

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 38

Calling on the name of the Lord

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Series editor: D. A. Carson

Calling on the name of the Lord

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

J. Gary Millar



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*For Lucy, Sophie and Rebekah
(the noisiest pray-ers I know)
praying that you will
call on the name of the Lord
for the rest of your lives*

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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

Many books have been written on prayer. Not a few are of the 'how to' variety. Some are almost mystical. Others carefully work through biblical passages – the prayers of Paul, for instance, or of David. Still others survey the many different kinds of address to God found in the Bible. The approach of Dr Gary Millar, in this volume, is unique: he combs through the entire Bible to discover the *focus* of prayers in each book or corpus of the Bible: this is a biblical theology of prayer. At one level what he uncovers is scarcely surprising: the vast majority of biblical prayers are tied in one fashion or another to God's purposes across the sweep of redemptive history, culminating in Jesus and the gospel. At another level what he finds is revolutionary: a great deal of contemporary Christian praying is centred on individual anxieties, needs and preferences, and not on the purposes and promises of God.

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This is not so much wicked (after all, Peter tells his readers, ‘casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you’, 1 Peter 5:7) as horribly imbalanced. In other words, Gary Millar’s work not only informs us about prayer in the Bible, but also, rightly absorbed, drives us to prayer that is in line with God’s saving purposes. And suddenly it becomes clearer what it means to pray in Jesus’ name.

*D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

Author's preface

All theology needs to be preached and lived. That is why writing an academic book on prayer is a deeply challenging experience, and it is why I am so grateful to Fiona, my wife, for her partnership in the gospel and all of life, and her constant encouragement to live out what I have been teaching and writing during the past couple of years. It is also why I gladly dedicate this book to my daughters Lucy, Sophie and Rebekah, who share with us (and create!) the unique delights and disasters of family prayer time, a daily reminder in our house of our need to call on the name of the Lord.

Thinking and writing about prayer, as well as seeking to grow in my own commitment to and enjoyment of prayer, has also lead me to reflect on and thank God for the people who have taught me most about prayer over the years. I am deeply thankful for my parents, John and Lorna Millar, for encouraging me to pray from my earliest days; for my youth fellowship leaders at my home church in Lisburn, Northern Ireland, who introduced me to praying with others; for my fellow students in the Christian Union groups at Queen's in Belfast and Aberdeen; for the unique and life-changing experience of congregational prayer modelled on Saturday nights by William Still and the church family at Gilcomston South, Aberdeen; for my in-laws, Warner and Sheena Hardie, who introduced me to the delights of praying for world mission around the breakfast table; and for the faithful 'prayer warriors' at Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church, Bangor. Our experience over twelve exciting years in Dublin heightened our commitment to pray for gospel faithfulness and gospel growth, and we will never forget the times of prayer we enjoyed in Howth, and Malahide Presbyterian Church in both good times and bad.

Writing this book has also deepened our gratitude for those precious people who have prayed for us so faithfully over many years – we need it more than ever, and hope they will be encouraged to pray on for God to do his work in and through us by the Spirit through reading these pages.

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Since my move to Australia in 2012, many people have listened to me ‘think out loud’ about prayer, and helped me to sharpen that thinking. I am deeply grateful to those involved in the Tasmania Christian Convention, Ignite Conference in Brisbane, Coffs Harbour Presbyterian Church in New South Wales, the Ministry Training and Development Conference of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Queensland and Northern New South Wales Church Missionary Society Summer School and the churches of the central coast of New South Wales, who have all been exposed to the developing ideas in this book, and have helped make it better than it otherwise would have been.

I am also grateful to my colleagues at Queensland Theological College, who have listened to random extracts of the argument of the book (and often sharpened them), helped track down resources and set me free to write. The peerless Annette McGrath, our librarian, has been an immense help. A special word of thanks is also due to the students/graduates who helped in the latter stages of production – Kamina Wust, Katie Allan, Melinda Smith and Lorissa Achjian. It is a privilege to be part of a godly and supportive community like Queensland Theological College, which is committed to ‘calling on the name of the Lord’ to keep the promises he has made to us in the gospel.

