



The Practice of Prayer and Crisis in Daniel

RODNEY A. WERLINE

Beginning in the eighth century BCE, Israel and Judah suddenly faced what we might think of as the first ancient Near Eastern super empires.¹ Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722/1 BCE, and Judah, while maintaining its autonomy, still had to pay tribute to that empire. Once Babylon defeated Assyria and Nineveh fell in 612 BCE, Judah eventually had to bow to them. Following some fatal political miscalculations and blunders, the Babylonians marched on Jerusalem and destroyed the city in 587/6 BCE. The Babylonians had adopted the Assyrian practice of exile. So, key figures from the priesthood, the nobility, the bureaucracy and the royal family were taken to Babylon, some joining the groups of exiles who had been taken there in the first deportation in 597 BCE, which included the prophet Ezekiel. With that series of disasters, Judah essentially permanently lost its

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

Prayers of a particular time and place can tell us a lot about the people and their experiences. Prayers from Daniel indeed show practice, crisis, and resistance to oppressive forces of the era.

autonomy to a succession of empires except for a short span during the time of Hasmonean rule.

In an era with so much turmoil, devastation, and suffering, we would expect that prayer would offer an important response for the people. And, indeed this is the case. In general, the number of prayers offered in desperate situations in the Apocrypha itself is illuminating. They highlight the dangers and struggles of the era—oppression by foreign rulers and powers, especially Antiochus IV, and the struggles of life as a vulnerable minority in the diaspora. These settings also determine many of the themes in the prayers. With the hope of salvation in mind, the suppliants often speak of God's strength and glory, as well as God's past mighty deeds. They seek to convince God to act based on God's ability and past actions. Some prayers express the hope that God will display holiness and bring a wicked leader to shame. When the temple is under assault, the suppliants ask God to protect it from profanation. Some prayers invoke God as creator or ruler over all things (e.g., Esther 13:9–10; 2 Maccabees 1:24; 7:23; 3 Maccabees 2:3). Others recall the promises made to Abraham and other patriarchs in order to affirm God's power and the assurance of God's presence through difficult days (Baruch 2:34; Azariah 12; Manasseh 1, 8). The suppliants also frequently hope for the end of the diaspora and for the return of the people to the land of Israel. Tobit 13 contains a long hymn of blessing that speaks of the glorious return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in splendor. After its penitential prayers, Baruch ends with a poem about the return (Baruch 4:4–5:9; cf. also 2 Maccabees 1:27). Sirach 36:1–22 offers a moving prayer for the hope of the gathering of the scattered people and their return to Jerusalem. The return would display God's power, holiness, and mercy, and this would confirm the words of the prophets, who promised a restoration. While other prayers and details could be mentioned, this provides brief sampling of prayers and liturgical texts from a period that marked by the struggle with foreign domination.

DEFINITION PROBLEMS

In order to talk about prayer, though, it is important to talk about the struggle to define the phenomenon. In earlier publications, I seemed to have had no problem defining it. My definition resembled

the one offered by Judith Newman, who sought, as I did, to distinguish between prayer and conversations that happen within biblical narratives.² As I argued, similar problems also existed in New Testament studies, as some Christian authors wanted to label petitions for help made to Jesus in the gospels as prayers. To get around these issues, I defined prayer as “an individual’s or group’s direct address to God that is generally initiated by the individual or group.”³ At the current moment in my career, however, I am in a period of re-shuffling this definition of prayer, and there are many reasons for doing so. First, it is often difficult to distinguish between prayers, doxologies, blessings, songs, and hymns. Clearly, all of these can function as prayer, even if God is addressed in the third person in the liturgical piece—that is, instead of “you,” the speaker says “God” and “he.” The Psalms have shown us that slipping back and forth between second and third person frequently occurs, but there is not an essential difference in the function of the language. We have an example of this in a passage from Daniel discussed below. Even when the language is in third person, God is still the audience for the utterance and it is God’s favor that is being sought. Second, literature from the era shows that the notion that a distinction can be made between prayer and conversations does not always hold up. The especially problematic text here is 4 Ezra 8. That book contains a series of conversations between God and Ezra, or an angel and Ezra, and in chapter 8 the text can refer to Ezra’s side of the conversation as prayer (4 Ezra 8:6, 19, 24 and cf. v. 63), and then slip immediately back into what one might consider conversation. Third, acts which do not include words at all, or words placed or inscribed on a ritual item of some kind, may also be considered prayer (e.g., *tefillin* or an amulet). Finally, scholars of biblical and second temple Jewish can mislead themselves because they sometimes tend to think of prayer only as a text.⁴ However, prayer is not simply words in the text. Prayer itself is an action that might have accompanying actions. In the case, prayer involves much more than words. Thus, at the moment, I am working on defining prayer based more on function than form. I currently understand prayer as an attempt to

² Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 5–7; Rodney A. Werline, *Pray Like This: Understanding Prayer in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 7–9.

³ Werline, *Pray Like This*, 7.

⁴ This is often pointed out by colleague Daniel Falk.

communicate to a super-human being. This definition is significantly influenced by recent emphasis on ritual theory, as we will soon see.

Thus, at the moment, I am working on defining prayer based more on function than form. I currently understand prayer as an attempt to communicate to a super-human being. This definition is significantly influenced by recent emphasis on ritual theory, as we will soon see.

METHODOLOGY AND DANIEL SCRIBES

In this presentation, I focus on the Daniel traditions. I am especially interested in showing that the prayers and references to prayers, blessings, and doxologies in the canonical form of this text spring from a much more disciplined ongoing practice that is lying in the background of this text, practices that apparently existed through the generations of those who produced and transmitted this text. This practice took place during a long period of suffering. Thus, the prayers in the text do not simply introduce a literary theme or convey a theological idea more important than the act—as many interpreters have understood them. They represent a manifestation of the embodied practice of a community in and through time. That much quieter, more quotidian action actually becomes vitally important in shaping the community and individuals for life in the community and sustaining the community and its members through time. Also, in the daily practice the community's engagement with the politics of the outside world and the micro-politics within the community are enacted. The process and the result are part of what Judith Newman sometimes refers to as the "liturgical imagination" and the individuals and community shaped by these embodied practices as having a

“liturgical body.”⁵ Again, they did this during a period of ongoing crisis, suffering, and trauma.

Behind these statements are the anthropological theories of Catherine Bell, Talal Asad, and Mahmood Saba.⁶ Each of these theorists have emphasized that rituals do not simply function as containers to carry ideas and thoughts, a position represented in a theorist such as Clifford Geertz, whom Asad assiduously, maybe mercilessly, dismantles. Instead, they claim, rituals are embodied politics. They are the place where power is negotiated and embodied. For these theorists, rituals do not simply indicate politics or refer to it; they act it out. Further, and important for my investigation, Mahmood especially draws on Aristotle’s understanding of practice as a technology that leads to virtuous life. That is, practice shapes us, our dispositions, our view of the world, and the way we act in the world. That practice is political.

As is widely known, Daniel divides into two basic sections: chapters 1–6 and 7–12. The first section contains court tales about Daniel and his three companions. These tales, as Nickelsburg demonstrated long ago, share literary formal characteristics with several other texts from the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East (e.g., the Joseph cycle, Esther, Tobit, and Ahiqar).⁷ Dating these chapters proves extremely difficult, but perhaps they arose during the Persian and Greek periods. Chapters 7–12 basically contain a series of revelations that relate to Jewish suffering under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167–164 BCE. The redaction history of the entire text is therefore quite complex. Some of the tales may even have their origins among the Babylonian scribal-literary circles.

One feature consistent throughout the two major sections is the reference to the *maskilim* as the group of wise men who are central to the text and are probably in some way responsible for its production,

⁵ Judith H. Newman, *Before the Bible: The Liturgical Body and the Formation of Scriptures in Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 17–26.

preservation, and transmission. The root word of this designation, *skl*, appears in Dan 1:4, when Daniel and his colleagues are described as “versed [*skl*] in every branch of wisdom.” The *maskilim* are mentioned again in Daniel 11:33–35 and 12:3. From these passages one can see that the *maskilim* taught others, had an elevated position within the community. They also possessed knowledge that allowed them to interpret dreams and visions, and unlock cryptic prophetic texts. For example, the verb root *skl* appears in the prayer in Daniel 9:13: “And we did not ponder [*skl*] your truth.”⁸ The *maskilim* in Daniel were probably scribes. As such, they seemed to have specialized training in many kinds of wisdom and literature. Daniel 11:33–35 suggests that some of the *maskilim* died as martyrs during Antiochus’s reign of terror.

