

PRAYER: AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Abstract

There are a few misconceptions concerning the understanding of prayer in the Old Testament, namely 1) prayer literature does not form an integral part of the Old Testament; 2) Old Testament prayer is confined to Psalmic prayers; 3) every single prayer must be treated as an isolated entity; 4) there is a dichotomy between 'cultic prayers' and 'private prayers' in the Old Testament; 5) Old Testament prayer has no literary and theological function. This article illustrates that these misconceptions are not a true portrayal of the prayer literature in the Old Testament.

1. Introduction

Prayer must be an intrinsic part of theology since the questions 'What is God like?' and 'What must I pray' cannot be separated. Clements (1985:3) says the following concerning prayer and theology: 'Prayer is in a large measure theology moving into action and testing out its own understanding of the divine nature of reality'. The way in which people understand the nature of God determines the nature and content of their prayers (O'Kennedy 1989:5).

Different theologians have expressed the importance of prayer. Brunner (1964:368) emphasizes the theology of prayer as the touchstone of all theology: 'Darum ist das Gebet der Prüfstein des Glaubens und die Theologie des Gebetes der Prüfstein aller Theologie'. Ebeling (1979: 208) believes that prayer as a religious act cannot be compared to other acts, but that the total relationship with God culminates in prayer.¹ There is no scarcity of general publications on prayer, but Warren (1980:2) is concerned about the neglect of prayer in systematic theologies. Besides Brunner and Ebeling there are other theologians referring to the importance of prayer in their theologies (Barth, Berkhof, Berkouwer, Calvin, et al) but it is a pity that in Protestant theologies of Bavinck, Honig, Weber, Schmid, Trilhaas and Heyns one finds no systematic discussion of prayer (cf. Du Preez 1980:11-12; Müller 1984:84-94).

The investigation of prayer in Old Testament theologies is also neglected. A study of nine prominent Old Testament theologies² has shown that just a of few them regard prayer as an integral part of Old Testament theology. Out of the nine theologies it is only Eichrodt, Zimmerli and Westermann who investigated seriously the importance of Old Testament prayer. It is significant that the theologies of English scholars (e.g. McKenzie, Clements and Childs) give little or

1 Cf. Ringleben (1982:230-248) and Wethmar (1988:217-237) for a more detailed discussion of Ebeling's opinion of prayer.

2 O'Kennedy (1989:5-20) investigated the discussion of prayer in the following Old Testament theologies: Eichrodt (1933/1957); Vriezen (1949/1966); Von Rad (1957); Zimmerli (1972); McKenzie (1974); Kaiser (1978); Westermann (1978); Clements (1978); Childs (1985).

no attention to the concept of prayer. A further negligence is the study of non-Psalmic prayers. Most of the theologies referring to prayer concentrate on the Psalmic prayers (O'Kennedy 1989:19). This article will illustrate the importance of prayer in the Old Testament and its theology.

2. Definition of Prayer Literature in the Old Testament

The question is: How do we discern prayer literature in the Old Testament? In order to answer this question it is necessary to examine criteria and definitions described in recent studies of prayer in the Old Testament. Greenberg (1983:7) describes prose prayer as 'nonpsalmonic speech to God - less often about God - expressing dependence, subjugation, or obligation; it includes petition, confession, benediction, and curse (but excludes references to nothing more than oracle-seeking)'. Corvin (1972:23) states the following: 'Where a text is preserved, if it is addressed to God in the second person, it is prayer. Reventlow (1986:89) says that prayer is the speech of a person or community of persons that brings before God their fundamental or current situation.

While Greenberg concentrates on prose prayer, Corvin and Reventlow explore a wider field. Corvin (1972:256) typifies certain prayers as conversational prayers and includes a few prayers which do not comply with the recognized criteria for prayer. It is difficult, for example to characterise the conversation with God in the garden of Eden (Gen.3:9-13) or the dialogue between God and Cain (Gen.4:9-15) as prayers. Reventlow (1986:5) ascribes both the vow and the appeal for an oracle to prayers in the early prose literature.

