

C. CLIFTON BLACK

The Lord's Prayer

INTERPRETATION *Resources for the Use of
Scripture in the Church*

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SERIES FOREWORD

This series of volumes supplements *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. The commentary series offers an exposition of the books of the Bible written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith. This new series is addressed to the same audience and serves a similar purpose, providing additional resources for the interpretation of Scripture, but now dealing with features, themes, and issues significant for the whole rather than with individual books.

The Bible is composed of separate books. Its composition naturally has led its interpreters to address particular books. But there are other ways to approach the interpretation of the Bible that respond to other characteristics and features of the Scriptures. These other entries to the task of interpretation provide contexts, overviews, and perspectives that complement the book-by-book approach and discern dimensions of the Scriptures that the commentary design may not adequately explore.

The Bible as used in the Christian community is not only a collection of books but also itself a book that has a unity and coherence important to its meaning. Some volumes in this new series will deal with this canonical wholeness and seek to provide a wider context for the interpretation of individual books as well as a comprehensive theological perspective that reading single books does not provide.

Other volumes in the series will examine particular texts, like the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount, texts that have played such an important role in the faith and life of the Christian community that they constitute orienting foci for the understanding and use of Scripture.

A further concern of the series will be to consider important and often difficult topics, addressed at many different places in the books of the canon, that are of recurrent interest and concern to the church in its dependence on Scripture for faith and life. So the series will include volumes dealing with such topics as eschatology, women, wealth, and violence.

The books of the Bible are constituted from a variety of kinds of literature such as narrative, laws, hymns and prayers, letters, parables, miracle stories. To recognize and discern the contribution and importance of all these different kinds of material enriches and enlightens the use of Scripture. Volumes in the series will provide help in the interpretation of Scripture's literary forms and genres.

The liturgy and practices of the gathered church are anchored in Scripture, as with the sacraments observed and the creeds recited. So another entry to the task of discerning the meaning and significance of biblical texts explored in this series is the relation between the liturgy of the church and the Scriptures.

Finally, there is certain ancient literature, such as the Apocrypha and the noncanonical gospels, that constitutes an important context to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Consequently, this series will provide volumes that offer guidance in understanding such writings and explore their significance for the interpretation of the Protestant canon.

The volumes in this second series of Interpretation deal with these important entries into the interpretation of the Bible. Together with the commentaries, they compose a library of resources for those who interpret Scripture as members of the community of faith. Each of them can be used independently for its own significant addition to the resources for the study of Scripture. But all of them intersect the commentaries in various ways and provide an important context for their use. The authors of these volumes are biblical scholars and theologians who are committed to the service of interpreting the Scriptures in and for the church. The editors and authors hope that the addition of this series to the commentaries will provide a major contribution to the vitality and richness of biblical interpretation in the church.

The Editors

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Since accepting the invitation in 2008 to write this commentary—can a full decade have slipped away?—I have accrued more than the usual number of debts in its preparation. Early drafts have been presented to Princeton Theological Seminarians in a regularly offered course, “Prayer in the New Testament,” as well as to members of Virginia’s Williamsburg Presbyterian Church (2000) and Doylestown Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania (2013). I was also honored to offer portions of what follows to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of South Carolina as the Nadine Beacham and Charlton F. Hall Sr. Visiting Lecturer in New Testament (2013) and to Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, Dallas, as the Robert E. Ratelle Distinguished Lecturer on Faith and Culture (2016). To all my listeners on these varied occasions, I tender appreciation for their gracious hospitality.

Because this volume is intended as a resource for Scripture’s use in the church, I knew from the start that guidance from some clerical leaders was imperative. Accordingly I solicited the counsel of twoscore pastors and priests across the United States: What questions did they hope a book such as this might answer? Whether I have addressed all their queries is impossible for me to say, but each deserves thanks for answering my plea: Gregory Bezilla, Michael Cave, Oscar Dowdle, Nan Duerling, Gregory Gibson, Gayle Kerr, Michael Lindvall, Elisa Owen, Fleming Rutledge, Gretchen Sausville, Patrick Willson, and Claude Young. Melanie Howard, my former research assistant, now Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Fresno Pacific University, and Kate Skrebutenas, ace Reference Librarian, helped me to mine the rich veins of the Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

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The Epiphany of the Lord
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ABBREVIATIONS

General

=	equals, is parallel to, is similar to
¶(¶)	paragraph(s)
§(§)	section(s)
×	times
AD	anno Domini, “in the year of [our] Lord”
alt.	altered
ASV	Authorized Standard Version (1901)
AT	author’s translation
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud (<i>b.</i> preceding the title of a tractate)
BC	before Christ
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2001
c.	century
ca.	circa, about
CASSIRER	Cassirer, Heinz W., trans. <i>God’s New Covenant: A New Testament Translation</i> . Eerdmans, 1989
CD	Barth, Karl. <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance. 14 vols. T&T Clark, 1936–77
CEB	Common English Bible (2011)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
chap.	chapter
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> . Editio altera. Reimerum, 1893
DSST	<i>The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Tests in English</i> , trans. Florentino García Martínez and Wilfred G. E. Watson. E. J. Brill, 1994.
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by
esp.	especially

ABBREVIATIONS

et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
frag.	fragment
Gk.	Greek
GNB	Good News Bible (1976)
GOODSPEED	Goodspeed, Edgar J., trans. <i>The New Testament: An American Translation</i> . University of Chicago Press, 1923
Heb.	Hebrew
<i>j.</i>	Jerusalem Talmud (<i>j.</i> preceding the title of a tractate)
JB	Jerusalem Bible (1955)
KJV	King James Version
LATTIMORE	Lattimore, Richmond, trans. <i>The New Testament</i> . Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah (<i>m.</i> preceding the title of a tractate)
MOFFATT	Moffatt, James, trans. <i>The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments</i> . University of Chicago Press, 1922
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NEB	New English Bible (1970)
NIV	New International Version (1978)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures</i> . Jewish Publication Society, 1985
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
OEBT	<i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology</i> . Edited by Samuel E. Balentine. 2 vols. Oxford University Press, 2015
OTP	<i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. Doubleday & Company, 1983, 1985
par(s).	and parallel(s)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)
rev.	revised
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952)
xviii <i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. 10 vols. Eerdmans, 1977

trans. translator, translated by
 vol(s). volume(s)

Dead Sea Scrolls

1QH *Thanksgiving Hymns (Hodayot)*
 1QM *War Scroll*
 1QS *Rule of the Community*
 4Q280 *4QBlessings^f*
 4Q286 *4QBlessings^a*
 4Q508 *4QFestival Prayers^b*
 11QPs^a *11QPsalms^a*

Pseudepigrapha

As. Mos. *Assumption of Moses*
2 Bar. *2 Baruch*
1 En. *1 Enoch*
Jub. *Jubilees*
Pss. Sol. *Psalms of Solomon*
Sib. Or. *Sibylline Oracles*
T. Dan *Testament of Dan*
T. Mos. *Testament of Moses*
T. Sol. *Testament of Solomon*

Apostolic Fathers

Barn. *Barnabas*
2 Clem. *2 Clement*
Did. *Didache*
Herm. *Shepherd of Hermas*
Mart. Pol. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*
Pol. Phil. *Polycarp, To the Philippians*

INTRODUCTION

Pray as you can, and do not try to pray as you can't. Take yourself as you find yourself, and start from that.

