



Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer

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The prayer for help, commonly called a lament, is the dominant form of prayer in the Old Testament, not only in the Psalms but also in the many examples of prayers in prose and prophetic material. A careful study of these prayers enables one to suggest, as I wish to do here, that, in a variety of ways, *such prayers have as a primary function the effort to persuade and motivate God to act in behalf of the petitioner who is in trouble and needs God's help*. That is evident in the prayers as a whole but is underscored in particular aspects of their form and rhetoric.

I. WHY GOD SHOULD ACT

One of the most prominent features of the prayers for help in Scripture is the regular presence, in a variety of forms, of *reasons* set before God as grounds for seeking help, a feature of biblical prayer that has come to be called the *motive* or motivational clause. They are often prefaced with some syntactic indicator, such as, "for/because," "for the sake of," "so that," or "lest." Whether such indicators are present or not, the prose and psalmic prayers are full of persistent and reasoned urgings of God to act. The questions I wish to ask and attempt to answer, therefore, are: What are the grounds for expecting God's help, and what is involved in urging God in prayer? The answers to these questions lead us directly, I suggest, into the Old Testament form of the prayer for *the will of God*, a dimension of prayer that

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receives much attention in the New Testament but seems to be absent from the Old.

In the broadest sort of way, these motive clauses tend either to draw attention to some feature of *God's nature and character* or to lift up some aspect of *the situation of the petitioner(s)*. They often point to *the relationship between God and the petitioner(s)* as a reason for God's response. These categories help identify the primary things that go on in the motive clauses, but one must always be conscious of the fact that they are really different aspects of a single reality.

To illustrate with regard to the character of God, one would expect that a prayer appealing for help and giving reasons for it would explicitly invoke *God's justice and righteousness* as a sufficient ground. So in one of his prayers, Jeremiah pleads:

But you, a Lord of hosts, who judge righteously,
who try the heart and the mind,
let me see your retribution upon them,

for to you I have committed my cause. (Jer.11:20)

If God is a just judge (and Jeremiah knows that to be true of God) then the prophet assumes God will want to act in deliverance of the one who has remained faithful and in judgment or retribution against the ones who have persecuted him. All those complaints that seek to establish the injustice and unrighteousness of the enemies and the innocence and faithfulness of the petitioner are giving a reason, implicitly or explicitly, for a just and righteous God to help. Their hope is to move God to intervene in behalf of the just and innocent petitioner.¹ Here is where one sees clearly the overlap between the situation of the suppliant and the nature of God. It is precisely the injustice in the human situation that is lifted up, implicitly appealing to the justice of God. Or the reverse happens, a just God is called upon to act in a situation self-evidently oppressive and unjust.

In a similar fashion, one may appeal to the *faithfulness of God*, the consistency of God's way in the world as reflected in God's promises or previous behavior with individuals and with the people. When God threatens to strike the people in the wilderness with pestilence because of their complaining, Moses says:

And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation. Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now." (Num.14:17-19)

The appeal is in part that the Lord will be faithful in several ways: in keeping the promise, in acting in character (forgiving iniquity), and in being consistent by pardoning the people for their sins now as God has done through all time up to the

¹For psalm prayers explicitly identifying God's justice or righteousness as a ground for God's acting to help, see Ps 5:12; 31:1; 35:24; 71:2; 143:1, 11.

present. But, of course, the appeal of Moses is not only to God's faithfulness. Moses is also urging God to act in accordance with that *mercy* or *steadfast love* that is so characteristic of the Lord and is explicitly made the identifying feature of the Lord's character in the confessional formula Moses cites. It is God's nature to be faithful, and it is God's nature to be merciful, to manifest a gracious love and forgiveness even against God's own inclination to reward faithlessness with justice instead of mercy. The appeal to the mercy or steadfast love of God is even more frequent in the biblical prayers, as an explicit motive, than the appeal to justice, and for good reason. God's justice may be the hope of the petitioner, but it also may be his or her downfall. So remembering God's compassionate nature, as confessed in the ancient formula and in many other ways, time and time again the one who prays will ask God to act "according to your steadfast love" and "your mercy."²

The other way of appealing to God as God is by intimating, in more or less direct terms,

that *God's reputation is at stake* in what happens to those servants of the Lord who cry out in affliction and oppression. One of the ways this is done is by the frequent urging of God to help "for your name's sake." In one sense, such a reason is a call to God to act in the way identified with the Lord's name, away demonstrated from the revelation of the name in the Exodus until now. But even more, this is a call to God to live up to God's name, that is, to God's reputation. The petitioner claims thereby that an act of deliverance on behalf of one who is a servant of the Lord is appropriate, if not necessary, for God's reputation as a faithful and merciful God. The claim of God to be exactly the kind of deity indicated in the other motive clauses is at stake in this situation. In the community prayer of Psalm 79 the people cry out:

Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and forgive our sins,
for your name's sake. (v. 9)

That petition with its concluding motive clause is followed by a question that identifies it as a matter of God's reputation quite clearly:

Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?" (v. 10a)

The question of the nations is really a challenge to the power of Israel's God. Their plight demonstrates to the world, it is suggested, that the Lord is ineffective or indifferent to those in God's care. That is why at the end of the prayer, the people plead:

Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors
the taunts with which *they taunted you*, O Lord! (v. 12)

God's reputation is at stake in Israel's fate. The nations' mockery of the people is really a mockery of the God whose people they are.

