

A Re-evaluation of Prayer in the Hebrew Scripture for contemporary Christians
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Abstract

Prayer has been much abused by many Christians today. The Saint needs prayers in order to remain in his saintly state. The sinner needs it too for God to overlook his continued sins. Perpetrators of injustice pray for the status *quo to remain*; victims of injustice pray too for a change in the condition. Prayer could be used to achieve anything conceivable, both good and bad. Almost everyone believes it. This paper broadly examined what proper prayers entail in the Old Testament of the Bible. Prayers must be matched with right conduct. Prayers should instill the lacking but much needed personal justice and good behaviour in the citizenry.

Introduction

In Nigeria the belief that prayer is a sovereign panacea for all the problems of mankind is real. The radio and television stations feature various praying styles by 'men of God'. Prayer here refers to the Christian type or types. Home videos heavily reflect praying exercises. Many homes play host to praying groups from time to time. Almost every Christian church has active prayer team called prayer warriors. Most Christians are prayer warriors. Priests, lecturers, traders, senators, governors, politicians, civil servants, students, applicants etc form members of prayer warrior groups.

Apart from the churches' prayer warriors, there are other independent prayer warriors who conduct prayers in their homes. They pray for all kinds of people who care to solicit their help. The commercial transport sector also witnesses much of this praying phenomenon. A trip in a commercial vehicle will confirm the authenticity of the above statement. These passenger- prayer- warriors would start to pray from the time the vehicle moves till it reaches its destination. On daily basis leaflets announcing prayer schedules are indiscriminately pasted on walls, trees, dilapidated vehicles etc in every nook and cranny of the streets.

In the working sites of various companies and in the government offices, private and group prayers are held before the commencement of work. In the mechanic village and in our markets some hours in particular days are devoted to prayers. During these hours, no kind of work or buying and selling respectively could take place. It is immaterial whether one is a Christian or not; one must not work or buy or sell, as the case may be, during these hours.

Social and political gatherings of every sort always kick off with prayers. Academic board meetings in departments and faculties in the universities start with prayers. Senate and council meetings in the tertiary institutions begin with prayers. It is prayer, prayer everywhere.

The barren woman needs it in order to conceive; the pregnant woman needs it in order to deliver safely. The healthy man needs it; the sick needs it. The saint and the sinner alike pray. The perpetrator of injustice prays; the victim of injustice prays. The masses pray consistently and insistently for their condition to change while the ruling class and all others responsible for the poverty of the masses pray without ceasing for the status quo to remain. Prayer is the master key for everything. With prayer impossibility becomes possible. Almost everyone believes it and almost everyone recommends it for another. It is the answer to every type of problem.

This shows that the teeming population of Nigeria is still religiously credulous. The tendency to either define all human activities in function of prayer or regard prayer as magical panacea for solving all human problems stare any keen observer in the face. As a result, therefore, the proliferation of praying centers and the

emergence of prayer warriors with fantastic claims of possessing the key to the solution of all human problems are regular phenomena.

Often the exaggerated claims of the so-called prayer warriors and what prayer could do stun some critical minds, thereby necessitating an urgent need for a re-assessment of these claims and the whole issue of prayer. It is the aim of this paper to do this in the light of Old Testament view of prayer. Christianity is an offshoot of Judaism and it is impossible in practice to articulate adequate Christian faith, of which prayer is crucial, without references to the Old Testament, hence the need for this study.

Definition of Prayer

Prayer has been variously defined by scholars. While some are critical; others have been categorized as naive but all throw meaningful light on how the term is perceived by faith writers and scholars. Thornton (1972) urged Christians to see prayer as relation forged by sacramental bonds and involving total faith – commitment. Smith (2004) defined prayer as the act of offering reverent petitions, especially to God. Ciaravino (2001) discussed extensively the meaning of prayer. According to her, prayer is God’s activity in our lives. Yet it is also our decided turning to God. Prayer is simple communication. In addition, it is profound self-examination.

We directly engage God in prayer, whether the mode of communication is language, silent meditation, dance or any other form. Importantly, prayer is a dialogue, which means that listening is necessarily involved. Prayer is not an ordinary conversation. It is a special mode of communication, because it is reserved for and given wholly to God. God is always present, but through prayer, we place ourselves deep within that presence by turning our full attention to it. During the conversation of prayer, we surrender to the moment and rise above limited notions of time and space. Everything else takes a back seat to the very important discussion with God. As a result, a strong relationship is formed.