—Dom John Chapman

The purification of desire, the education of human wanting, is one of the principal ways in which God answers prayer. It is always a reduction, which reaches its culmination in the single desire for God himself and his kingdom.

—J. Neville Ward

If asked to write on the back of an envelope what I believed about the Lord's Prayer, its intent and efficacy, I would scribble "the education of human wanting." Neville Ward's apt phrase identifies two basic, intersecting dimensions of all prayer, crystallized in the Lord's Prayer. When praying as Jesus taught his disciples, we enroll ourselves in a twofold curriculum: one of *ēducere* (Latin, "to lead out") and of *ēducāre* ("to bring up"). The first of these cognate terms refers to the drawing out of our latent potentialities; the second refers to our habits, manners, and intellectual aptitudes. The Lord's Prayer explicates who we truly are: creatures made in God's image, warped by sin and under restoration by God's Holy Spirit. Simultaneously, the Prayer trains what we are becoming: God's obedient children, whose minds are renewed by God's merciful will (Rom. 12:2).

By that double-pronged education, the Prayer reforms our manifold "wanting" as human creatures. What we most profoundly *need* is evoked and exposed. What we most ardently *desire* is developed and disciplined. Each petition of the Lord's Prayer contributes to this complex, lifelong process. Perhaps that is why, notwithstanding the apostle Paul's frank admission that we do not know how to pray as we ought, the prayer Jesus gave his followers articulates something more than "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Jesus' model prayer meets us where we are and quickens us to pray as we can, not as we can't.

Viewed from that vantage, the Lord's Prayer—indeed, every prayer in conformity with Jesus' attitude and instruction, his life

and death—is *always* answered, for the simple reason that we cannot make such petitions as he taught us without simultaneously receiving them.

So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24; cf. Matt. 21:21)

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. (1 John 5:13–15)

Regrettably, too many Christians regard the God to whom they pray as a celestial slot machine. “Answered prayer” is believed to be getting what we want: if we’re lucky or if God is paying attention, the spinning wheels will land on three cherries and we’ll hit the jackpot. Nowhere in Scripture is prayer so presented. The biblical God is trusted to listen and to fulfill our *needs*, even when they do not jibe with our *wants*. If God granted our every wish, we would have serious reason to doubt the wisdom of God.

The key ingredient is prayer offered *in accordance with God’s will*, which in one way or another preoccupies the Lord’s Prayer in its entirety. It is impossible for us to ask that God’s name be made holy and God’s will be done—that the meaning of human existence be redefined by the authority of one God who is Father and King—without the breakthrough or amplification of that power in our own lives. To ask it is to receive it. For that reason most of what is dismissed as “unanswered prayer” is a misnomer: an unreflective description of something we have requested that falls short of God’s glory, defies God’s beneficent intent, or disappoints our foreshortened vision or unworthy aspirations. In a strict sense there’s no such thing as unanswered Christian prayer. If the God to whom we appeal in the Lord’s Prayer is what we want, then that, most assuredly, is what we shall get.

In writing this book for the church’s preachers and teachers, my hope is to help them pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples with better understanding and deeper appreciation. Despite its familiarity and apparent simplicity, the Prayer contains words and phrases hard to understand. As a whole it issues from a culture

that, while at some points comparable to ours, is also very different. This is true of all Scripture. On many occasions I shall ask my readers to flex their exegetical muscles, in an honest attempt to recover what we need to know—linguistically, historically, socially, and religiously—about the Prayer, so that it may speak to us more intelligibly. The metaphor that seems to me most apt, which I suggest to my students and have elaborated elsewhere (“Trinity and Exegesis,” 26), is one I have pilfered from the saints of the church. Scripture, wrote Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), is a love letter addressed to us from the God who wants to marry us (*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 83.3; see Dumontier, *Saint Bernard et la Bible*, 86–97). “You are reading? No, your betrothed is talking to you. It is your betrothed, Christ, who is united with you [cf. 2 Cor. 11:2]. He tears you away from the solitude of the desert and brings you into his home, saying to you, ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord’” (anonymous, but attributed to Jerome [ca. 342–430] by Špidlík, *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain*, 16). If this be so, then we who read these billets-doux should want to learn everything we can about our Lover: the messengers through whom that love is conveyed (prophets and psalmists, evangelists and apostles), the foreign languages they spoke (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin), and the strange worlds they inhabited (Mesopotamia and Caesar’s empire). Historical inquiry of the sort undertaken in this volume is governed, finally, not by science (*scientia*) but by love (*caritas*).

In each of the following chapters I shall also tender theological reflections on the Prayer’s several petitions. I neither ask nor expect my readers to agree with my assessments at every point or, for that matter, at any point. Every interpreter must come to terms with Scripture’s claims for oneself. My aim is only to invite those using this book to engage some larger conversations that I consider important and pertinent to the concerns of the Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. I hope that my comments in those veins will prompt readers to frame better questions than mine, as well as answers more congruent with Christian faith and theological reason.

Finally, this volume is offered with confidence in the power of our Lord’s Prayer for the formation of Christian character. Inherently fertile, the Prayer accomplishes that which God purposes (cf. Isa. 55:11). It is impossible for us to pray it and remain unreconstructed by the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16). By its praying, measure by measure, grace softens our self-centeredness, and love

enlarges our noblest capacities: trust in our heavenly Father, desire that God's name and all creation be sanctified, regarding our fellow creatures with merciful eyes. The Lord's Prayer is nothing other than Christ's own curriculum in the education of human wanting.

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PART ONE

Getting Our Bearings

*The Religious World of the Lord's Prayer
Prayer in the Gospels*

The Religious World of the Lord's Prayer

You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.

—Anne Lamott

According to Luke (11:1), one of Jesus' disciples requested that he teach them how to pray. That was no silly question with an obvious answer. Many options were available to them. Doubtless his disciples truly wanted to know how Jesus prayed and thus how they should pray. That serious question sets the stage for this chapter.

Religious devotion is among humanity's oldest, most pervasive, and multifaceted activities. Where there is religion, there is prayer. Some anthropologists reckon prayer as old as any known cultural artifact and as universal, perhaps, as language itself. "Prayers have this diagnostic value: they present in microcosm the longings, beliefs, ideals, and assumptions that drive the inner life of individuals and the corporate life of human cultures. In prayer, the dreams of a civilization take lucid and articulate form" (Zaleski and Zaleski, *Prayer*, 15). Prayer is primary speech: a form of human discourse that reaches for the godly, coordinating tongue with head and heart and gut. Enough evidence from antiquity survives to support these assessments; however, those remains are somewhat spotty and uneven in quality. Again, no surprise: like us, most of our forebears prayed without committing their prayers to writing. They had no Book of Common Prayer: their religious beliefs were too diverse.