Staudt (1980:58) proposed three criteria to define prayer literature: 1) explicit communication with God; 2) communication initiated by an individual or the people as a whole; 3) this communication ensures a response from God. Balentine (1993:30-31) agrees with Staudt's three criteria and believes that prayer has an element of *intentionality* which distinguishes it from other forms of communication. Balentine attempts to locate intentionality in texts in two ways: Firstly prayer can be identified by the presence of particular Hebrew keywords and phrases like *החלל* (pray) or *קרא בשם* (call on the name); secondly there are also prayer texts which lack specific prayer language or clear introductions, but convey an intentional and weighty address to God (e.g., and X said [אמר] to the Lord). These discourses usually have the intention of clarifying a certain matter before God.

Staudt and Balentine's criteria are very useful aids in distinguishing prayer literature in the Old Testament. A further criterium that prayer literature demands is communication *with* God. In the texts outside the prayer literature people speak *about* God, people or things, or *with* people (e.g. blessings) (O'Kennedy 1994:28). In most of these situations God is addressed by human beings at their initiative (Miller 1994:33).

There is a difference between recorded prayers (texts which record the actual words of prayers) and stated prayers (references to prayers). The references to prayer gestures and practices are regarded as an integral part of prayer literature (cf. 1 Kgs.8:22; Dan.9:3-4) (O'Kennedy 1994:28).

3. Historical Development of Prayer

In the oldest literature of the Old Testament there is no specific word for prayer. A specific term was used only after exile. Before this reference was made to the calling of God, say, seek and ask (Westermann 1981:155). The term פלל (Hitp. verb: התפלל; noun: תפלה) is the most important term used for prayer in the Old Testament.. Sawyer (1980:133-134) makes two observations concerning the occurrence and use of פלל: 1) It refers mainly to the formal prayers in cultic context; 2) it is a general term which describes various types of prayer: thanksgiving, lament (petition and confession of guilt) and intercession.

Apart from פלל the following terms are used: חנן (Hitp. - pray, supplicate); עתר (pray, supplicate); פנע (pray, plea, intercede); שיח (pray, complain); חלה (Pi. - pray, supplicate); קרא (cry to the Lord); שוע (Pi. - cry for help); זעק (cry to the Lord)³; צעק (cry for help); דרש and vqb (Pi. - to seek the face of the Lord); שאל (ask); אמר (say); שיח and הגה (refer to a meditation of musing that seems related to prayer). A few verbs are used to describe the praise and thanksgiving to God: הלל (Pi.); ידה (Pi.); ברך; and jbv (Pi.) (Gispén 1957:21; Peskett 1990:34; Miller 1994:32-48).⁴

Westermann (1989:13-16) believes that the Old Testament prayers evolved through a lengthy developmental process. He distinguishes three stages in the historical development of Old Testament prayer:

1. The earliest stage refers to brief appeals to God which grew out of a specific narrative situation (cf. Ex.18:10; Judg.15:18; 2 Sam.15:31; etc.).
2. In the second stage these brief appeals were grouped together in a Psalm. Most of the Psalms were written in poetic form and functioned within the cult, where they served as a link to the numerous experiences of the Israelites.
3. In the third stage long prose prayers developed (cf. 1 Kgs 8; Ezr. 9; Neh. 9). There developed a breach between the poetic-liturgical Psalm and the prose prayer as a result of the destruction of the first temple. The rebuilt post-exilic temple did not serve the same role as the first temple. Psalms were still used, but the longer prose prayer with an emphasis on instruction became more prominent.

Greenberg (1983:43-46) differs from Westermann in that he does not see a linear evolution of prayer, that is a historical development from one stage to another. Greenberg views the prayers in the Old Testament at three different levels:

1. When visiting the temple the worshipper uses a ritual prayer such as a Psalm.
2. At other times (even in the temple), the same worshipper would use a more spontaneous prayer. There is the possibility that this person would use certain phrases or formal components in his spontaneous prayers.