²E.g., Ps 6:4; 25:7; 31:16; 44:26; 51:1; 69:13, 16; 86:5, 15; 109:21, 26; 143:11.

While any motive clause assumes something about God as a part of its appeal, a number of these clauses are formulated primarily *with reference to the one who prays*. The most obvious way that happens is by referring, in brief or extended fashion, to the distress and affliction of the petitioner. So Jacob says of Esau, "I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children" (Gen 32:11), and Jeremiah prays that his enemies may be done in "for they have dug a pit to catch me" (Jer 18:22). Time and again the afflicted pray-er who prays in the psalms urges his or her petition by saying, "for I am languishing...for my bones are shaking with terror" (Ps 6:2), or "for trouble is near and there is no one to help" (Ps 22:11), or "for I am in distress" (Ps 31:9; 69:17). The petition may be reinforced by asking for God's deliverance *lest* something happen to the one praying.³ A number of times, allusion is made to the danger posed by the enemies.⁴ There are even times when petitions are grounded in presentation of the

lamerter's plight *as the result* of divine affliction:

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,

...

For your arrows have sunk into me,

And your hand has come down on me. (Ps 38:1-2)

What happens in all such motive clauses is that the fundamental ground of prayer, that is, the responsiveness of God to the cry of human need, is lifted up. All the description of the plight of the afflicted, wherever it occurs in the prayer, assumes God's care and compassion, especially for those in distress. Here again the appeal is implicitly to "the Lord, gracious and merciful," the one who has promised to heed the cry of the afflicted "for I am compassionate" (Exod 22:21-26). These specific motive clauses express the basic assumption of the prayer, that human suffering is something to which God will pay attention. So by laying out that case, they provide the grounds for the appeal. In one instance, the petitioner may call attention to God's nature; in another, to the situation that allows, if not indeed pushes, God to act according to that nature.

A particular variation of this reference to the distress of the suppliant is an underscoring of the weakness and lowliness of the one who prays. So Jacob says, "I am too insignificant," and calls attention to the threat of death to "the mothers with the children" (Gen 32:10-11). Moses says of the people, "for they are too heavy for me" (Num 11:14). In a prayer for help that does not arise out of distress, Solomon nevertheless appeals for "an understanding mind to govern" on the grounds that "I am only a little child" and "who can govern this your great people?" (1 Kgs 3:7, 9). His weakness and lowliness for the task is the basis of his appeal for help. All such pleas are grounded in an awareness that the God of Israel is, by nature, inclined toward the weak and the small and the powerless. If one can place oneself in that category, then a powerful reason is set before God that will

³Ps 7:2; 13:3b; 28:1; 143:7b.

⁴Ps 5:8-10; 27:11; 35:7, 20; 54:3; 56:1-2; 71:10; 109:2; 143:3.

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surely evoke a positive response. So, when Amos seeks to stop the judgment announced by God against the northern kingdom, he says,

O Lord God, forgive, I beg you!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small! (Amos 7:2; cf. v. 5)

As the next verse indicates, such an appeal was effective to stave off the judgment against a nation that believed itself to be one of the most powerful in the region.

II. THE MOTIVATIONAL STRUCTURE OF PRAYER

To list or catalogue all the different ways God is explicitly urged and given reasons to respond in help would greatly outrun the limits of this essay. What must be recognized, however, is that there is some sense in which most of the prayer functions in this fashion. Certainly the

description of the plight of the petitioner, the *lament* over trouble and affliction, can be understood as evoking or eliciting the sympathetic response of God. So also the various *expressions of confidence or trust* (for example, “You are my God,” “God is my shield,” “I put my trust in you”) tie the petitioner to the deity, presenting the pray-er as one who trusts in God and acts as God would expect and seek. When, on occasion in the prayer for help, God is not only addressed but praised, that *praise* is a way of encouraging God to act. King Jehoshaphat’s prayer in the face of the Moabites and Ammonites (2 Chron 20:5-12) is uttered explicitly in an attitude of fear (v. 3). Jehoshaphat follows the address, “O Lord, God of our ancestors,” with these questions:

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?

His words not only render praise to God as God in heaven, ruler of all nations, full of power and might, deliverer of Israel, and the like, they also serve in some sense both as *complaint* and *motivation*. The putting of questions to God—in effect asking if all these things are true, why is this going on—is a common form of complaint. Such praise also serves as a reminder to God of God’s character and promises as a ground for the appeal for deliverance now.