Prayers uttered in ritual were deliberately formalized; prayers inscribed upon buildings adopted ceremonial rhetoric; prayers uttered by dramatic characters were artistic fictions. We may assume enough verisimilitude that ancient audiences would have recognized all these as prayers. Possibly the wording of such public specimens molded that of informal prayers, much as a regular churchgoer today might reflexively confess, “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.”

It is impossible to know with the precision we desire how most of Jesus’ ancestors and contemporaries prayed. Nevertheless, the effort to reconstruct that is not wasted. Jesus himself was heir to a rich, multicultural tradition of prayer. It is important to recognize those points at which the prayer taught to his disciples intersects with that heritage. It is equally important to perceive where that prayer deviates from religious patterns of his own day. This chapter presents, not a clear photograph, but an impressionist painting of prayer in that world where Jesus was born. We shall be less concerned about what the ancients said about prayer, more interested in how they prayed—insofar as that may be recovered from literary remains.

Prayer in Greco-Roman Religions

Ancient Greece (ca. 850 BC–AD 50)

4 Although many aspects of prayer in classical Greece are controversial, Simon Pulleyn (*Prayer in Greek Religion*) has identified some constant elements. First, ancient Greeks believed in many gods, inscrutable though not necessarily omniscient, who desired *timē*: “honor” or “esteem in others’ eyes” (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1). Second, offering an appropriate gift (*charis*, “something pleasing”), mortals, whether kings or commoners, invoked the gods for specific benefits (Plato, *Timaeus* 27c). Third, those offerings were typically accompanied by cultic ritual (Plato, *Statesman* 290cd). Fourth, because the Greeks did not share Israel’s sense of sin as disobedience of divine commandments, Greek prayers were not motivated to repair a broken relationship. They attempted, instead, to establish a quid pro quo between mortals and gods: “Give to me because I have given to you.” Commonplace in ancient Greek prayers was the conditional, gently coercive construction *ei pote*: “if

ever” a god has bestowed favor to a generous petitioner in the past, such beneficence may again be counted upon.

Hear me [Apollo], you of the silver bow, who protects Chryse and holy Cilla and rules with might over Tenedos: if ever I [Chyrse, the priest] have roofed over for you a pleasing temple or burnt up for you fat thighs of bulls or goats, fulfill for me this wish: may the Danaans pay for my tears by your arrows. (Homer, *Iliad* 1.37–42, trans. S. Pulleyn)

Lady [Artemis], you who saved me before in the glades of Aulis from my father's terrible, murderous hand, save me again, and these people, too. (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1082–84, trans. Pulleyn)

As Pulleyn notes, the pattern for such prayer corresponds with the terms of hospitality assumed by ancient guests of their hosts: “I entreat you [Nestor], if ever my father, noble Odysseus, performed for you some word or deed that he had promised, remember these now, I [Telemachus] ask you” (Homer, *Odyssey* 3.98–101, trans. Pulleyn).

Petitioners sought the gods for all manner of reasons: advice in business affairs, magical incantations for self-improvement, and cries for rescue from beyond the grave.

O Lord Sarapis Helios, beneficent one. [Say] whether it is fitting that my son Phantias and his wife should not agree now with his father, but oppose him and not make a contract. Tell me this truly. Farewell. (Question to an oracle, Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1148 [1st c. AD], trans. Pulleyn)

Everyone fears Your Great Might. Grant me the good things: the strength of AKRYSKYLOS, the speech of EUONOS, the eyes of Solomon, the voice of ABRASAX, the grace of ADONIOS the god. Come to me, Kypris, every day! The Hidden Name bestowed to You: THOATHOE'THATHO-OYTHAETHO'USTHOAITHITHE'-THOINTHO; grant me victory, repute, beauty toward all men and all women! (*Greek Magical Papyri Texts* 92.1–16)

My dearest, if any voice of mortals is heard in Hades, I say this to you, Heracles. Your father and your children are dying, and I am perishing, too. . . . Help—come—appear to me, even as a

shadow. It would be enough if you came as a dream. For those who are killing your children are wicked. (Euripides, *Hercules* 490–96, trans. Pulleyn)

The Greeks realized that gods were not at their beck and call. Some prayers suggest a bargain, splitting the difference between favorable and unfavorable outcomes:

Grant victory to Ajax, and that he might win shining fame. But if you love Hector and care for him, give equal might and glory to both. (Homer, *Iliad* 7.203–5, trans. Pulleyn)

Occasionally, as in the *Homeric Hymn* 9, which praises Artemis for her military prowess, no explicit petition is made to a god or goddess. Euripides suggests that at times the one who offers thanks could still hold a grudge:

O Zeus, it took you a long time to heed my troubles,
But I am thankful to you nonetheless for what has been done.
(*Children of Hercules* 869–70, trans. Pulleyn)

On the other hand, the ancient Greeks were capable of a self-critical attitude toward prayer:

Our poets, understanding prayers as requests made to the gods, should exercise utmost care that they not inadvertently ask for evil under the guise of good. To make such a prayer would surely be a most ridiculous blunder. (Plato, *Laws* 7.801b, AT)

That sentiment lacks the direct force of “Deliver us from evil” and “Thy will be done,” but it’s headed in the same direction.

Imperial Rome (27 BC–AD 476)

6

After beginning to undermine Greek hegemony over the Mediterranean world in the second century BC, the early Roman republic was coming unglued in a series of civil wars whose climax was the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. After Caesar’s adopted son, Octavian, triumphed over his political adversaries, the Roman Senate conferred on him the title “Augustus” and unprecedented power of command over the entire empire (27 BC–AD 14). Augustus walked a tightrope between tradition and novelty. On one side,

he countenanced worship of proliferating local, municipal, and domestic deities, including the Greek gods under Latin names, such as Jupiter (Zeus), Minerva (Athena), and Diana (Artemis). On the other, Augustus gradually consolidated his new, one-man dominion by means of temple-building, veneration of his deceased predecessor as a deity, public prayers for the emperor's well-being, and identification of himself as *pontifex maximus*, "supreme bridge-builder" between all priests and their gods. Precedents for such beliefs and practices were as ancient as Egypt's pharaohs, as recent as Alexander the Great and his Seleucid and Ptolemaic successors in Egypt.

Rome ascribed its military conquests to its *pietas* (religious duty) and *pax deorum* (peace with the gods). In Cicero's words, "There is really no human activity in which human valor [*virtus*] approaches more closely the divine power [*numen*] of the gods than the founding of new states [*civitates*] or the preservation of those already founded" (*Republic* 1.12, AT). Acts of prayer in imperial Rome, like religious practice in general, were bent toward social policy and adroit governance. This was no Augustan flimflam: "Ordinary inhabitants of the Roman empire *expected* that political power had a religious dimension" (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:359).