3 Cf. discussion of Boyce (1988:59-61): 'The cry as a technical term for prayer'.

4 Miller (1994:32) discusses the prayer terminology under three headings: a) General words for communicating with the Deity; b) Technical terms for prayer; c) General terms that become virtual technical terms for prayer for God's help. See also Ap-Thomas (1956:15-241) for a further discussion of prayer terminology.

3. According to Greenberg, the third level is a totally unconventional and unsophisticated level, possibly a simple exclamation (cf. 2 Sam.15:31 or Judg.15:18).

Greenberg believes that one person prays on two or three levels. Hannah, for example, used a long prayer (1 Sam.1:12) and a psalm of thanksgiving (1 Sam.2:1-10). Samson prayed spontaneously on one occasion (Judg.15:18) but later followed a more conventional pattern (Judg.16:28).

In the evaluation of Westermann and Greenberg's opinions the following two viewpoints must be considered. Aejmelaeus (1986:109) examines traditional prayer in the Psalms and comes to the following conclusion: 'It is possible that this simple, spontaneous form of prayer had its origin in the private prayer and was taken up, elaborated on, and fixed into normative models of prayer in the organized cult'. Albertz (1984:39) observes a direct communication with God in early prayers and most of the laments in the Psalms, compared to a distancing between God and man, which is to be found in most of the post-exilic prose prayers. The opinions of Aejmelaeus and Albertz emphasize the evolution in Old Testament prayer.

It is difficult to evaluate the opinions of Westermann and Greenberg since both points of view contain elements of truth. It cannot be denied that there are differences in the content and construction of Old Testament prayers. The obvious differences are between the Psalms and non-Psalms prayers (Corvin 1972:46-51). Most of the longer prose prayers originated in the post-exilic period (cf. 1 Chron.29:10-19; Ez. 1 and 9; Neh. 9; Dan. 9), but not all short prayers are from earlier origins (cf. 2 Chron.14:10 [11]; Neh.13:31b). The Psalms cannot be seen purely as part of the second (or third) stage, since some Psalms originated in the pre-exilic period (cf. Ps 2, 20, 21, 45, etc.) (Fohrer 1969:285-293). It is also a fact that prayers are prayed by the same worshipper on different levels. The form and content of these prayers are determined by various social situations in the same historical time-span.

It is clear that Westermann's three stages cannot be accepted as watertight phases in a historical developmental process. Greenberg's hypothesis of three levels of prayer must be taken into consideration. One should rather examine the possible development which took place within a particular prayer (e.g. 1 Kgs.8:22-53). Moreover, it is important to scrutinize the content of the various prayers, and determine which literary and theological function they perform within a specific narrative.

4. The Occurrence of Prayer Literature in the Old Testament

The Old Testament contains a large number of prayers and references to prayer. Most of the 150 Psalms can be classified as prayers. Greenberg (1983:7) believes that apart from the Psalms 140 references are made to prayer. Corvin (1972:256-260) studies the prose prayers in the historical narratives of the Old Testament. His division regarding the occurrence of prayer in the historical narratives is as follows: Conversational prayers (20); Single response prayers (31); Unrecorded prayers (37); Formal prayers (15). Lockyer (1959:7-11) investigates all the prayers of the Bible and comes to the conclusion that there are 222 recorded prayers in the Old Testament.

Although scholars differ over the incidence of prayers in the Old Testament it is clear that a large number of prayers are found there. Prayer literature is not confined to the Psalms. Prayer literature is spread throughout the greater part⁵ of the Old Testament and is expressed in different literary forms.

