon* at a relatively early point in its development.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) The present study is based upon a corpus of 469 manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza, containing 213 transcriptions of the statutory text of the *birkat ha-mazon*, and 352 transcriptions of the prayer’s poetic counterparts (a single manuscript may contain multiple transcriptions). I am currently preparing a critical edition of the full corpus of the poetic transcriptions as part of my doctoral dissertation, under the guidance of Prof. Ephraim Hazan (Bar Ilan University). In addition, the present collection of statutory transcriptions serves as a preliminary basis for a forthcoming critical edition of Geniza texts of the *birkat ha-mazon*, which I am preparing together with Dr. Uri Ehrlich (Ben Gurion University). Regarding the criteria used to differentiate between statutory and poetic transcriptions, see below (section II).

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\(^2\) Technically speaking, the prayer is confined to meals in which bread is consumed; its relevance at other meals is a matter of Talmudic debate (Ber 44a).

\(^3\) The primary Rabbinic sources specify only the number of benedictions and the general themes which are to be contained within (see t.Ber 3,9; 6,1; p.Ber 1,5 3d; 7,1 11a; Ber 48a–49b).

\(^4\) The extent to which we can extrapolate information from these texts regarding the pre-Geniza state of the prayer will be considered below (section IV).
The Geniza manuscripts reflect two distinct models of *birkat ha-mazon* recitals. Primary among them is the statutory form of the prayer, in which the basic prayer text remains constant, even as the various manuscripts offer a wealth of additional supplications and variations. At the same time, however, the Cairo Geniza also brought to light over 200 distinct poetic versions of the prayer. Although later European prayer books incorporate such compositions within the statutory text (Finkelstein 1929, 236 n. 49; Davidson 1938–39, 345–387 esp. 362–363), the original intent of the poems was not to supplement, but rather to supplant (Fleischer 1970, 42–63 esp. 55–60; Shmidman 2006, 45–102 esp. 61–64). Indeed, according to the normative liturgical practice during the Geniza period, these poetic texts served as complete alternatives to the statutory text; other than a few set phrases which were appended to the end of the 2nd and 3rd benedictions, the poetic recitals almost entirely disregarded the statutory text (Shmidman 2006, 49–59).

Nevertheless, despite their differences, the statutory text and the poetic compositions do share a number of common features. In the present study, I shall examine two such points of interaction, demonstrating the influence of the poetic forms upon the statutory version of the *birkat ha-mazon*.

## I. Categorizing *Birkat Ha-Mazon* Texts

Before we embark on a comparison of the poetic forms of the *birkat ha-mazon* with the statutory text, we must first obtain a reliable method to differentiate between the two types of texts. It is not sufficient to contrast the ‘poetry’ of the poetic texts with the ‘prose’ of the statutory text; the statutory text may occasionally incorporate poetic phrases, while at