Many Roman prayers perpetuated Greek beliefs in reciprocity between mortals and gods, now styled as *do ut des*: "I give [to you] that you may return [the favor]." One observes this principle at work in prayers offered by Romans in a variety of settings.

Kindly Pales [patron deity of shepherds], please grant your favor to one who sings of shepherds' rites, if I show dutiful respect to your festival [namely, the Parilia, a livestock ritual associated with Rome's own foundation]. (Ovid, *Fasti* 4.721–22, trans. Mary Beard)

Often besought for cures was Asclepius, the god of healing whose serpent-entwined staff remains the symbol of modern medicine. The following prayer is typical:

Asclepius, child of Apollo, these words come from your devoted servant. Blessed one, god whom I yearn for. How shall I enter your golden house unless your heart incline towards me and you will to heal me and restore me to your shrine again, so that I may look on my god, who is brighter than the earth in springtime? (Apuleius, *Apology* 55, trans. Beard)

Equally persistent were prayers for military conquest. Here a general, Decius Mus (340 BC), vows to sacrifice himself and his troops to Rome and to the gods:

Janus, Jupiter, Mars Pater, Quirinus, Bellona, Lares, . . . gods whose power extends over us and our enemies, divine Manes [gods of the underworld]: I pray to you, I revere you, I beg your favor and beseech that you advance the strength and success of the Roman people . . . and afflict [their] enemies with terror, fear, and death. As I have pronounced in these words, so on behalf of the state, the Roman people, . . . the army, the legions, and auxiliaries of the Roman people, . . . I devote the legions and auxiliaries of the enemy, along with myself, to the divine Manes and to the earth. (Livy, *History of Rome* 8.9.1–8, trans. Beard)

Like the Greeks, Romans tendered beautiful prayers to Universal Reason or Law, personified as a deity. To Cleanthes, Zeno's successor as head of the Stoic school in Athens, is attributed this *Hymn to Zeus* (frag. 537.1–10, mid-3rd c. BC):

Most glorious of the Immortals, many named,
 Almighty Zeus, ruler of Nature, that governest all things with law.
 Hail! For lawful it is that all mortals should address Thee.
 For we are Thy offspring, taking the image of only Thy voice,
 As many mortal things as live and move upon the earth.
 Therefore I shall hymn Thee, and sing Thy might forever.
 For Thee doth all this universe that circles round the earth obey,
 Moving whithersoever Thou leadest, and is gladly swayed by Thee.
 (Epictetus, *Teaching* 35, trans. Frederick E. Grant [alt.])

8 There was no single “imperial cult,” a coinage appearing nowhere in ancient literature. Instead, there were as many cultic veneration of the emperor as there were provincial villages and cities. Still, in the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries AD, no other religion was as widespread, well organized, and centrally endorsed (by the emperor himself). Prayers to the emperor followed suit. Special priesthoods, staffed by provincial aristocrats, were created to offer sacrifices to deceased emperors in temples dedicated to them alone. About three years after the death of Augustus, an altar inscription at Narbo (present-day Narbonne, France) bound its residents “to worship his divine spirit in perpetuity” (*CIL* 12.4.333). The lyric poet Horace, Octavian's

contemporary, affirmed: "We have always believed that the thundering Jupiter reigns in heaven; Augustus will be held as god present" (*Song of the Ages* 3.5.1–3, AT). By strict senatorial protocol an emperor was not fully divinized until his postmortem apotheosis. Nevertheless, as Horace gushes and as many common folk may have believed, Augustus seems to have been regarded in life as a sort of "honorary god" in a conceptual world where "godhood" enjoyed a flexible meaning. By conferring upon Octavian the title "Augustus," the Senate had opened a fateful door: a claim that the Roman emperor was not merely great or superior to all other sovereigns, but rather *the* recipient par excellence of divine power to engender life, nourish growth, and dispense blessings. In Horace's words (*Letter to Augustus* 2.1.15–16), he was *praesens deus*, "god present." This, as we shall see, became the crux of a dangerous stalemate between Hellenistic Jews and their Roman potentate.

Prayer in the Hebrew Bible and Emergent Judaism

Ancient Israel (1200–200 BC)

In some ways the prayers of ancient Israel parallel those of ancient Greece. Both exhibit rough similarities with modes of Egyptian, Hittite, and Akkadian prayers, particularly their association of prayer with sacrificial offerings (see Pritchard, *ANET*, 375, 394–95; Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 5–31). A personal deity is addressed and petitioned, with express motivation for the request. Greek prayers resembled guests' expectation of benefaction by their hosts; likewise, in Israelite prayers some scholars discern a replica of human petitions in everyday life (Aejmelaeus, *Traditional Prayer*, 88–89).

Yet, when reading Hebrew prayers, one moves into a different religious world, molded by and expressive of different theological assumptions. Most obviously, Greco-Romanism was riotously polytheistic. From among primitive Canaanite gods (Num. 25; Judg. 6; 1 Kgs. 18) the LORD of Israel had emerged as sole and sovereign; by the sixth century, despite occasional backslides into idolatry (Deut. 32:21; 1 Kgs. 16; 2 Chr. 24:18), a rigorous monotheism was built into the Deuteronomist's credo (Deut. 6:4, 13; cf. 1 Chr. 16:26). That belief remains a defining characteristic of Judaism to the present day.

The other distinguishing feature of Hebraic and later Jewish prayer was the milieu created by the Sinaitic covenant, for which no exact parallel exists in Greco-Romanism. Most ancient peoples seem to have assumed some “compact” between mortals and deities: as we have seen, “Give to me because I have given to you”; “I give that you may give in return.” Critically different was Israel’s belief that the LORD God had unilaterally instigated with that people the Sinai covenant and all subsequent codicils (Gen. 17:1–14; Num. 25:10–13; 2 Sam. 23:5; Ps. 89:3, 28–29)—owing not to the nation’s magnitude or righteousness, but rather to the LORD’s selection of this people over all others and a steadfast fidelity to those promises (Deut. 7:7; 9:5). We have seen that some Greek prayers refer to *charis*, a gift pleasing to the gods, proffered by humans to encourage a favorable disposition. The Septuagint uses the same Greek term to translate the Hebrew word *khēn*, but the framework for its use in the Bible diverges from that of Homer and the tragedians: God’s gracious mercy to Israel is utterly self-motivated, in no way the discharge of any reciprocal debt owed to those who sacrifice to the LORD (Exod. 34:6; Num. 6:25; Neh. 9:17, 31; Ps. 86:15). Unlike Olympus’s residents, Israel’s God needs no mortal honor. The LORD accepts sacrifice, properly presented (Lev. 3–4, 7–9; Num. 7), but beyond all burnt offerings desires the nation’s obedience (1 Sam. 15:22), steadfast love (Hos. 6:6), justice (Sir. 35:9), “a broken spirit, and a broken and contrite heart” (Ps. 51:17). Within this framework Israel’s prayers are best understood.