5. Literary Forms of Prayer in the Old Testament

The prayers of the Old Testament are written in various literary forms or *Gattungen*. Gunkel (1933)⁶ was one of the first scholars to pay particular attention to the different forms in the prayer literature. The form critical studies of Gunkel and others concentrated mainly on the Psalms.⁷

The study of the different literary forms emphasizes that one cannot consider every single prayer on its own. Scholars cannot treat each separate prayer as an isolated entity. One may rather take up certain prayers that serve as characteristic and typical examples of certain patterns of speech, articulating certain typical themes of faith (Brueggemann 1984:17). There are numerous literary forms or *Gattungen* but the four most important forms are: praise; thanksgiving; lament; and intercession (cf. Reventlow 1986).

5.1 Praise

Westermann (1981:159-169) discusses praise and thanksgiving prayers together, but acknowledge a difference between descriptive praise (Gunkel's hymn of praise) and declarative praise (Gunkel's prayer of thanksgiving). In this article thanksgiving will be discussed as a separate form and not as a subdivision of praise. The content of thanksgiving is however the same as Westermann's declarative praise, namely gratitude in the context of a specific happening. The content of the praise corresponds with Westermann's descriptive praise, namely praise with reference to the abundance of God's work and existence. Praise can therefore be seen as the recognition of *whom God is* (His attributes) and thanksgiving as recognition of *what God gives* (His deeds) (O'Kennedy 1989:24).

Prayers of praise appear in both the Psalms and narratives (Ex.15:1-18; Judg.5:1-31; 2 Sam.22:2-31; Deut.32:1-43; etc.). The greatest concentration of praise prayers are found in the Psalms (Ps. 8, 29, 33, 100, 103, etc.). A typical praise prayer follows a two part structure: 1) declaration of praise or summons to praise; 2) a reason why praise is expressed (Burden 1991:15-16; Balentine 1993:200, 213-215).

Although the prayers of the Old Testament cannot all be typified as hymns of praise, praise of God appears in many of them (e.g. 1 Sam.2:1; 1 Kgs.8:23-24; Neh.9:5; etc.). Praise is probably the heart of Old Testament prayer. In the prayers of the Old Testament the continuum between praise and lament must not be understood as a pendulum, that is, the worshipper did not swing back and forth between praise and lament. The prayer evidently progressed in the direction of praise (Miller 1985:6-7). The worshipper for example, asked for forgiveness in order to restore his relationship with God - he wanted to praise God.

5 Corvin (1972:89) points to a striking absence of prayers in the Priestly material.

6 The edition used in this article was published in 1975.

7 Eybers (1978:26-29) refer to 14 *Gattungen* in the Psalms.

5.2 Thanksgiving

One reason why the prayer of thanksgiving is discussed separately, is that in the Old Testament it coheres closely to the lament. Occasionally the lament develops into a prayer of thanksgiving while the thanksgiving has the lament as its departure point (Kloppers 1989:7).

The distinctive parts of the prayer of thanksgiving are: 1) Introduction reminiscent of those of the praise prayer; 2) Central part where a disclosure concerning the worshipper's cry for help and his redemption takes place. The prayer of thanksgiving also contains other elements: the announcement of the thanks offering; admonition for the feast guests; a short song of praise; etcera (Kaiser 1975:337).

Thanksgiving prayers occur mainly in the Psalms (Ps 30, 32, 41, 65, 67, etc.) and include the so called songs of trust (Ps. 11, 16, 23, 62 and 129). In these prayers gratitude to God is expressed in concrete terms (Eybers 1978:28; Reventlow 1986:220).

5.3 Lament

The lament (individual and communal) is composed of the following elements: invocation; lament; confession of trust; petition/intercession; motives or reasons for petition; vow of praise; assurance that the lament has been heard. The petition (*Bitte*) is considered to be the nucleus of the lament. The elements mentioned above are not to be found in every lament (Kaiser 1975:332; Gerstenberger 1980:119, 127).

