

Prayer

PRAYER, the offering of petition, confession, adoration or thanksgiving to G-d.

In the Bible

The concept of prayer is based on the conviction that G-d exists, hears, and answers (Ps. 65:3; cf. 115:3–7) – that He is a personal deity. In a sense it is a corollary of the biblical concept that man was created "in the image of G-d" (Gen. 1:26–27), which implies, inter alia, fellowship with G-d. Although prayer has an intellectual base, it is essentially emotional in character. It is an expression of man's quest for the Divine and his longing to unburden his soul before G-d (Ps. 42:2–3 [1–2]; 62:9[8]). Hence prayer takes many forms: petition, expostulation, confession, meditation, recollection (anamnesis), thanksgiving, praise, adoration, and intercession. For the purpose of classification, "praise" is distinguished from "prayer" in the narrower, supplicatory sense, and "ejaculatory" from formal, "liturgical" prayer. But the source is the same; in its irresistible outpouring, the human heart merges all categories in an indivisible "I-Thou" relationship. Thus prayer and praise may intermingle (I Sam. 2:1–10) and supplication and thanksgiving follow in close succession (Ps. 13:1–5, 6). Indeed many scriptural passages might be called "para-prayers" – they seem to hover between discourse and entreaty (Ex. 3:1–12), meditation and petition (Jer. 20:7ff.), or expostulation and entreaty (Job, *passim*). It has been estimated (Koehler-Baumgartner) that there are 85 prayers in the Bible, apart from 60 complete psalms and 14 parts of psalms that can be so termed; five psalms are specifically called prayers (Ps. 17, 86, 90, 102, 142). But such liturgical statistics depend on the definition given to prayer.



TERMINOLOGY

The variegated character of biblical prayer has given rise to a rich nomenclature for praying. The rabbis already noted that "prayer is called by ten different expressions" (Sif. Deut. 26), but on closer examination even more can be found. The most common word for prayer is *tefillah* (Isa. 1:15); the corresponding verb is *hitpallel* (I Kings 8:42). The stem, *pll*, has been explained to mean "to cut oneself" and to refer to the primitive pagan custom of slashing oneself in a frenzy during worship. This etymology is not only hypothetical, but is wholly irrelevant to the biblical situation. It was the idol-worshippers who cut themselves (I Kings 18:28) and the verb used is *wa-yitG-dedu*; the Torah forbids such practices (Deut. 14:1). In Scripture the stem *pll* signifies "to interpose, judge, hope." These meanings are eminently suited to the biblical conception of prayer as intercession and self-scrutiny leading to hope. Other terms are: *qara'* ("to call" on the name of the Deity, i.e., worship – Gen. 4:26); *za'aq* ("to cry out" for redress of wrongs – Judg. 3:9); *shiww'a* ("to cry aloud" for help – Ps. 72:12); *rinnah* ("ringing cry" of joy or sorrow – Ps. 17:1); *darash* ("to seek" G-d – Amos 5:4); *biqqesh penei* ("to seek the face of" G-d – Hos. 5:15); *sha'al* ("to inquire" – Ps. 105:40); *nasa'* ("to lift up" – Jer. 7:16); *pag'a* ("to encounter," i.e., to appease, gain favor – Jer. 7:16); *hithannen* ("to seek favor," i.e., beseech – Deut. 3:23); *shafakh lev* ("to pour out heart" – Ps. 62:9[8]); and *si'ah* ("complaint" – Ps. 142:3[2]).

THE CHARACTER OF PRAYER

Despite its multifaceted character, biblical prayer is essentially a simple human reaction. The rabbis called it "the service in the heart" (Ta'an. 2a); the expression has its roots in biblical thought (Hos. 7:14; Ps. 108:2; 111:1). But the needs of man are so numerous and complex that prayer inevitably came to reflect the vast range of human moods, fears, hopes, feelings, desires, and aspirations. In early times – in the patriarchal age – a simple invocation, a calling upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:8; 21:33), would suffice. The approach to G-d at this stage was marked by spontaneity, directness, and familiarity – G-d was near. Yet the future was veiled by mystery; man was often undecided how to act. Hence the request for a sign or oracle addressed directly to G-d (Gen. 24:12–14), or indirectly through a priest (I Sam. 14:36–37) or prophet (II Kings 19:2ff.). From this stratum grew the magnificent prayers for understanding and guidance (Num. 6:24–26; I Kings 3:6ff.; Ps. 119:33ff.).

But in emergency man does not merely want to know the future; he seeks to determine it by entreating G-d's help. Thus Jacob (in a votive supplication) prayed for essential material needs (Gen. 28:20ff.); Eliezer for the success of his mission (Gen. 24:12–14); Abraham for the salvation of Sodom (Gen. 18:23–33); Moses for erring Israel (Ex. 32:31–32); Joshua for divine help in the hour of defeat (Josh. 7:6–9); Hezekiah for deliverance from Sennacherib (II Kings 19:15–19); the prophets on behalf of their people (Jer. 14:1ff.; 15:1ff.; Amos 7:2ff.); Daniel for Israel's restoration (Dan. 9:3–19); Ezra for the sins of his people (Ezra 9:6–15); and Nehemiah for the distress of his people (Neh. 1:4–11). Solomon's noble dedication prayer at the consecration of the Temple (I Kings 8:12–53) includes almost every type of prayer – adoration, thanksgiving, petition, and confession. It also strikes a universal note (8:41ff.) so often echoed by the prophets. The spectrum of biblical prayer thus ranges from the simplest material needs to the highest spiritual yearnings (Ps. 51:1ff.; 119:1ff.), transcending, like prophecy, the horizon of history and reaching to the realm of eschatology (Isa. 66:22–23).