Don Carson continues to be an example and an encouragement to me, and this book is much better than it would have been because of him. Philip Duce at Inter-Varsity Press has been a pleasure to work with, as always. My thanks go also to Eldo Barkhuizen, whose rigorous and gracious copy-editing brought new clarity to the argument.

My prayer is that even through this book our God and King will continue to glorify his name in all the earth, as he moves people like us to call on his name.

*Gary Millar
August 2015*

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia biblica
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BECOT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
BTCB	Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CC	Continental Commentaries
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , ed. D. J. A. Clines, 6 vols., Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2008
<i>DOTP</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch</i> , ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003
EBC	The Expositor's Bible Commentary
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
FOTB	Focus on the Bible
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , ed. E. Kautzsch, rev. and tr. A. E. Cowley, Oxford: Clarendon, 1910
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , ed. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, tr. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols., Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series

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LHB/OTS	Library of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
MLBS	Mercer Library of Biblical Studies
MT	Masoretic Text
NAC	New American Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. W. A. VanGemeren, 5 vols., Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PTW	Preaching the Word
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
THOTC	The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction: prayer and the gospel

It is a difficult and formidable thing to write on prayer, and one fears to touch the Ark. Perhaps no-one ought to undertake it unless he has spent more toil in the practice of prayer than on its principle. But perhaps also the effort to look into its principle may be graciously regarded by him who ever liveth to make intercession as itself a prayer to know better how to pray.

(P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*)

For various reasons, including those expressed so beautifully by P. T. Forsyth, I had no intention or ambition to write a book on prayer. Over the past few years, however, several interrelated concerns have driven me to this unexpected place! At the root of my interest is simply a desire to pray more and more effectively as one who belongs to, is called to and is enabled to pray by the Lord Jesus Christ. To that is added a growing sense of disquiet at the marginalization of prayer in local churches across the English-speaking world. In the circles I move in there has clearly been a significant increase in expository preaching, for which I thank God. Evangelism has become more thoughtful, relational and clearly gospel-centred, which is hugely encouraging. The quality of engagement with the biblical text in small groups is, I think, significantly richer than was the case, say, in the 1980s. All this is massively encouraging. But there is another trend that often goes unnoticed – *the church in many places has stopped praying*.¹

I am not suggesting that this has been a policy decision, or the result of a blatant declaration of self-reliance. In most cases, I suspect, it has just happened – often as a result of the laudable goal of getting more people engaged in the life of the local church. We have decentralized, and the prayer gathering has been replaced by a small-group programme. And the net result when it comes to prayer? All too often prayer is relegated to that slot somewhere after 9.30 p.m., where the

¹ This analysis is developed more fully in the afterword.

group leader (of which I have often been a prime example) says something like ‘Oh, I didn’t realize it was so late. We’d better stop there and pray for a couple of minutes before we go.’ The fact that the rushed prayers that follow are often dominated by concern for someone’s next-door neighbour’s grandmother who may or may not be a Christian and has been diagnosed with cancer (important though it is to pray for people like this) simply serves to highlight the lack of gospel depth in our view of prayer.

These twin concerns of personal growth, and a sense that prayer was slipping off the agenda of the church, were fuelled by the observation that books on prayer seemed at least to have lost their place in the pantheon of must-read Christian classics. So, for example, when I was a student from the late 1980s onwards, no respectable member of the Christian Union would ever have admitted to not having read Ole Hallesby’s classic book *Prayer*² and would probably earnestly have been working through Don Carson’s more recently published *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*.³ Even among theological students today I am struggling to think of a title on prayer from any generation or written at any level that commands such attention.⁴ When I decided several years ago to plunge in at the deep end and give a series of five conference addresses on prayer, I struggled to find a book that simply dealt with the biblical material on prayer, beginning with Genesis and finishing with Revelation. There were helpful studies on the Lord’s Prayer, and Paul’s prayers, and some excellent books on the practice of prayer, but no single comprehensive treatment of the unfolding story of what the Bible says about prayer.⁵

² Hallesby 1931.