The lament is to be found in the short prayers of the historical narrative (Gen.32:9-12; Josh.7:7-9; Judg.15:18; etc.) (Wendel 1931:123). Several Psalms are communal laments (Ps. 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, etc.) or individual laments (Ps. 3, 5, 6, 7, etc.). All of the so-called penitential Psalms are typified as laments (Ps. 6, 28, 38, 51, 61, 88, 102, 130 and 143). Numerous laments are found in Jeremiah, Job and Habakkuk (Balentine 1993:146-198). The post-exilic penitential prayers also contains elements of the lament (cf. Dan.9:4-19). A variety of situations gave rise to the lament: life threatening circumstances, war, illness, natural disasters, etcetera.

5.4 Intercession

There is a difference between intercession and petition, the most important element of the lament. Petition is essentially prayer for *yourself* while intercession is prayer *on behalf of someone else* (Balentine 1984:162; O'Kennedy 1989:36; Miller 1994:263). Although there is a difference, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between these two literary forms.

It is noticeable that apart from the royal prayers (Ps.20:10; 72) there are no specific examples of intercession in Psalms. In the non-Psalmic prayers numerous intercessory prayers are to be found, most especially in two contexts: 1) In the narrative texts where the salvation history is pertinent (Gen.18:16-33; Ex.5:22-33; 1 Sam.12:23; etc.); and 2) In the prophetic literature (Jer.14:1-15:2; Am.7:1-3; 4-6; etc) (Scharbert 1960:324-333; Kloppers 1989:9).

Many scholars (Scharbert 1960:239; Johnson 1962:59; Reventlow 1986:245-246; Miller 1994:263-264; et al) declare without any doubt that the prophets of Israel

were intercessors. For example, Johnson (1962:59) says: 'so the prophet was a specialist in prayer; he was peculiarly qualified to act this way as an intercessor'. Scharbert (1960:329) argues that the intercession belongs to the 'wesentlichen Aufgaben' of the prophets. Other scholars (Hertzberg 1963:74; Jeremias 1971:311; and Balentine 1984:161-173) are hesitant to speak of the prophets as intercessors. They refer to the subordinate role of intercession and argue that one cannot speak of intercession as an official duty of the classical prophets. Balentine⁸ (1984:162-163) believes that of the major prophets in the Old Testament only Jeremiah is described with real consistency as one who intercedes. The Old Testament portrays a difference in the intercessory role ascribed to the prophets. For example, Amos cannot be seen as an intercessor in the same 'category' as Moses or Jeremiah. On the other hand this difference does not mean that prophets were not regarded as intercessors. Most of the people who prayed on behalf of someone else, the community as a whole or individuals, were prophets or were regarded as such by tradition. These included not only Abraham, Moses and Samuel, but also Elijah, Elisha, Isiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos, as well as unnamed prophets. On the other hand, this does not mean that other people were not allowed to do intercession. There are examples of elders, kings and others who prayed on behalf of other people (cf. Deut. 21:7-8; 2 Sam. 24:17; 2 Chron. 30:18; et al) (Miller 1994:263).

6. Prayer and Cult

Wilms (1981:17) mentions that there is an interaction between word and ritual within the cult. He argues that these two functions (word and ritual) cannot strictly be separated from each other. The prayer belongs to the verbal action within the cult, but cannot be seen as detached from the other cultic events. That which happened at the feasts, sacrifices and other cultic proceedings influenced the verbal action of the worshipper.

The question is: Is prayer only cultic when it is performed in the temple? Is it non-cultic when a disconsolate worshipper prays to God, longing to worship in the temple? (cf. Ps. 42/43) (Reventlow 1986:299). Probably the question should be adapted to read: What influence did the cult have upon prayer?

Sometimes one hears of the 'spiritualization' of prayer. This meant a loosening of the original cultic prayer from the cult, and led to the development of prayer as a private matter between the worshipper and God. Eventually prayer replaced the sacrifice, making it redundant. Reventlow (1986:299-300) differs from this hypothesis. According to him, in Old Testament thinking there is no dichotomy between cult and spirituality, between apparent outer form and inner piety. The inner and outer are closely related and influence each other. Reventlow's opinion is shared by Janowski (1982:185) who understands the cult and cultic ordination as the 'maintenance of the restorative and reconciliatory life'.