The people at Qumran also used the term *maskil* for a teacher within their unique circle, as the designation occurs at several places in the Qumran scrolls. The *maskil* apparently had many functions within the Qumran community. But one that should be noted here is that the *maskil* was a liturgical specialist and leader. He is mentioned several times in the *Hodayot*, a collection of hymns, and there is a collection of songs connected to the *maskil* (4Q510–511).

DANIEL 6

Among the many characteristics and virtues of the *maskilim* was their dedication to prayer. They understood the practice as an ongoing formative and character establishing practice, and as a way to function in stressful, traumatic circumstances. The practice comes bubbling to the surface in several passages. However, the obvious place to begin is Daniel 6 and Darius’s decree that banned prayer to any god or human other than the king (Daniel 6:6–9). The very fact that the story focuses on prayer as the object of the decree demonstrates that the practice in part defined the life of the *maskil*. The story assumes that it is well known that Daniel prays three times each day (v. 10), and that he does so by opening the window and facing toward Jerusalem. In this time, as Jeremy Penner has shown, Judaism did not have a set

⁸ Translation my own.

number of times to pray each day nor are there fixed times for prayer.⁹ In fact, the Qumran community seems to have prayed several more times each day. Praying toward Jerusalem if one is not in the city is attested as early as 1 Kings 8:35. One might compare Daniel's practice in this chapter with the time of prayer in the later tradition in Daniel 9 when the seer prays at the time of the evening *tamid*, again as if it is common practice. In Daniel 6, when Daniel emerges from the lion's den unscathed, Darius offers a decree that takes the form of a doxology. As Carol Newsom points out, the language closely resembles Nebuchadnezzar's declaration in Daniel 4:1–3.¹⁰ The pattern of the pagan king praising God is also present in Daniel 3:28–29; 4:24–37. Again, the importance of noticing this daily practice is not literary or theological, but to recognize that prayer formed the life of the community and the individuals within the community, especially as it faced traumatic crises.

Prayer serves an important function within the story in Daniel 2 about Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It provides the linchpin in the plot and moves it toward its resolution. This feature itself reveals something about the author's understanding about the ritual power and function of prayer. The ritual makes things happen.

DANIEL 2

Prayer serves an important function within the story in Daniel 2 about Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It provides the linchpin in the plot and moves it toward its resolution. This feature itself reveals something about the author's understanding about the ritual power and function of prayer. The ritual makes things happen. The prayer and blessing in

⁹ Jeremy Penner, *Patterns of Daily Prayer in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁰ Carol Newsom and Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 201.

Daniel 2 are offered in the midst of an intra-Babylonian political court battle between the king and his wise men. As a member of the court, Daniel gets caught up in it. The content of Daniel's prayer for the revelation does not appear in the text. Daniel simply and calmly directs his three colleagues to pray, to "seek mercy from God" (v. 18 cf. Daniel 9:3). While all four of them prayed, the vision comes to Daniel in the night (a link between Daniel 2 and the visions in Daniel 7–12). This pattern of seeking a revelation by praying appears in several texts in the Second Temple period, including later in Danielic traditions (ch. 9), as we will see.

Upon receiving the revelation, Daniel blesses God. Here again, even though the language of the blessing is in the third person, there can be little doubt that the audience for the blessing is God, and that the blessing has a similar function as a praise addressed directly to God. Daniel said:

Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered. (Daniel 2:20–23)

Daniel's blessing provides a counter-narrative, or counter-discourse, to the narrative in the propaganda of the empire which claims it is all powerful.¹¹ The blessing clearly challenges the authority of the king. God possesses the knowledge that the king needs—not even the king possesses this. The language of v. 21 about God changing "times and seasons" and deposing kings and setting up kings relates directly to the revelation that Daniel has received about the king's dream and its interpretation. Each kingdom lasts the amount of time that God has determined, and does not result from the work of kings or the empire.