³ Carson 1992.

⁴ Paul Miller’s marvellous *A Praying Life* (2009) is one exception, and during the time of writing of this volume the relative ‘silence’ has been broken by two extremely helpful Reformed evangelical books on prayer: see Keller 2014; Philip 2015.

⁵ There was, of course, Graeme Goldsworthy’s immensely stimulating *Prayer and the Knowledge of God* (2003). But unusually for Goldsworthy his approach is more systematic-theological than biblical-theological in its true sense. Further investigation did uncover some other excellent books on prayer in the Bible – Tim Chester’s insightful *The Message of Prayer* (2003), while not strictly speaking a biblical theology, does cover much of the biblical material. *Teach Us to Pray* is a valuable collection of studies (see Carson 1990, and in particular, the chapter by Ed Clowney [Clowney 1990: 136–173]), as, at a more academic level, is *Into God’s Presence*, edited by Richard Longenecker (Longenecker 2001). There are also several studies by critical scholars (see e.g. Clements 1985; P. D. Miller 1994), but it remains the case that there is no study of which I am aware that simply traces the unfolding biblical material on prayer.

INTRODUCTION

As I continued to try to think through these rather disparate concerns, I came across these statements in Calvin's discussion of prayer in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.1–3:

Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God's name [Rom. 10:14–17]. And this is precisely what [the apostle] had said a little before: the Spirit of adoption, who seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts [Rom. 8:16] raises up our spirits to dare to show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings [Rom. 8:26], and confidently cry, 'Abba! Father!' [Rom. 8:15].⁶

So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.⁷

But they . . . do not observe to what end the Lord has instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his own sake as ours.⁸

For Calvin it is clear that there is an unbreakable link between prayer and the gospel. And with that simple, but compellingly profound, insight the trajectory of this study was set. What follows in these pages is an exposition of the fact that prayer in the Bible is intimately linked with the gospel – God's promised and provided solution to the problem of human rebellion against him and its consequences. The gospel shape of prayer is evident from the opening pages of the Bible – and in particular from the first mention of prayer in Genesis 4:26, when people first begin to 'call on the name of Yahweh' – right through to the end, when the church prays, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' (see Rev. 22:20).

This study will follow the contours of the Bible's teaching on prayer. After defining prayer as 'calling on the name of the Lord', my intention is simply to demonstrate how the biblical material builds on this basic understanding. As a result, more biblical text will be quoted than is normal in an NSBT volume. This is deliberate. Even careful readers of the Bible often overlook significant teaching on prayer because it is deeply embedded in passages of narrative or poetry where the

⁶ Calvin 1960, 2: 850–851.

⁷ Ibid. 851.

⁸ Ibid. 852.

main emphasis lies somewhere else. Prayer is an important biblical-theological ‘thread’ running through the Scriptures, but it is one that is easily missed in the tangle of other material. My hope is that this volume will make a small contribution to help the church rediscover the persistent biblical witness to the importance of prayer.

Initially the focus will be on showing how ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’, or *prayer that asks God to deliver on his covenantal promises*, is the foundation for all that the Old Testament says about prayer. On moving to the New Testament it will become apparent how *calling on the name of Yahweh* is redefined by Jesus himself, and how, after his death and resurrection, the apostles understood *praying in the name of Jesus* to be the new covenant expression of *calling on the name of Yahweh*. Prayer throughout the Bible, it will be argued, is to be primarily understood as asking God to come through on what he has already promised; as Calvin expressed it, ‘through the Gospel our hearts are trained to call on God’s name’.⁹

At the conclusion of this volume I have added an afterword. While not strictly following the logic of the argument, it is a vital part of the whole. This book is, at one level, an academic exercise. But at another it would be wholly disingenuous to undertake to write on prayer without both attempting to live out what is written and to apply it to the life of the church. The last word in this volume, then, is reserved for a brief attempt to apply the previous chapters’ insights to the challenges we face as the church of Jesus Christ, calling on him in the middle of our broken world, as we await his return.