8 It is interesting to see that Balentine (1993) neglects the investigation of intercession in his recent book on prayer in the Hebrew Bible. There is no single chapter with the heading 'intercession'. Nevertheless he discusses a few intercessory prayers under the heading 'prayers for divine justice' (Balentine 1993:118-145).

The above dichotomy (cult-spirituality) is sometimes extended to a dichotomy between spontaneous prayer on one side and prescribed cultic prayer on the other (Greenberg 1983:38). Some scholars make no dichotomy between spontaneous prayer and cultic prayer but simply concentrate on one of them. Anderson (1991:15) emphasizes the role of cultic prayer: '... prayer in the Bible was not always a spontaneous and effervescent outpouring of one's feeling toward God but could be - and perhaps more often was - a carefully prescribed act'. Aejmelaeus (1986:90-91) examines traditional prayer in the Psalms and emphasizes the influence of daily life: 'It is particularly the appearance of the pattern of traditional prayer which renders it more plausible that the cultic form grew out of living practice than the reverse'.

In the study of prayer in the Old Testament one must guard against the separation of cultic prayer and private prayer. The cult cannot be understood apart from private life. There was a continuous interaction between happenings at the temple and happenings at home. The Psalms, for example, are the product of such interaction: the people come from their homes to the temple, and the worshippers at the temple return to their homes and work (Westermann 1981:157). This implies that the 'cultic prayers' were influenced by everyday private life, and that the spontaneous 'private prayers' were directed by the religious activities in the temple. It is important to recognize that the cult fulfilled an important role within this interaction. The cult was actually a crystallization point of the happenings in Israel before the 'face of God' (Reventlow 1986: 315).

A further dichotomy or differentiation is often made between the individual and the community. The typification of the Gattungen (e.g. individual and communal lament) emphasizes this differentiation. It is, however, important that the individual is not separated from the community. In the individual lament the worshipper remains an individual, but he is an individual who is part of a community. The individual worshipper at the temple cannot be seen as an isolated person who prays alone in his room. It is probable that he was among family, friends and other visitors. In the lamentations of Job for example (cf. Job 2:11-13) one read that Job as an individual was surrounded by his friends.

The family and clan were the social units which bound the individual to the general and cultic community. Further, it must be understood that prayers were passed on verbally from generation to generation before they were recorded. The 'individual prayers' were therefore carried forward by the community and not the individual (Gerstenberger 1980:167-169; Reventlow 1986:295-298).

It has already been shown that more prayers were recorded in the later literature (exilic and post-exilic) than in the pre-exilic period. Various explanations are given for this. One such explanation is that the destruction of the temple and the absence of a temple cult provided the driving force for the development of prayer. Sacrifice demands a temple and cultic personnel, but prayer is universal. One can pray any time at any place (Levine 1981:72). This means that prayer 'replaced' sacrifice in worship.

Haran (1983:129-130) has another explanation for the relationship between sacrifice and prayer. He maintains that in the temple prayer should be seen as inferior to sacrifice. According to Haran it was a replacement for sacrifice, a poor-man's sacrifice. A visitor to the temple was expected to bring a donation to God (burn, peace or grain offering), but in place thereof the poor man came

empty-handed. He was permitted to pray as a substitute for sacrifice. According to Haran the conception of prayer being secondary to sacrifice is emphasized in the Psalms. Psalm 141:2 says, for example: 'Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice' (NRSV).