Many of Israel’s prayers were motivated by similar concerns in Greece and the Roman Empire. We witness such in the ancient hymn of praise ascribed to Moses, immediately followed by Miriam’s closely related hymn, sung after Israel’s rescue at the Red Sea:

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
 horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
 The LORD is my strength and my might,
 and he has become my salvation;
 this is my God, and I will praise him,
 my father’s God, and I will exalt him.
 The LORD is a warrior;
 the LORD is his name. . . .
 Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
 Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
 awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.
In your steadfast love [*khesed*] you led the people whom you
redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. . . .
You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your
own possession,
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.
The LORD will reign forever and ever.
(Exod. 15:1b–3, 11–13, 17–18)

This single hymn encapsulates many of Israel's fundamental claims about itself and God. First, it is a response of faithful praise from a people who have experienced rescue from foreign captivity. Second, it dilates on the LORD's sole responsibility for that gracious liberation: the Israelites did nothing to save themselves. Third, the occasion for praise is a discrete event in Israel's history: "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD" (Exod. 15:1a). Fourth, that critical event demonstrates the LORD's creative and redemptive power over all other divine claimants, both now and forever. Fifth, by the LORD's decisive action at the sea, the way is paved for Israel's entry into an abiding covenant: "You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode" (15:17; cf. 19:1–20:21).

The more one mulls over this hymn, the more intelligible is the pattern into which fall so many of Israel's other prayers to its God. Psalm 117 expresses a succinct example:

Praise the LORD, all you nations! [the call to praise, issued
universally]
Extol him, all you peoples! [the same call, reiterated]
For [*kî*] great is his steadfast love toward us, [the justification for
praise: God's *khesed*]
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. [that *khesed*
assured in perpetuity]
Praise the LORD! [the climactic call to praise]

Analyzing other hymns like the songs of Deborah (Judg. 5) and of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10), as well as numerous blessings (*bĕrākôt*) of the LORD distributed throughout Scripture (e.g., Gen. 14:20), Samuel Balentine describes some interesting patterns (*Prayer in*

the Hebrew Bible, 199–224). While often originating as personal expressions of praise in historical narratives, these hymns unfold as proclamations to Israel at worship.

Equally interesting is Balentine’s observation that, structurally and substantively, praise and lamentation are two sides of a single coin:

<i>Imperative address</i>	<i>Motivation</i>
Praise: Sing to the LORD,	for [kî] he has triumphed gloriously. (Exod. 15:21)
Lament: Deliver me, please,	for [kî] I am afraid of [my brother]. (Gen. 32:11)

As it was for ancient Israel, so it remains for many worshipers today: the life of prayer is a constantly reciprocating circuit between the poles of thanksgiving and lamentation (see also Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, esp. 154).

Complaints, pleas for help, and *cris de coeur* (cries from the heart) dominate Jeremiah’s oracles (11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18) and Job’s responses (chaps. 3, 29–31); they absorb the book of Lamentations and by a considerable margin outnumber all other types of prayers in the Psalter. The linkage of lament with praise is evident in Jehoshaphat’s cultic prayer, in Jerusalem’s assembly, on the eve of terrifying invasion (2 Chr. 20:6–12):

O LORD, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? They have lived in it, and in it have built you a sanctuary for your name, saying, “If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry to you in our distress, and you will hear and save.” See now, the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession that you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

Jehoshaphat is impaled on the dilemma of faith. All the questions in this prayer are indirect thanksgivings. *Of course* the LORD is the same God in heaven whom our ancestors worshiped. *Without question* this God rules over all nations and kingdoms. *Certainly* the land given to Abraham is his descendants' inheritance forever. *Beyond doubt* the LORD will come to the defense of his holy temple. So—the enemies are at the gate. We cannot withstand them. We don't know what to do. We're looking to you, God. Where are you?

In the Psalter's classic laments, similar confessions and questions address personal rather than national distress, which came to be uttered in a cultic setting.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 Why are you so far from helping me,
 from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
 and by night, but find no rest.
Yet you are holy,
 enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
 they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
 in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
But I am a worm, and not human;
 scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
 they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
"Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
 let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" (Ps. 22:1–8)

The psalmist hasn't the cold solace of an agnostic or atheist. There *is* a God, now and forever enthroned on Israel's praises. That God knows the sufferer's torments and shame. That God hears this prayer. Why doesn't God do something to remedy the circumstances? The last verse could be read as a desperate attempt to shame God into action: if you don't care about the mockery my attackers are making of me, why not do something to safeguard your own honor?

Verses 22–24 of the same psalm may be interpreted as the psalmist's vow: a bargaining promise that the Almighty shall be upheld in the congregation if only divine relief will come:

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
 in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

Some biblical *cris de coeur* express no petition at all, only anguished questions followed by something like a capitulation to misery:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes numbed
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
(Hab. 1:2–4, slightly alt.)

Still, the inner-scriptural dialogue continues. In the teeth of suffering, the powerless, discerning a response from the absent God, seize words of trust that melt into doxology.

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD. (Ps. 40:1–3)

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning. (Ps. 30:4–5)

Hebraic prayer defies simple synopsis. Let this much be said: Israel's Scripture reveals a perpetual conversation—frequently, a debate—between that people and their God over religious, social, and political matters of fundamental consequence. In a millennia-long process, continually renewed without reaching closure, Israel's basic beliefs about itself, the world as a whole, and the LORD God were articulated and evolved. Israel's emergent picture of humanity reveals vulnerable yet blessed creatures, subject to a range of conflictive passions and conduct: gratitude, violence, discouragement, persistence, miscarriage of justice, nobility, terror, and exuberance. The God to whom Israel prayed is One, personal yet transcendent, sovereign yet responsive, righteous yet merciful, present yet hidden, properly summoned by all yet answerable to none. No less than for any ancient Greek or Roman community, prayer was a primary means of cohesion and self-understanding among contemporaneous Hebrews. Here, too, prayer evinces the education of human wanting.

Second Temple Judaism (ca. 200 BC–AD 70)

More closely approaching the time of Jesus, we witness a flourishing of varied Jewish prayers. At this point the specimens are so numerous, the literature so vast, that taking their full measure becomes impossible. The best we may do is to consider some samples of Jewish piety in the centuries and decades immediately preceding the beginning of Jesus' movement.

The *Apocrypha* and *Pseudepigrapha* are conventional though clunky categories used to describe a large body of Jewish literature of multifarious genres. Because most of these texts originated in languages other than Hebrew, most rabbis did not regard them as canonical, on a level with that of Torah, Prophets, and Writings (Tanakh). Different Christian groups have variously assessed their authority: to this day Roman Catholic Bibles include works like Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, which appear in the

Septuagint; some African Orthodox Churches regard *1 Enoch* as scriptural. In any event this bountiful literature opens windows onto Jewish prayer in the shadow of Persian, Egyptian, then Roman political occupation.