Protestation of innocence by the petitioner, a fairly common feature of the psalm prayers, is clearly designed to justify God’s help. Psalm 17 is an excellent example. The prayer begins with initial pleas such as “Hear a just cause, O Lord,” “let your eyes see the right” (vv. 1-2) and returns to petition in vv. 6ff. Between those petitions, the psalmist proceeds to make the case that his or her cause is just:

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped. (vv. 3-5)

In all these words, the suppliant, in direct address to God, is justifying why the Lord should intervene in this situation to protect the psalmist (vv. 8-9) and overthrow the enemies who have brought false accusations (vv. 13-15).

The motivational dimension of these prayers, therefore, is comprehensive and far-reaching. It pervades the prayers and suggests that one of the primary aims of the prayer for help is *to urge and reason with God*. Rarely does a prayer not seek to lay a claim on God in some way. Petitions do not go up unattended by implicit rhetoric and explicit reasons to evoke a positive response from God. There is a kind of disturbing suggestion here that without laying out reasons and making a case, God will not respond. Clearly there is no assumption that prayer is a

mechanical matter of simply asking for help and receiving it. On the contrary, if, as the Hebrew words for “prayer” and “supplication” (*tevilla* and *tehinna*) suggest, prayer is a matter of laying a case before God (*tevilla*) or appealing to God’s grace and mercy (*tehinna*), that is truly what happens in the motive clauses and rhetoric of prayer. God may not be coerced, but God can be persuaded. The prayers do not assume that things are cut and dried, that God either answers prayer or does not. They seek to evoke a response, not just through the petitions themselves but through all dimensions of the prayer and especially those sentences and clauses that suggest reasons for God’s actions and results that can be accomplished or prevented by God’s intervention. The impassibility of God is not a part of Israel’s understanding of prayer. In form and content, the prayer for help assumes that God can be moved and that God can be persuaded to act in the situation so that it is changed for good. Those several places in the Bible where God relents and does not do what God had planned regularly occur in response to prayer and the human insistence that there are reasons why God should act to help.

III. THE RELATIONAL GOD OF PRAYER

There is, therefore, in the character of scriptural prayer a powerful suggestion that the one who prays can truly engage the deity, can urge reasons upon God for acting in behalf of the one in need, just as God in giving the law urges reasons upon the people for responding and obeying. Prayer was the point at which the human creature dared to approach the transcendent, holy deity with no restrictions on what could be expressed; the human was free not only to cry out in rage, anger, despair, and hate, as in the lament part of the prayer, but also to beseech, urge, and persuade. We have placed the emphasis on the petitionary dimension of the prayer for help, but these motive clauses indicate that persuasion is as much at the heart of the prayer as is plea. The mind and heart of God are vulnerable to the pleas *and the arguments* of human creatures.

It is important, however, to keep in mind the nature of the arguments. They appeal to God to be and to act as God would be and act. Here clearly prayer is not simply “thy will be done.” Indeed the petitioner is at pains to impress his or her will, that is, one’s need and sense of what God should do, upon the deity. And yet, in another sense, the prayer for God to act “according to your steadfast love” or “for your name’s sake” is in the profoundest way possible a call upon God to help,

because that is God’s will. The motive clauses are, in effect, a way to indicate that God’s response to the cry for help should be a manifestation of mercy and love, a demonstration of God’s just dealings in the world, a compassionate response to the sufferer in pain or to the weak and powerless in the community, an act of righteousness in that God’s help will be appropriate to the relationship established between God and the people. But those reasons, articulated by the suppliant in distress, have been found to be precisely the will and way of God as demonstrated in the long experience of God’s way with Israel. It is in the very nature and structure of the relationship between God and the human creature that the deliverance from pain and suffering, the overcoming of affliction, guilt, and oppression by others can be counted upon. This is why the psalmic prayers of pain and suffering are so regularly full of confidence and trust.

There is an implicit assumption that the cry for help is appropriate and can be urged upon God because, *a priori*, it is God’s will to save the innocent and the righteous. That is, the prayer

is consistent with the will of God as it seeks something that is consistent with the divine nature. If, therefore, as we have argued elsewhere, praise of God is an act that is understood to be a reasoned, sensible act (as indicated by its form in which a call to praise is rooted in a reason for doing so) the same is no less true with those laments or prayers for help that are so ubiquitous in Scripture.⁵ In this instance, however, the reasons are set before God in a prayer, which, in all its features (some more explicit than others), seeks to make a persuasive case to God that divine help is the thing to do.⁶

⁵Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 64-78.

⁶It should be noted that there is a reverse operation of argument and persuasion in God's giving of the law, where motives and reasons are also given. But in the law it is God or God's representative, Moses, who makes the arguments and seeks to make a persuasive case to *the people* that obedience to the law is an appropriate and reasonable thing to do.

PATRICK MILLER's newest book, They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer, is scheduled to appear shortly from Fortress Press.