Haran (1983:130-134) further emphasizes the importance of the sacrifice compared with prayer. Within the framework of the temple service the sacrifice could not be omitted. In contrast, prayer was optional, in spite of the fact that there were several recorded prayers. The conclusive proof is, according to Haran, the fact that people in the Pentateuch were *forced* to bring sacrifices (within the Priestly laws and without), while there is no reference in the Old Testament to people being forced to pray. Haran interprets this to display a hierarchical order within the cult. Sacrifice was the most important, followed by prayer or even acts of prostration without verbal prayer.

From a history of religion point of view, Haran's hypothesis is a possibility. There is, however no clear evidence in the Old Testament to support his views (not even in Ps.141:2). There are in fact, examples where sacrifice and prayer stand in relationship to one another, especially in the prayers of thanksgiving (cf. Ps.66:13-14). At prayer and lament festivals sacrifices are also mentioned (Judg.20:26; 214: 1 Sam.7:9; Jer.14:12; Lam.2:19) (Gunkel 1967:17-19; Reventlow 1986:300). The supremacy of sacrifice above prayer is also unacceptable. In the recording of the prayer of Solomon at the inauguration (1 Kgs. 8 = 2 Chron.6) the offering of prayers precedes the sacrifices. Even the Chronicler, who paid greater attention to the temple and cult, places the prayer of Solomon prior to the sacrifices.

7. Literary and Theological Function of Prayer

Most of the books studying prayer in the Old Testament concentrated on form-critical information (cf. Wendel 1931; Krinetzki 1965; Gerstenberger 1980; Reventlow 1986; Aejmelaeus 1986; Miller 1994).⁹ In these books particular reference is made to the Psalmic prayers. Where concentration is focussed only on Psalmic prayers, one has a distorted picture of prayer literature in the Old Testament. One probably also forms a one-sided picture of the religious experience of the common Israelite. The Psalms are written in poetic language and are more likely to reflect the beliefs of the educated Israelite. To obtain a better view of the religion and theological thoughts of the Israelite one also needs to study the narrative prayers (Greenberg 1983:7).

There is a clear differentiation between prose prayer in the narrative literature and prayer in the Psalms:

1. The prose prayers had their setting more in literature than in the cult..
2. The prose prayers are of a *specific* nature and not *general* like the Psalms.
3. Prose prayers are created for and fused into a specific context (Corvin 1972:46-52).

⁹ There are two books (Greenberg 1983; Balentine 1993) and two unpublished dissertations (Corvin 1972; Staudt 1980) which are not concentrating on form-critical information.

Prayer expressed in a literary form is not merely communication to God with the expectation of a reply. Prayer performs a definite literary and theological function within the narrative in which it is found. The prayer had to conform to the theological intention of the author/redactor (Corvin 1972:241-245; Staudt 1980:329; Greenberg 1983:8; Balentine 1993:25). Prayers are often placed in strategic places within the narrative. In the Deuteronomistic History, for example, prayers are placed between a *report* of some crisis in the divine-human relationship and the ultimate *resolution* of this crisis (Deut.3:23-25; 9:26-29; Josh.7:7-9; 2 Sam.7:18-29; etc.). These prayers have the literary effect of shaping a narrative situation (Staudt 1980:330-336). Old Testament prayer also plays an important role in portraying both human and divine character.

7.1 Prayer and the Depiction of Human Character

Prayer is one of the means used in the Old Testament for building character portraits. A specific prayer can only reveal part of the worshipper's character. Yet prayer is an important source that scholars have not addressed adequately (Greenberg 1983:18; Balentine 1993:49).

Brueggemann's study on the Psalms (1984) signifies points of contact with the above principle. Brueggemann (1984:17-19) argues that one must use the insights of the form-critical approach but it is also important to look at the *character behind the prayer*. This means that one must search for the actual human experience which leads to the specific prayer. Brueggemann discusses the different Psalmic prayers under three headings: 1) Psalms of orientation (seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude); 2) Psalms of disorientation (anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death); 3) Psalms of new orientation (surprise when the worshippers are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God). Brueggemann's existential approach helps people to understand more of the human character behind the Psalmic prayers.