Befitting its pious protagonists, the folktale of Tobit (ca. 200 BC) is deeply doxological. This book revisits many of Job's issues, transplanted into a Diaspora Jewish environment. The story is bifocal: it entwines the shifting fortunes of Tobit, whose loyalty to Torah gets him into trouble, and Sarah, a woman whose seven successive husbands have been demonically slain before any marriage could be consummated. Both Tobit and Sarah devoutly assert their innocence and plead for death. "With much grief and anguish of heart," Tobit prays:

You are righteous, O Lord,
 and all your deeds are just;
 all your ways are mercy and truth;
 you judge the world. . . .
 Command, O Lord, that I be released from this distress;
 release me to go to the eternal home,
 and do not, O Lord, turn your face away from me.
 For it is better for me to die
 than to see so much distress in my life. . . . (3:1–2, 6cd)

"At that same time, with hands outstretched toward the window," Sarah prays:

Blessed are you, merciful God!
 Blessed is your name forever;
 let all your works praise you forever. . . .
 Already seven husbands of mine have died.
 Why should I still live?
 But if it is not pleasing to you, O Lord, to take my life,
 hear me in my disgrace. (3:11, 15de)

Their requests are fulfilled. God delivers both from their distress.

Yet this book moves a step beyond Job by aligning the laments of particular Jews with that of the nation as a whole. In its penultimate chapter (13:1–17) Tobit prays that a chastened Israel may be redeemed from exile.

Blessed be God who lives forever,
 because his kingdom lasts throughout all ages. . . .

O Jerusalem, the holy city,
 he afflicted you for the deeds of your hands,
 but will again have mercy on the children of the righteous.
Acknowledge the Lord, for he is good,
 and bless the King of the ages,
 so that his tent may be rebuilt in you in joy.
May he cheer all those within you who are captives,
 and love all those within you who are distressed,
 to all generations forever. (Tob. 13:1, 9–10)

Interwoven into a tale that is at once fantastical, humorous, and heartrending is a concerto of praise, lament, thanksgiving, and trust in God's dedication to a wayward, restored Israel.

Corporate concerns rise to the fore in the book of Judith (ca. 150 BC), set in the age of the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar and his relentless general Holofernes (606–562 BC). As nations are toppled right and left, a widow of Bethulia rises to confront a seemingly invincible force. Judith is the exemplary feminist *avant la lettre*: wise, courageous, wealthy, beautiful, cunning, and sexy. She's Miriam (Exod. 15:20–21), Deborah (Judg. 4:4–16), Jael (Judg. 4:17–22), and the women of Thebez (Judg. 9:53–54) and Abel-beth-maacah (2 Sam. 20:14–22) all rolled into one. After seducing Holofernes into a drunken stupor, she decapitates him. Shame upon Assyria; victory for Israel! Yet, throughout this tale, the prayers of Judith are eloquent and by no means extraneous to the plot. She warns her countrymen: "Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him" (Jdt. 8:16–17). Thus does Judith pray:

For your strength does not depend on numbers,
 nor your might on the powerful.
But you are the God of the lowly,
 helper of the oppressed,
 upholder of the weak,
 protector of the forsaken,
 savior of those without hope.
Please, please, God of my father,
 God of the heritage of Israel,
 Lord of heaven and earth,
 Creator of the waters,

King of all your creation,
hear my prayer! (Jdt. 9:11–12)

Judith concludes the festival honoring her triumph with a royal hymn (16:13, 17):

I will sing to my God a new song:
O Lord, you are great and glorious,
wonderful in strength, invincible. . . .
Woe to the nations that rise up against my people!
The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day
of judgment;
he will send fire and worms into their flesh;
they shall weep in pain forever.

References to Sarah, Judith, and other Hellenistic Jewish women at prayer prompts one to wonder if the occasion, forms, and contents of their prayers differed in substance from those of their male counterparts. In a copiously detailed study (*Prayers*), Markus McDowell concludes that the authors of Second Temple Jewish literature tended to portray prayerful women and men in much the same way, though the perspective adopted by the majority of these women's prayers employs female imagery and vocabulary (197–214). For example, in *Joseph and Aseneth*, an early first-century-AD exposition of Genesis 41:45–51 and 46:20, Aseneth, Potiphar's daughter and the story's main character, offers five of nine personal prayers (11:16–18; 12–13; 17:10; 21:10–21; 27:10). Aside from a few passing references ("I . . . was a boastful and arrogant virgin . . . who trusted in the richness of my glory and in my beauty," 21:12d, 16c, trans. Bucharid [*OTP*]), the substance of her prayers could be offered by any model convert, male or female, from idol worship to loyal obedience to Israel's God (McDowell, 123–36).

The *Psalms of Solomon* (150 BC) collect eighteen poems blending lament, hymns of trust, praise, and thanksgiving. Some have the nation Israel in view, its recent circumstances or eschatological future (*Pss. Sol.* 1, 2, 7, 8, 11, 17, 18). Others concentrate on personal piety by contrasting sinners with the righteous (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16). The tenth psalm catches the didactic flavor of the rest:

Happy is the man whom the Lord remembers with rebuking,
And protects from the evil way with a whip
(that he may) be cleansed from sin that it may not increase. . . .

And the devout shall give thanks in the assembly of the people,
 And God will be merciful to the poor to the joy of Israel.
 For God is good and merciful forever,
 And the synagogues of Israel will glorify the Lord's name.
 (vv. 1, 6–7, trans. R. B. Wright [OTP])

While interesting in its own right, the lengthy seventeenth psalm is a curtain-raiser for New Testament eschatology. This hymn is focused on God's royal sovereignty: "O Lord, Thou art our King for ever and ever" (v. 1; also vv. 2–4, 43–49). Removal of sinners' military occupation of Israel will demonstrate God's kingly power (vv. 6–22). God's chosen instrument for this deliverance will be a Davidic king (cf. 2 Sam. 7:13–14; Ps. 89:19–37) who embodies not only martial strength, but also wisdom, righteousness, and blessing (*Pss. Sol.* 17:25, 29, 40, 42, 44). This "Lord Messiah" (v. 32: *māshîakh* [Heb.]; *christos* [Gk.]) is a human rather than a divine figure, as idealized as the age over which he will preside as God's regent:

And [Israel's king] will gather a holy people
 whom he will lead in righteousness;
 and he will judge the tribes of the people
 that have been made holy by the Lord their God.
 He will not tolerate unrighteousness [even] to pause among them,
 and any person who knows wickedness shall not live with them.

 [He] will bless the Lord's people with wisdom and happiness,
 And he himself [will be] free from sin, [in order] to rule a great
 people.
 He will expose officials and drive out sinners
 by the strength of his word.
 And he will not weaken in his days, [relying] upon his God,
 for God made him
 powerful in the holy spirit,
 and wise in the counsel of understanding,
 with strength and righteousness.
 (*Pss. Sol.* 17:26–27a, 35b–37, trans. Wright)

Like Psalms 2 and 110, this is a royal psalm that acknowledges God's sovereignty through an appointed king on earth. Unlike those psalms, *Psalms of Solomon* aspires to a future age of perfect piety.