Conversation is a vital part of human relationship. This often involves spoken conversation, but can also take the form of unspoken thoughts communicated through body gestures, movements of the eyes, smiles, even emotional empathy. These conversations are powerful and liberating. Likewise, conversations with God, through prayers, are the blocks on which spirituality is best built. It is a conversation that provides us with confidence, closeness, and comfort.

More than words, prayer is an attitude. In a wider sense, attitude is the way we function and hold ourselves and that is exactly what prayer is - the way we function and hold ourselves in God’s presence. God does not need our prayers; God has been doing fine for the past couple of billions of years. We need our prayers. Prayer is the way that we come to terms with our joys, wants and desires. It is the way we answer our longing for communion and compassion, and the way we seek ultimate completion.

Mbiti (1975) in agreement with the above view observed that prayer helps to remove personal and communal anxieties, fears, frustrations and worries. They also help to cultivate man’s dependence on God and increase his spiritual outreach. Through his descriptive approach, Ekwunife (2007) in a more comprehensive manner said that

Prayer is a spiritual means through which the religious man interiorly and externally communicates with God and all supersensible beings of his invisible world. It can be described as a religious spiritual outreach of the temporal religious man to the transcendent being and his agents (p.6).

In prayer, man rises above his creatureliness and immerses himself with faith in the invisible world of human experience. In prayer, the disturbed order of creation is restored for the religious man and peace reigns once more. In prayer, the religious man not only affirms the reality of the supra-sensible world, but also expresses a faith-conviction that a temporal world is not fully meaningful without the transcendence. Prayer is, therefore, that spiritual air which energizes, sustains, enlivens and directs man's temporal journey to eternity. It is a spiritual faith search light and communication with the source of human existence.

From all the above definitions it is clear that man who invented religion also established prayer. The finite nature of man strongly informed his idea of prayer and the entire notion of religion. It is only through the eye of religion and through the means of religious language that one can understand prayer as communication, conversation or dialogue with a higher invisible bodiless spirit and his agents. Man initiates this one-sided dialogue, sets time for it, fixes its contents and summons the divine to participate. Whatever man makes out of this 'imaginary' interaction with the divine is his received answer to his prayer. Belief in prayer is real. All religious men across the globe are involved and whether we like it or not belief is as strong as reality in this regard.

Old Testament View of Prayer

The Hebrew word for praying denotes some concepts that are different from or additional to the English definition. The Hebrew verb 'to pray' is **פָּלַל** (Bacon, 1975). However, there are other words used for prayer in Hebrew but this one is more fundamental to our discussion. A careful analysis of this word is important. The letter **ל** is simply the inseparable preposition "to" which signifies the infinitive form of the verb. The syllabus **פָּלַל** is the signifier for the reflexive mood in Hebrew (Hithpa'el). This syllable in Hebrew has an additional meaning that is not operative in the English word. It tells us that something about the activity (to pray) reflects back on the person who does it (Hammer, 1994).

The concepts that this root denote go beyond the English words -prayer, entreaty and supplication -to include think, decide, judge, incriminate and even punish. The Hebrew word for prayer, and similarly the Hebrew concept for prayer, is a much broader one than its English counterpart. It is not only to reach upwards or outwards to the divine; for the Jew, it is also to look inwards. Not only to look inwards at one's dreams, aspirations and desires, but it is also to look inwards critically – to challenge oneself to become a better person, and to invite divine participation in this process. Jewish prayer can be a very personal exercise. It can even go so far as being a way to talk to oneself deeply and reflectively (perhaps imagining God "eavesdropping"; perhaps not). Jewish prayers can also be structured.

As cited in Thompson (1982), Kohler identifies about eighty-five original prayers in the Old Testament. In addition there are about sixty whole psalms and fourteen parts of psalms which may be called prayers. With Abraham, prayer was revealed in the Old Testament. He obeys and submits himself to God's call. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God's will, is essential to prayer, while the words used count in relation to it. Abraham's prayer is expressed first in deeds: a man of silence, he constructs an altar to the Lord at each stage of his journey. Only later does Abraham's first prayer appear – a veiled complaint reminding God of his promises which seem unfulfilled. This one aspect of the drama of prayer appears from the beginning: the test of faith in the fidelity of God. During the patriarchal age prayer is calling upon the name of the Lord and it is

intimately associated with sacrifice (Gen 4: 26; 12:8; 21:33; 13:4; 26:25). From the account of Jacob's wrestling with a mysterious being (Gen. 32), the spiritual tradition of the church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance.