The depiction of character is true of both Psalmic and non-Psalmic prayers. For example Psalm 51 depicts David as one who is willing to confess his sins before God, while the narrative prayer of 2 Samuel 24:10 depicts the same characteristic of David. Besides David there are numerous other examples: Abraham, a man willing to persevere as intercessor (Gen.18:23-33); Solomon longing for wisdom (1 Kgs 3:6-9); Elijah's trust in Yahweh, the only living God (1 Kgs 18:37-37); Hezekiah's prayer portrays him as a good and faithful king (2 Kgs 20:2-3); etcetera.

In the above examples prayer serves as a means of confirming status. Prayer may also function subtly to caricature or parody. Two clear examples of caricature are: 1) Jacob's prayer in Genesis 32:9-12 (MT vs.10-13); and 2) the prayers of Jonah in 2:2-9 and 4:2-3. Jacob's prayer contributes to the general portraiture of Jacob as the supplanter and exploiter. Jonah's prayers show the discrepancy between word and act. Both prayers portray a level of piety that is not exactly what it seems (Balentine 1993:48-80).

7.2 Prayer and the characterization of God

The Old Testament describes prayer as the response of man toward God. Prayer literature contains decisive elements of what the Old Testament says *about God*

that can be found nowhere else (Westerman 1981:156). Because of its *portrait of God*, prayer becomes indispensable for Old Testament theology. Although God is not the one speaking in the act of prayer, God is being addressed. What one says to God and about God is revealing the worshipper's conception of God (Greenberg 1983:13). For example the way in which Old Testament man understood forgiveness was communicated through the prayer literature.¹⁰

The study of prayer literature may indicate a 'shift' in the development of Old Testament theology or a particular theological viewpoint of an author/redactor. Throntveit (1987) studied the royal speeches and prayers in Chronicles. He argues that in prayers unique to Chronicles (i.e. prayers with no parallel in Samuel-Kings) the particular theological 'Tendenz' is to stress the power and might of Yahweh in contrast to the dependance of humanity (Throntveit 1987:74-75). Another example is that of Corvin (1972) who investigated the prose prayers of the historical narratives in the Old Testament. Corvin (1972:239-245) proposes an evolution from conversational to formal prayers in keeping with a shift in theological perception from God's immanence to God's transcendence.

There are several elements of prayer depicting a portrait of God. Balentine (1993:265) refers to two important elements: 1) The address to God serves repeatedly as proclamation that God is perceived as personal and accessible (e.g. 'Lord our God'; 'Lord God of Israel'); 2) The prayer's portraits of God affirm divine attributes. For example, Daniel and Nehemiah emphasize God's grace, forgiveness and justice (Dan.9:4-19; Neh.9:5-37).

8. Conclusion

The above investigation illustrates the following:

- Prayer literature forms an integral part of the Old Testament. The study of Old Testament prayer literature must not be neglected.
- Old Testament prayer is not confined to Psalms prayers. Many of the prayers in the Old Testament is prose or narrative prayers related to a specific literary context.
- One cannot interpret each separate prayer as an isolated entity. Therefore the study of the different literary forms is important.
- There is no dichotomy between 'cultic prayers' and 'private prayers'. In the time of the Old Testament there was an interaction between the individual at home and the cultic community.
- Old Testament prayer performs a definite literary and theological function within the narrative in which it is found. As a discourse between people and God, prayer plays an important role in portraying both human and divine character. Because of its portrait of God, prayer becomes indispensable to Old Testament theology.

One can conclude with the words of Balentine (1993:271): 'Hebraic prayer is not a static activity that merely reflects a fixed world and a settled relationship with the Creator. Rather, it is a dynamic act of faith that brings into existence new possibilities for both divine and human fidelity'.

10 An example of this is the dissertation of O'Kennedy (1994). The dissertation hypothesis that the concept of forgiveness may best be understood if it is researched in the prayer literature of the Old Testament.

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