There was an early relationship between sacrifice and prayer (Gen. 13:4; 26:25), which persisted until the destruction of the Second Temple. The sacrifice suggested man's submission to the will of G-d; the prayer often provided a commentary on the offering. But the two are not necessarily linked. It is noteworthy that the sacrificial regulations make no liturgical provisions (except for the Day of Atonement, Lev. 16:21); but actually the offerings were themselves a dramatic form of prayer. Contrariwise, prayer could replace sacrifice (Ps. 141:2). In the synagogue, prayer, accompanied by Scripture reading and exposition, entirely took the place of altar offerings.

Examples of prayers of intercession have already been cited. The intercessor, whether prophet, priest, king, or national leader, does not point to the need for an intermediary in worship: "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him in truth" (Ps. 145:18). The intercessor is one who, by his innate spiritual attributes, lends weight to the entreaty. The ultimate criterion still remains not the worthiness of the pleader but of those for whom he is pleading (Ezek. 14:14, 20).

THE ACCESSORIES OF PRAYER

Prayer, unlike sacrifice, could be offered up anywhere (Gen. 24:26; Dan. 6:11 in the upper chamber; Ezra 9:5ff.), but there was a natural tendency to prefer a sacred site (e.g., Shiloh or Gibeon). Eventually the Temple at Jerusalem became the major place of prayer (Isa. 56:7); those who could not be there

physically at least turned toward it when worshiping (Dan. 6:11; cf. Ps. 5:8 [7]). In time to come the Temple would be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7). The synagogue had its origin during the Babylonian exile; originally a place of assembly, it became in due course a house of prayer and study. The emphasis on congregational prayer began to grow but private prayer was never abolished. The heart and not the hour dictated the occasion for prayer. Day and night the Heavenly Father could be entreated (e.g., I Sam. 15:11; Ps. 86:3; 88:2[1]). But the need for regularity brought about a synchronization of the times of prayer and of sacrifice: morning worship corresponded to the morning oblation (Ps. 5:4[3]), afternoon orisons to the late afternoon sacrifice (I Kings 18:36; Ezra 9:5). Nightfall provided yet another occasion for worship, so that prayers came to be offered thrice daily (Ps. 55:18; Dan. 6:11; though twice in I Chron. 23:30). The seven times mentioned in Psalms 119:164 mean "often" or "constantly."

In the Bible no particular gestures are prescribed in connection with prayer. But certain postures developed naturally to lend emphasis to the content of the prayer: standing, which is normal (I Sam. 1:26; I Kings 8:22); kneeling (Dan. 6:11; Ezra 9:5); prostration (Josh. 7:6); head bowed (Gen. 24:26; Neh. 8:6); hands stretched out or uplifted (I Kings 8:22; Ps. 28:2); face between knees (I Kings 18:42); and even sitting (II Sam. 7:18). More important accompaniments of prayer were fasting, mourning, and weeping (Isa. 58:2–5; Joel 2:12); but the ultimate criterion remained earnestness of heart (Joel 2:13).

Originally prayer was undoubtedly spontaneous and personal; but the need to organize religion gave rise to liturgical patterns and musical renderings (Ezra 2:65; I Chron. 16). Prayer formulas are found already in the Pentateuch (Deut. 21:7ff.; 26:5–15). The Psalms provide examples of fuller liturgical development, including choral and instrumental features. The response "Amen" occurs in Numbers 5:22, Psalms 41:14, etc.; a prayer before the reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 8:6; a doxology in Nehemiah 9:5, 32; a typical review of G-d's dealings with Israel leading to a confession and a pledge in Nehemiah 9:6–10:1 (9:38).

ANSWER TO PRAYER

That prayer is answered is an accepted biblical verity (e.g., Gen. 19:17–23; Num. 12:9ff.); but Scripture is no less emphatic that not all prayers are answered (Gen. 18:17ff.; Isa. 29:13ff.). Ritual is not enough, while hypocritical worship is an abomination (Isa. 1:15; Amos 4:4ff.); and there are occasions when intercession is forbidden (Jer. 7:16; 11:14). It is at this point that the biblical concept of prayer is seen in its true inwardness. Paganism regarded worship as a form of magic, whereby the deity could be compelled to fulfill the worshiper's wishes; the moral element was wholly absent. In biblical faith the divine response is essentially linked to ethical and spiritual values. Man, as it were, answers his own prayer (Gen. 4:7), and fundamentally the answer is a significant change of spirit and outlook. Abraham learned the lesson of faith (Gen. 15:1–6); Moses became his people's deliverer (Ex. 3:2–4:18); Isaiah was transformed into a prophet (Isa. 6:5–8). Prayer and prophecy were probably closely correlated, the former providing spiritual soil in which the revelatory seed took root (Jer. 1:6ff.; Hab. 1:13–2:3). In many instances prayer assumes a tempestuous character (Jer. 12; Ps. 22; Job, *passim* [cf. 16:17]), but the storm always ends in newfound faith and peace. At times, moreover, G-d answers before He is appealed to (Isa. 65:24; cf. Dan. 9:20ff.), for man not only beseeches G-d, but G-d also seeks man (Isa. 50:2; 65:12). The "I-Thou" relationship is reciprocal.

In sum, the Bible conceives prayer as a spiritual bridge between man and G-d. It is a great instrument of human regeneration and salvation, worthy even of martyrdom (Dan. 6:11). Rooted in faith (Ps. 121) and

moral integrity (Ps. 15), it banishes fear (Ps. 23) and asks, in its noblest formulations, only the blessing of divine favor (Num. 6:24–26). Clothed in language of simple but matchless beauty, it is imbued with religious love and a sense of sweet fellowship with G-d. Both the Christian and Muslim liturgies have been profoundly influenced by the spirit, thought, and forms of biblical prayer.