¹¹ Cf., Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theological Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 223–279.

DANIEL 9

Daniel 9 contains a penitential prayer. Several of these prayers appear in Second Temple Jewish texts: Ezra 9; Nehemiah 1 and 9; Prayer of Azariah; Tobit 3; 2 Maccabees 2; and “The Words of the Luninaries” (4Q504). The prayer in Daniel 9 also has some relationship with the prayer in Baruch 1:15–3:8. While these penitential prayers incorporate many traditions and are crafted for their particular settings, their deuteronomic theology stands out. They especially draw on Deuteronomy 4 and 30 and 1 Kings 8. Besides this, features from priestly texts appear in several of the prayers. These prayers assert that the struggles that have come upon the people are punishment for the people’s sins, and the penitential prayer becomes a first step in turning the situation around. But, Daniel 9 has perplexed interpreters for some time because it mixes apocalyptic determinism—there is a set number of years that people will suffer—with deuteronomic causal theology—deliverance begins with repentance. While this is not the place to sort this out, I have argued that the author of the prayer may not have felt the tension to the extent that modern interpreters have.¹² People of faith often seem quite capable of holding to contradictory ideas.

The prayer begins with Daniel puzzling over Jeremiah’s prophecy that the exile was to last seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10–14). A prayer follows this contemplation over the text. As mentioned earlier, the prayer takes place at the time of the evening *tamid*. While this may not be a widely fixed time for prayer, Daniel 9 gives the impression that Daniel prayed at this time each day—it seems to be presented as a habit, or an often-engaged practice. The performance of the prayer at a sacred time imagines the seer inhabiting sacred time. The practice could be understood as a way to subvert hegemonic notions of time which were a to regulate social order. The interpretation of the prophecy comes through the angel Gabriel, who has been sent to Daniel. As in Daniel 2, the text links prayer with revelation, this time, though, in relationship to a text.

¹² Rodney A. Werline, “Prayer, Politics, and Social Vision in Daniel 9,” in *Seeking the Favor of God: The Development of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, eds. Mark Boda, Daniel Falk and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 17–32.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what is gained from this kind of analysis? First, ritual, prayer and liturgy have moved to a much more important position in the process of understanding the production of the text and the formation of the community and the individuals related to it. There was a time when interpreters viewed prayers within texts as simple acts of piety. They basically were expressions of the more important theology that appeared elsewhere in the text—a tendency which may have sprung from a Protestant bias against practice and ritual as so-called “works.” Further, this tendency reflects the privileging of thought over embodied practice in the western philosophical tradition, especially since Descartes. As we continue to think about and research the dynamics between worshipping scribal communities and text production, the liturgical features of the text should become more and more important. The text is not simply an intellectual, theological product, with liturgical pieces subservient to the intellectualism of theology. Rather, the text becomes a product of and the guide for a worshipping group, a point that Newman has emphasized throughout her scholarship.

I am not convinced that the prayers we examined in Daniel, as well as the prayers in Septuagint Daniel (the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men), are crafted simply to boost the image of these heroes as pious people. Rather, in this case, the prayers become a practice of resistance that is re-experienced whenever the community read the text. The same, I think, is true of Septuagint Esther (the so-called “Additions”), which also contains several prayers. The goal is not simply to show how Esther and Mordechai are pious, but how they are engaged in subverting imperial power—a form of embodied resistance, the practice of resistance.

Practice is at the foundation of these texts and community life. This recovery of practice means that we cannot not treat “piety” in a text as an aside or a nice aesthetic addition to round out some character. The text reflects what the community practiced and how it understood the functions of those practices. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls should have suggested to us that we needed to reconsider the place of worship in the formation of self, community, and texts. With the help of ritual theory, the restoration of the place of practice has arrived. ⊕

Rodney A. Werline is the Leman and Marie Barnhill Endowed Chair in Religious Studies at Barton College, Wilson, NC. He is ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). His most recent book is Whenever They Prayed: Dimensions of New Testament Prayer (Fortress/Lexington, 2021). He was a co-editor for the volume Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters (2nd ed., SBL, 2020).