The *Dead Sea Scrolls* (200 BC–AD 70) open wide a treasure trove of Second Temple prayers, including three-quarters of the Psalter in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts known to us. Here we

shall concentrate on excerpts from the fragmentary Thanksgiving Scroll (*Hodayot*), whose speaker may have been the Qumran community's venerated "Teacher of Righteousness." Much of what these hymns profess is epitomized in 1QH 5:2: "Only by your goodness is man acquitted, / [purified] by your abundant compa[ssion . . .] / You embellish him with your grandeur, / you install him in your abundant pleasures, / with everlasting peace and lengthy days" (trans. Martínez/Watson). The rest of the *Hodayot* are variations, light and dark, on this theme.

What is flesh compared to this?
 What creature of clay can do wonders?
 He is in sin from his maternal womb,
 and in guilty iniquity right to old age. . . .
 The path of man is not secure
 except by the spirit that God creates for him,
 to perfect the path of the sons of man
 so that all his creatures come to know the strength of his power
 and the extent of his compassion
 with all the sons of his approval. (1QH 12:29b–30a, 31b–32, *DSSE*,
 trans. Martínez/Watson)

Human creatures are utterly dependent upon their Creator, not only for life but also for the means of righteousness (the gift of Torah, "an everlasting possession": 1QS 11:5–8). Not only that: the *Hodayot* repeatedly insist on a divine, dualistic predeterminism:

I know that every spirit is fashioned by your hand,
 [and all its travail] you have established
 even before creating him.
 How can anyone change your words?
 You, you alone, have created the just man. . . .
 Upon flesh you have raised his glory.
 But the wicked you have created for the time of wrath,
 from the womb you have predestined them for the day of
 annihilation. (1QH 7:17b–18, 21, *DSSE*, trans. Martínez/Watson)

Such a view does not degrade into the hymnist's arrogance in being numbered among the elect. Rather, this sharp dualism is amplified in the stark contrast between mortals and God.

I am dust and ashes,
 what can I plan if you do not wish it?

What can I devise without your agreement?
How can I be strong if you do not make me stand?
How can I be learned if you do not mold me?
What can I say if you do not open my mouth?
And how can I answer if you do not give me insight?
See, you are prince of gods and king of the glorious ones,
Lord of every spirit, owner of every creature.
Without your will nothing happens,
And nothing is known without your wish. . . .
Be blessed, Lord,
God of compassion and of abundant favor,
because you have made me know these things
So that I recount your marvels,
and I not keep silent day and night. (1QH 18:5–9b, 14–15a, *DSSE*,
trans. Martínez/Watson)

In this light, one so blessed is responsible to God and to one's fellows. An appropriate response is thankful blessing:

For in the distress of my soul you heard my call,
you identified the outcry of my pain in my complaint
and saved the soul of the poor man in the lair of lions,
who sharpen their tongue like swords. . . .
But you, my God, have changed {my soul} the storm to a calm, . . .
Be blessed, Lord,
Because you did not abandon the orphan,
Nor have you have slighted the wretch.
For Your strength [is unfathomable]
and your glory measureless. (1QH 13:12b–13, 18a, 20–21a, *DSSE*,
trans. Martínez/Watson)

Qumran's hymnbook piles on blessing, dedication, and pleas for help:

Be blessed, Lord,
creator [of all things,]
[mighty] in acts
everything is your work.
You have resolved, in fact, to take pity [on your servant,]
to show me favor by the spirit of your compassion
and by the splendor of your glory. . . .
I know that no one besides you is just.
I have appeased your face by the spirit that you have given me,
to lavish your favor on your servant for [ever,]

to purify me with your holy spirit,
to approach your will according to the extent of your kindnesses.
(1QH 8:16–17b, 19–20, trans. Martínez/Watson)

Because God “discriminat[es] between the just and the wicked” (4Q508 f1:1), an oath is taken to assure the community’s righteous integrity:

But I,
I have known, thanks to the wealth of your goodness,
and with an oath I have enjoined my soul
not to sin against you
and not to do anything that is evil in your eyes.
In this way I force all the men of my counsel
To make progress in the community.
According to his intelligence I promote him,
I love him in proportion to his abundant inheritance.
I do not lift my face to evil,
or consider a wicked gift.
I do not exchange your truth for wealth,
or for a gift all your judgments.
Quite the reverse, . . .
I will not admit into the council [of your truth]
someone distant from your covenant. (1QH 6:17–20c, 21b–22,
trans. Martínez/Watson)

Such fidelity God will reciprocate to the community for all eternity. The hymnist, appointed “like a father for the sons of favor, like a wet-nurse to men of portent” (1QH 15:20c–21a), again offers gratitude:

I give you thanks, Lord,
Because you have sustained me with your strength,
you have spread your holy spirit over me so that I will not stumble,
you have fortified me against the wars of wickedness,
and in all their calamities you have not discouraged me from your
covenant. . . .
Who is like you, Lord, among the gods?
Who is like your truth?
Who, before you, is just when judged? . . .
All the sons of your truth
You take to forgiveness in your presence,
You purify them from their sins

by the greatness of your goodness,
and in your bountiful mercy,
to make them stand in your presence
forever and ever.
For you are an eternal God,
and all your paths remain from eternity to eternity.
And there is no one apart from you. (1QH 15:6–8a, 28, 30–31,
DSSE, trans. Martínez/Watson)

Qumran covenanters exiled themselves from a world, including fellow Jews, that they considered irredeemably corrupt. By contrast, the Alexandrian Jew *Philo* (25 BC–AD 50) embraced and interpreted Hellenistic thought for Diaspora Judaism. There's no little mysticism in Philo; some of his writings, such as his *Life of Moses*, verge on the ecstatic. While taking a very dim view of pagan mystery religions and their heroes, Philo devoutly prays to *Moses* as revealer, since on Sinai he most closely approached a vision of God's divine essence:

Now is it not fitting that even blind men should become sharp-sighted in their minds to these and similar things, being endowed with the power of sight by the most sacred oracles, so as to be able to contemplate the glories of nature, and not to be limited to the mere understanding of the words? But even if we voluntarily close the eye of our soul and take no care to understand such mysteries, or if we are unable to look up to them, the hierophant himself [i.e., Moses] stands by and prompts us. And do not thou ever cease through weariness to anoint thy eyes until you have introduced those who are duly initiated to the secret light of the sacred scriptures, and have displayed to them the hidden things therein contained, and their reality, which is invisible to those who are uninitiated. (*Dreams* 1.164–65, trans. F. H. Colson/G. H. Whitaker [LCL])

Indeed, Philo identifies Moses exactly as John the evangelist refers to Jesus: the *Logos*, which Philo understands as God's self-emanation of the divine reality that bridges creation and its redemption (*Cherubim* 27–28; *Migration of Abraham* 131; cf. John 1:1).