In the pre-exilic period one of the major accents in prayer is intercession, though this was also an issue in the patriarchal time (Gen. 28:22ff). Moses' prayers are intercessory ones (Ex. 32:11-13; Numbers 11:11; Deut 9:18-21). The prayers of Aaron, Samuel, Hezekiah, Solomon are prayers of intercession (Numbers 6:22; I Sam 7:5-13; 12:19, 23; I Kings 8:22-53; 2 King 19:14-19) Intercession was real but God always remained free to exercise his will; hence we hear of unsuccessful intercession (Gen 18:17ff; Ex32:30-35; Amos 7:1-6). Jeremiah is even forbidden to intercede with God (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

Biblical prophets of Israel are men of prayer. Some of their prayers exhibit the awareness of their personal assignment and deep concern for the salvation of the community (I Kings 18:36-37; Amos 7:1-5; Jer 15:1). Their prayer is not escape from this faithless world, but rather thoughtfulness to the word of God. At times their prayer is an argument or complaint, but it is always an intercession. They taught the people what true prayer should be: conversion of heart. Elijah demonstrated on Mount Carmel that the prayer of the righteous is living power in words. The prophetic vision came to Daniel while he was at prayer (9:20). According to Stuhlmüller (1977) the pre-exilic prophets strove primarily to instill person goodness and social justice alongside prayers but when prophecy came under clerical control after the exile the goal was careful functioning of the liturgy where the concern was fasting, prayer, sacrifices, oblation etc. This is understandable because of the prevalent apocalyptic ideas then, which heavily influenced prophecy. The prophetic literature, especially the pre-exilic ones, made it clear that the Lord does not 'hear' every prayer. If prayer does not tally with conduct, the Lord does not give heed to such prayers. During and after the exile, prayer for the Israelites became more personalized and interiorized (Jonah 2:2 – 10; Ezra (:6-15; Neh 1:4-11)

The masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament is the Psalter (Moody 2008). Nowhere is the prayer of Israel in the Old Testament made more personal, concrete and universal as in the book of Psalms. Here is a book for all, for prayer in all its forms, for all occasions: in grief, in times of hopelessness and desperation, when one is afraid, surrounded by enemies etc. In the Psalter, there are many thoughts addressed to one's own soul, much advice, and many words of consolation. The Psalter is extensively used in every Christian church. In Morse's (2008) words, Christian prayers recorded in the New Testament very often borrow expressions from the psalms.

It is evidently not simple, as seen from the above, to systematize prayer in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, there are undoubtedly outlines and models for prayer but no compulsory set of laws steering either its contents or its rites.

Re-appraisal of Prayer in the Old Testament for Modern Christians.

At this juncture it is proper to point up some clues or hints from our theme as to what prayer should be and what it should not be. This is most important now that many so-called Christians emphasize and misuse it for what it is not intended for. We can increase our understanding of prayer by thinking about what prayer is and what it is not. The power of prayer has been misunderstood, maligned and abused as evident in our society today.

Using prayer as solely a means to achieve an end-like some power tool that one could purchase at a hardware store is destructive. If one views prayer merely as a

way to get something, one reduces it to a one-dimensional, self-centered practice, and will surely be unfulfilled when one's requests are not answered in just the way one wants. Prayer should be cherished for its benefit at the very moment it is experienced, not for what it can do in future. We should use prayer to its fullest, to gain insight and then spring into action in our world.

Viewing prayer as service, as the effort to share in creation of the world and bring all things closer to God, helps to avoid self-centered prayer. At a very shallow level, prayer is asking for things that will better lives here and now. If we approach prayer in such a manner, it is nothing more than a means to get what we want. Like a spoiled child, we think that if we kick and scream enough, God will give in and magically produce the treats of life. Prayer is so much more than that.

One of the benefits of prayer is an increase in tranquility. During prayer, we gain calm and insight, and therefore are often able to reduce the scattered thoughts in our harried minds. However, to view prayer as passive is to miss out on a large part of the prayer experience. Turning to God in prayer necessarily takes zeal and effort. That is why prayer is often referred to as the "exercise of the spirit". That does not mean that our muscles start moving, but the spirit certainly do. The power of prayer enlivens the spirit, awakening creativity and stimulating the desire to change for better. Through prayer we cultivate a greater eye for the good and the bad, healthy and the unhealthy. We see things for what they are, and attain the bigger picture of what is truly important. As a result, prayer spurs us on to personal change and transformation for better.