⁹ Ibid. 850–851.

Chapter One

The day prayer began: prayer in the Pentateuch

The day prayer began

The early chapters of Genesis are critical for any discussion of biblical theology. It is here – in creation, Eden and beyond – that the building blocks for understanding the storyline of the Bible are found. And it is here (not surprisingly) that *prayer begins*.

Where is the first prayer in the Bible? Sometimes it is suggested that the conversations between Adam, Eve and God in Eden are prayer. But the text does not present them in this way – they are described using the normal language of conversation.¹ In the same way that the relationship with God is not *explicitly* described as a ‘covenant’ because ‘covenant’ categories in the Old Testament are generally pressed into service when God is initiating steps to *restore a broken relationship*, these pre-fall, natural conversations are not described as ‘prayer’.² Nor are any of the interactions surrounding Cain and Abel’s sacrifices called prayer.³ It is only when we come to the end of Genesis 4 that we find anything that looks unambiguously like prayer.

¹ This simple statement masks an important methodological point. As I will explain, in this study ‘prayer’ is taken to refer to the deliberate activity when human beings call on God *when he is not immediately present*. This is why the conversations between God and Adam (and God, Adam and Eve) in the Garden of Eden are not considered to be ‘prayer’. Similarly, Abraham’s conversation with Yahweh in Gen. 18 (when ‘Abraham still stood before Yahweh . . . [and] drew near and said . . .’ (18:22–23) does not, strictly speaking, belong to the category of prayer (contra many popular-level books, including e.g. Keller 2014: 26).

² I have no wish to enter the systematic theological debate at this point on the nature of the relationship between God and his newly created people. My point is not that it is inappropriate to describe pre-fall relationships as ‘covenantal’ in a systematic theological sense, but simply to point out that this is not how the text uses the language of covenant or how the language of prayer is used.

³ Contra e.g. M. E. W. Thompson 1996: 12.

Genesis 4:25–26 states:

And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, ‘God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.’ To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.⁴

This is the day that prayer began.

The key phrase is ‘at that time, [men] began to call upon the name of Yahweh’. The construction emphasizes that this moment saw the definite beginning of something new.⁵ However, in the flow of Genesis the most significant question is surely why this new beginning is signposted here. Why is the beginning of prayer triggered by the birth of Enosh? This is an intriguing question.

There seems to be no intrinsic significance attached to Enosh himself.⁶ He plays no part in the unfolding narrative, and after this is mentioned only in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 1 Chronicles 1. So we must look elsewhere for a rationale. Commentators have often noted the apparently inexplicable inclusion of this note after Cain’s family tree in Genesis 4; so von Rad: ‘The notice about the beginning of the Yahweh cult is strange and cannot be rightly explained.’⁷ Those who have tried to explain the phrase have generally done so as a comment on the development of ancient religion (e.g. Wenham, Westermann et al.), although Calvin tried to trace it back to the godly

⁴ Most books on prayer, even those with specific sections on the Pentateuch, make no comment on ‘At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD’ (e.g. Clements 1985; Peskett in Carson 1990: 19–34; Balentine 1993; Chester 2003; however, Clowney, in Carson [1990: 138], without developing its significance does note the fact that prayer began at this point. Goldsworthy (2003: 72) also notes that prayer begins here but does not develop it, as does Verhoef 1997: 1062.

⁵ See GKC 103c. According to GKC 144k, the passive is used here with an impersonal subject to denote an active. However, there are few parallels for this, and it may simply be an unusual way of focusing the reader’s attention on the fact that *prayer begins*, rather than on the indeterminate identity of those who started this practice. So also Walton 2011: 279.