Philo's works reveal little of their author at prayer and virtually nothing of prayer texts in his day. This should not surprise us. None of his treatises is strictly devotional; they are exegetical, philosophical, or otherwise analytical (consult Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship in*

Philo of Alexandria). From comments en passant we can assemble a picture of prayer as Philo commends it. “Prayer is a request for good things” (*Agriculture* 99; also *Immutability* 87; *Sacrifice* 52); conversely, “I should pray, if ever I had a design to commit injustice, that I might fail in my iniquity” (*Posterity and Exile of Cain* 82). Positively: “For the undefiled high priest [= *logos*; cf. *Dreams* 1.215], conscience, has derived from nature this most especial honor, that no error of the mind can find any place within him; on which account it is worth our while to pray that [*logos*] may live in the soul [as a] judge who has received jurisdiction over the whole of our minds” (*Flight and Finding* 118). We pray, Philo suggests, that our moral center may be controlled by that wisdom by which God created and holds all things together. In a more general sense Philo considers a long, happy life and a good death “those things that are especially admired among us, of the things which are really goods, every one of which we pray to attain to at suitable seasons, and if we do attain to them, we are called the happiest of men” (*Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* 99; cf. 100–126). Encouraging prayers for moderation, he sounds perfectly Aristotelian (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6.7): “But that we may not, through deviating from the right road, be compelled to yield to one of two rival faults, let us desire and pray to be able to proceed straight along the middle of the road. Now, the middle between temerity and cowardice, is courage; the mean between profuse extravagance and illiberal stinginess, is temperance; that between crafty unscrupulousness and folly, is prudence; and the proper path between superstition and impiety, is piety” (*Unchangeableness of God* 164).

Philo regards prayer as a virtue: “If anyone is a friend of virtue, let him pray that all good things may be implanted in him and may appear in his soul, like some symmetrical proportion conducing to beauty in a statue or a picture” (*Husbandry* 168). Virtue’s highest object is God. “The beginning and the end of the greatness and numerousness of good things is the ceaseless and uninterrupted recollection of God, and an invocation of his assistance in the civil and domestic, confused and continual, warfare of life” (*Migration of Abraham* 56). For Philo, Jacob’s prayer at Bethel (Gen. 28:20–22) is exemplary:

God is the name of the beneficent power, and Lord is the title of the royal power. What, then, can anyone call a more ancient and

important good, than to be thought worthy to meet with unmixed and unalloyed beneficence? . . . And it appears to me that it was because the practitioner of virtue saw that he uttered that most admirable prayer that “the Lord might be to him as God” [Gen. 28:21], for he desired no longer to stand in awe of him as a governor, but to honor and love him as a benefactor. (*Dreams* 1.163, trans. Colson/Whitaker [LCL])

Prayer is properly situated in the temple, wedded to ritual sacrifice by irrefragable priests (*Life of Moses* 2.5). Roughly a third of Philo’s lengthy tractate on *Special Laws* is devoted to careful exegesis of Numbers and Leviticus. Penitence and remission of sins by sacrifice are actually “virtues” (*Dreams* 2.299; *Moses* 1.146–51; *Special Laws* 3.121). Philo stresses the unifying power of pure worship: not only of all Jews in all times and places (*Embassy to Gaius* 280), but also of all nations, who are blessed by the merciful “Ruler and Governor of the universe, . . . who take[s] to himself [Israel] out of all other nations and to consecrate to the priesthood, that it might forever offer up prayers for the whole universal race of mankind, for the sake of averting evil from them and procuring them a participation in blessings” (*Life of Moses* 1.149).

Considered at greater depth, prayer, for Philo, is ultimately an expression of gratitude to God that transcends place or convention:

While each of the virtues is a holy matter, thanksgiving is supremely so. Buildings, offerings, and sacrifices, customary for most people, cannot genuinely express our gratitude to God. Not even the whole world would be a temple adequate to render the honor due to God. To the contrary, such must be expressed through hymns of praise—even then, not by a voice straining to be heard, but by music repeated through the intellect too pure for the ear to discern. (*Planting* 30.126 AT)

In AD 38, following a summer of riots between Jews and Greeks in Alexandria, Philo led a Jewish delegation to the emperor Gaius Germanicus (aka Caligula, AD 12–41), hopeful of securing Jewish exemption from edicts commanding imperial worship. Here follows an excerpt of Philo’s report of that meeting:

And while [Gaius] was triumphing in these super-human appellations, the sycophant Isidorus, seeing the temper in which he

was, said, “O master, you will hate with still more just vehemence these men whom you see before you and their fellow countrymen, if you are made acquainted with their disaffection and disloyalty towards yourself; for when all other men were offering up sacrifices of thanksgiving for your safety, these men alone refused to offer any sacrifice at all; and when I say, ‘these men,’ I comprehend all the rest of the Jews.” And when we all cried out with one accord, “O Lord Gaius, we are falsely accused; for we *did* sacrifice, and we offered up entire hecatombs, the blood of which we poured in a libation upon the altar, and the flesh we did not carry to our homes to make a feast and banquet upon it, as it is the custom of some people to do, but we committed the victims entire to the sacred flame as a burnt offering; and we have done this three times already, and not once only; on the first occasion when you succeeded to the empire, and the second time when you recovered from that terrible disease with which all the habitable world was afflicted at the same time, and the third time we sacrificed in hope of your victory over the Germans.” “Grant,” said [Gaius], “that all this is true, and that you did sacrifice; nevertheless you sacrificed to another god and not for my sake; and then what good did you do me? Moreover, you did not sacrifice *to me*.” Immediately a profound shuddering came upon us the first moment that we heard this expression, similar to that which overwhelmed us when we first came into his presence. (*Embassy to Gaius* 355–57, trans. Colson [LCL], emphasis added)

In imperial Rome radical monotheism could cost its adherents very dearly, as John of Patmos was quick to remind others (Rev. 13–14).

Conclusion

Standing at the foot of the Acropolis, Paul declared (so Luke tells us), “Athenians, I see how extremely *deisidaimonesterous* you are in every way” (Acts 17:22). That Greek adjective is ambiguous; it can be translated as “religious” or “superstitious.” However one assesses the evidence presented in this chapter, the record is clear that, in antiquity, human beings paid attention to matters divine. The examples of prayer we have witnessed were not fixed points on a single evolutionary line. Instead, they emerged as lively options amid complex, overlapping contexts.

Taken altogether, the heritage of prayer for Jesus and his disciples was rich and wide-ranging. Whether uttered by Greeks or Israelites, Romans or Hellenistic Jews, prayers were directed heavenward at moments of crisis, on occasions of everyday need, and in outbursts of praise. For all their variety, ancient cultures accepted a reciprocating loop between mortals and the divine. Their perception of relations with the gods or one God copied human interactions with one another and their mortal sovereigns, even as a sense of the transcendent exploded mundane models. In prayer the boundaries between personal and national, between private and communal, were recognized yet permeable. All such characteristics will reappear in our study of the Lord's Prayer.

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