The hydra-headed problems of poverty and corruption in our country, coupled with the hustle and bustle of life, make us to grow fatigued from work and stress. As a result, we shirk away and tire from responsibility to the point that we think that it is nice to put everything in someone's hands and say "here fix it". Many approach prayer in this manner, and it is most unhealthy. When the desired solution does not reveal itself, such people blame God and live in anger. Prayer is not a means of instant gratification. It is not a pill for all ailments. In fact it involves cooperating and working with God to make changes in our lives and the world. It often takes a lot of patience and perseverance. Prayer should not be expected to necessarily spell out or immediately trigger solutions to the troubles in our lives. Instead, through prayer, we gain insight and direction so that we can work productively toward a solution. Prayer, as its Old Testament root word shows, is self-inspection, self examination. Through prayer, we learn about ourselves at deeper levels, and become provoked to come closer to God to gain the enlightenment needed to understand how God can change us, not how we can change God to do our bidding. Almost every modern Christian seeks in prayer to change and compel God to solve his/her problems.

According to Ekwunife (2007), prayer for the modern man seems a necessity when it is pragmatic in orientation – that is, when it produces effects that yields immediate dividends to the clients or helps the organizers achieve immediate aim and earn accolades in form of monetary rewards; or calculate to praise the minister as the man of God or one who has the key to the heart of God. As long as prayer is geared to immediate human problem-solving, it is hailed as effective. These solved problems supposed to be achieved through prayer in Nigeria, range from instant death of enemies, over-turning of misfortune, infertility, increase in material prosperity to success in business even through criminal or dubious means. No one dreams in this context of prayers answered through excruciating sufferings, apparent disappointment and structural injustice. Immediate physical healing and material prosperity are sure

signs that God is with his people: contraries to these positive effects are signs of inability to pray effectively against the intervention of the devil.

The truth about prayer is that its power is not as magical as many are willing to believe. We know it comes from God and the expression of God in every being. We know it is effective when the righteous man prays with sincerity, confidence and openness. But it must be drummed into everyone that every prayer is answered, not according to our will, but God's will. This will dictate also the time, not our time. This is important for it is in the habit of some of our prayer warriors to give God a specific period of time in which to answer their prayers. The miraculous, of course, could be interpreted by the supplicant to happen through prayer, but this is because God's nature, quite plainly, exceeds time, space and the law of physics. God is best not understood as a robed apothecary who mixes sparkling potions in his castle. And prayer is best not understood as a human opportunity to exercise power over the universe's energy. Some claim that when they utter the right words in prayer, the laws guiding the universe will be momentarily collapsed and everything will start spinning in their favour.

It is important to understand that God rejects some prayers (Isaiah 1:15). The gesture of prayer, with hands extended and the palms open toward heaven, is rejected if the hands are bloodstained with crime. Not even the religious exterior ritual washing of any sort can redress this; only an interior cleansing of the heart can (Moriarty, 1977). Some prayers are not only rejected but even attract punishment from God. Recitation of prayers without the accompanying spiritual commitment and obedience to God's commandment will be answered by Yahweh's "wondrous" dealing which will reduce the wisdom of the people praying into folly (Isaiah 29:13-14). It is easy to stand in prayer at a certain time each day reciting pre-scripted prayers without examining the self. Vassilikos (2008) asks a rhetoric question – how is this kind of prayer different from the mindless chirping of birds?

Dalrymple in Ciaravino (2007) suggests that the metaphor of a glass window should be used to cultivate a healthy attitude about prayer as service. When we look at a glass Window, three things could be observed. First, it could be noticed that the glass is dirty, broken or even clean. When this is done, the view outside is missed and the window is not used to its potential. Second, we can look at the Window's reflection to see ourselves. The window then becomes an opportunity for vanity or self-preoccupation. Again we lose the view. Finally, we can look through the window, allowing it to serve its greater purpose. Peering through the windowpane, to what is beyond; we come to learn so much more about our surroundings and our world in general.

Prayer is that window. It has the capacity to be used for great insight and contact. But we need to look through prayer to see God. We should not stop at the window's glass, seeing only what is immediately in front of us – our immediate problems and the desires for instant gratification. Prayer is the means by which wonderful ideas can be created and great needs in the world can be identified.

Prayers in the Old Testament offer a valuable insight to the ancient Hebrew mind-set. The above clues from prayers in the Old Testament are elaborations of ideas that jump out from the consideration of so many prayers scattered over the books of the Old Testament. In more specific terms the Old Testament gives many examples of prototype prayers and proper attitudes in prayer.

Abraham, the father of believers by his total obedience to God taught us that prayer restores man to God's likeness and enables him to share in God's love that saves the multitude. Elijah is remembered by Christians for his courageous prayer on

Mount Carmel (I Kings 8:41-46); it was courage, derived from faith and obedience, that enabled Elijah to pray such a remarkable prayer. James says of Elijah “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (5:16-18).

