
What is quite remarkable about this collection of essays is that each scholar is not just writing an academic piece on prayer, but you can feel the presence of each scholar’s view on prayer which incidentally has not transpired over a course of just this essay, but something that each scholar must have been thinking about, reflecting upon, and perhaps, even exhibiting and practicing in one’s own life. In essence, thoughts on prayer do not develop over night. It takes much time and maturation over one’s life time in prayer. But in order to fully understand prayer—and not just the literary beauty of prayer—one actively has to be in prayer to know prayer. I don’t think it’s merely enough to read on the subject matter of prayer or even recite a compendium of prayers collected over thousands of years. One has to be in prayer to truly reflect on prayer. Here is a subject matter and a world that is above academics as our understanding and reflection must rise to that level. But there is a fascinating catch to this volume. It is what is in those prayers, namely, words, phrases, a sentence or two or even direct quotes from scripture that makes this volume so special, deep, and moving.

In the introductory essay, “The Scripturalization of Prayer,” James Kugel provides a working definition of prayer and scripture for the current volume. “But whether simple or fancy, spontaneous or premeditated, prayer is by its nature rooted in the here-and-now of the person praying” (p. 1). “Scripture is, by definition, a thing of the past, ‘those people back then,’ whereas prayer, if it is to be sincere, has to come from ‘us now’” (p. 2).

Now Judith H. Newman in “The Scripturalization of Prayer in Exilic and Second Temple Judaism,” points out that the earliest prayer in the Hebrew Bible (Num 12:13)—the short but poignant prayer of Moses on behalf of his sister Miriam, “God, please heal her”—is simple and “barebones” in comparison to the elaborate and baroque prayer of the first-century in 3 Maccabees 2. Newman examines portions of scripture embedded in the prayers found in 1 Kings 8:23-53; Nehemiah 9:5-7; Judith 9:2-14; and 3 Maccabees 2:2-20. She says that there is a development of “past and earlier [scriptural] traditions” in pre-exilic prayers becoming more intentional and formalized by the late Second Temple (pp. 23-24).

Dealing with a later post-exilic text, Esther G. Chazon examines the basic form of weekly prayers found in 4Q504 or Dibre Hamme’orot (Words of the Luminaries). She touches on the historical prologue with the request, climactic petition for deliverance or spiritual guidance, the benediction, and the response of “Amen, Amen” (pp. 25-26). Chazon then shifts to explain the kind of biblical material that is found into those prayers. She isolates and groups these elements into four basic modes: modeling, florilegium, pastiche, and free composition. She concludes by saying, “…The Words of Luminaries’ also teaches us that future study of the widespread phenomenon of scripturalization of prayer should no longer be restricted to the reuse of the Hebrew canon but should also take into account use of apocryphal sources, dependence upon existing biblical exegesis, and indebtedness to a developing liturgical tradition” (p. 41).

Two usages of biblical tradition are found in Jewish liturgy. One is a repackaging of a biblical text or a segment of a verse in a non biblical tradition such as a personal prayer. The
other is biblical passages forming the core of a liturgical formula. Shlomo Naeh’s “The Role of Biblical Verses in Prayer According to the Rabbinic Tradition” goes to lengths to show in the Tractate Shabbat, a scribe who snoozes off and then cognizant of Rabbi Yishma’el who is attempting to sneak in to see his students, dunks his parchment into a vessel of water. There is chastisement for the latter act. The point is that benedictions are not to be written—“Those who write benedictions are like people who burn the Torah” (p. 44). One of the key tasks that Naeh attempts to unpack is the rule of פסוק ברכח אומרים אין, the connection between scripture and blessing in rabbinic prayer. In short, the admonition is “to forbid the use of biblical verses in liturgical blessings; and yet, the Talmud and the different Jewish traditions give ample evidence of such use” (p. 49). He brilliantly resolves the problem by saying, “The problem of ברכח פסוק lies, rather, in the recitation of a purely biblical continuum as the body of the blessing. Such a recitation belongs to the category of קרא and is, therefore, disqualified as תפילה. . . But a reworking of the biblical passage—even as slight as the addition of a single verse from someplace else in the Bible—takes such a text out of the category of מ الكريم and makes it acceptable for use as תפילה” (p. 59).

Robert Brody introduces a fascinating period called the “genoic period.” Simply put, it is the starting point when the Jewish community in the Middle East received the completed Talmud (Babylonian) and began interpreting it and applying it. Some date this to the middle of the 6th century to the middle of the 11th century C.E. Brody examines the Seder Rav Amram Gaon by Amram b. Sheshna and the Siddur Rav Se’adyah Gaon, by Se’adyah b. Jospeh (928-942 C.E.). I found his quotation of Se’adyah’s introductory remarks on the commentary to the Psalms to be breath-taking:

...[We must] convert the speech of the prophet in the book, [such as] ‘have mercy upon me,’ to the speech of the Lord—‘I will have mercy upon my servant’—and from ‘heed my prayer’ to ‘I will heed your prayer,’ and from ‘deliver me and save me’ to ‘I will deliver him and him,’ and similarly everything in this book. All is the word of the Lord and nothing is human discourse, as the truthful transmitters [of the tradition] have attested (p. 73).

Indeed, the title of his essay, “Liturgical Uses of the Book of Psalms in the Geonic Period.” Two additional essays—Shulamit Elizur’s “The Use of Biblical Verses in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry,” and Joseph Yahalom’s “From the Material to the Spiritual: Scriptural Allusions and Their Development in Judeo-Arabic Liturgical Poetry”—complete the volume. Unfortunately, these two essays do not match the level of depth in comparison to the previously rehearsed essays. The former simply talks about how biblical endings are important in liturgical poetry and the latter speaks about the tension between scripture and prayer while just barely touching on the subject of spiritual interpretation of scripture. But a slightly recovery of the piece is made by mentioning and exploring the inverted comma phenomenon by Israel Najara, “the great mystical poet of the time.”

As a whole, the volume is to be commended. But do keep in mind the book loses some steam towards the end. And lastly, the title of this work can probably be attributed to Judith