Thunder (2005) identified a wonderful example of reverential prayer within the first eleven verses of the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah goes to great lengths within his introduction to establish the greatness of God. He continues to name God’s attributes including sovereignty and faithfulness. Nehemiah ends his prayer to God by placing himself and his countrymen in the position of servant under God. (1:1-11) Hannah’s prayer to the Lord is a beautiful picture of humble servant offering great adoration to God (I Sam 2:1-10). Moses’ prayer of intercession is the prototype of all intercessory prayers. Christ’s death on the cross for the sins of mankind is akin to Moses’ intercession for Israel after the sin of the golden calf was committed (Ugwueye, 2004). Moses offered himself vicariously for bearing the punishment of the guilty. (Ex. 32:30-33). Our prayer warriors and intercessors should emulate this.

Certain worthy attributes run throughout Old Testament prayers to God. These include praise, penance and petition. No prayer should be without great praises to God (2 Sam 7:18-20). No prayer of mortal men could be complete without confession of sin (Ezra 9:5-10:1). Daniel made a petition to God (9:3-27). The most interesting element in the account is that God sent an angel to Daniel as soon as Daniel started to pray (V23) because Daniel was greatly beloved. Christ’s work has caused Christians to be named ‘greatly beloved’. He eagerly awaits all genuine petitions (Eph. 3:2).

Old Testament saints were aware of God’s power to answer their appeals as evidenced by their prayers. God is persistent (Psalm 66:16-20) God hears the prayers of those who do not regard iniquity in their heart. God is powerful (Isaiah 44:24-45:8), God is persevering (Psalm 105:8-11). He keeps his promises. God is prompt (2Chron. 7:14-15). God always responds to correct prayers. The Psalter, which could be described as a Christian hymn book, contains what prayer and praying should be.

Finally, it may be important in our society today to pray as Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Elijah and the prophets prayed; but it is most urgently very important to behave like they did. “He (God) delivered Paul and Silas, he will always deliver me” (Acts 16: 25-26). This is a popular Christian song people are fond of singing but while all try to pray as Paul and Silas did, none cares to behave as they did. Their deliverance is ascribed to their pious prayer and virtuous behaviour. The prayer of an upright man is power at the speed of thought. Prayer must always match conduct for effective result.

Conclusion

Old Testament prayers and prayer forms, fulfilled in Christ and radicalized by him, which sought God’s will in their intentions are now being gradually displaced by magico-miraculous prayers and prayer forms that tend to force God’s will to become the will of the supplicants. Whatever Christians of today do in the name of prayer, it should be pointed out that it is God’s will that is final with regard to prayers, not man’s will. The knowledge of God’s will governs the contents of prayers, for the supplicant must realize that, if his request is to be granted, it must please God. Knowing that the wicked and those disregarding God’s laws have no favour with him, the supplicant obviously cannot request that which runs counter to righteousness and to God’s revealed will.

Though God’s will is not known totally by man, biblical statements regarding praying for “anything” are not to be taken out of context. For instance “...if you ask anything of the father, he will give it to you in my name” (John 16:23).” For everyone who asks receives ...” (Matt 7:8). “Anything” clearly does not embrace things sinful

and unrighteous. Not everyone who asks receives. As we have seen before, many people's prayers cannot be answered by God for their unrighteous state. Some people's prayers even attract punishment.

On the other hand many believe that "what will be, will be" whether with or without prayers. Can prayers make what will be, not to be? Or make what will not be, to be? Answers to this question will be varied according to people's belief but sincere answers are very important for our praying life today. Prayer certainly can perform some functions in the whole idea of "what will be, will be". Ekwunife (2007) concluded philosophically that

...prayer in its earnestness, sincerity with faith and love, will not only douse what will be, but more, energize religious believers to withstand the shocks of what will be. Sincere prayer will certainly lift man above mundane considerations to his ultimate source of destiny where "what will be, will be" would finally be resolved. The victory of "what will be, will be" is religious faith, hope and charity. When these three virtues of religion are well balanced in realistic mundane pursuits, prayer can now be described as master key to overcoming the fear of "what will be, will be" (p. 193).

Really 'what will be, will be,' is a shocking and fearful age-long reality that God alone can in conclusion of all things resolve. Right prayer, hope in God, liberality to the less-privileged and self-examination leading to positive transformation of heart are the things that can help us cope with life and its problems; not the battered, tattered, shattered and scattered belief in magico-miraculous prayers and prayer forms that are being flaunted by the so – called Christians of our time. The fate or destiny of Christians, non-Christians or those who do not know how to pray and those who do not pray at all is alike governed by God's will. Prayer is good if properly done but what is sorely needed in our society today more than prayer is how to instill the much needed but lacking personal justice and good behaviour in the citizenry.

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