⁶ No connection is made with etymological or aetiological possibilities flowing from the root.

⁷ Von Rad 1972: 112–113. See also McKeown 2008: 44–45. This verse has been fertile ground for source-critical discussion, esp. in view of Exod. 3:13–14 and 6:3. However, this is not the place to mount a detailed defence of the early use of the name of Yahweh. For an overview of the discussion see e.g. Baker 2003: 359–368, as well as the slightly dated but nonetheless useful short treatment of the issue in Motyer 1959.

parenting of Seth.⁸ On the whole, however, there has been little or no attempt to root this phrase in its theological context of the early chapters of Genesis.

In the immediate context I would argue that the focus of the unfolding narrative is fixed firmly on the importance of descendants – or, to be more exact, on *which descendant* would be the recipient of Yahweh's blessing. This dynamic is clearly present in the Cain and Abel narrative. However, I would go further and suggest that as early as 3:15 the search is on for one particular 'offspring' (*zera*).⁹

Within the narrative world of Genesis 1 – 11 it is likely that the fulfilment of promise of 3:15 is to be sought, in the first instance at least, in one of Adam and Eve's own children. The tension of the narrative at the beginning of chapter 4 is predicated on the fact that the reader wants to know if either Cain or Abel could be the 'serpent crusher' of 3:15. The shock factor, then, flows from the fact that Abel, the godly offspring, is terminated (thus instantly obviating any claim to be *the* offspring), while the murderous Cain remains. Given how the narrative unfolds in Genesis, it is conceivable that a murderer would be part of the line of promise – however, at this stage of the primeval history the emphasis is not on the universal sinfulness of humanity, but on the determination of God to keep his promise, which brings us back to 4:25–26.

After the Cainite genealogy 'closes off' the significance of this part of the family for the unfolding plan of God (in exactly the same way as the genealogies of Ishmael and Esau do later in the book), the birth of Seth in 4:25 instantly eases the tension. It is, however, extremely surprising that Seth receives no more attention in the narrative. His sole contribution to the developing story is to father Enosh. This strange omission is barely discussed in the literature.

The simplest explanation of the passing reference to Seth is that he is of limited significance to the flow of Genesis because (whether or not he is godly) he shows no sign of doing anything resembling crushing the head of the serpent. He comes, and he goes – however, he does produce a son, Enosh. And Enosh's contribution to the

⁸ Calvin 1847: 223.

⁹ I am, of course, aware of the controversy surrounding the reference of Gen. 3:15. Although I am personally convinced of the messianic implications of this verse, I would argue that the interpretation offered in Gen. 4:25–26 does not necessarily require such a reading. The growing preoccupation with the identity in each generation of the descendant through whom blessing will come (see e.g. Gen. 12, 22, 25, 38, 49–50) also makes it highly likely that the text should be read as messianic.

narrative? It is a case of like father like son, as he too simply comes and goes.

This means that, theologically speaking, the context of the innovation of 4:26 is one of salvation-historical anticlimax. There is a growing sense that the promise of 3:15 *may not be fulfilled immediately*. The expected offspring is clearly neither Cain, nor Abel, nor Seth, nor Enosh. It seems that at this point the realization begins to dawn on the Adamic community that the fulfilment of promise may take some time. In context this is the most natural explanation of the fact that Enosh's birth leads to people 'calling on the name of Yahweh'.

Calling on the name of Yahweh

At this point we do need to spend a little time teasing out the precise nuance of the phrase 'calling on the name of Yahweh'. One key lexicon suggests that this denotes 'entering into an intensive relationship as someone who calls'.¹⁰ However, this seems to be overreaching slightly. On the other hand, Clowney reduces the significance of the phrase to 'calling his name aloud'.¹¹ This seems reductionist. So what is the import of this phrase?

The simple answer seems to be that it refers to crying out to God *in prayer*. The beginning of the post-Eden 'conversation' between humanity and God begins with 'crying out to God' (or 'calling on the name of Yahweh'). This, then, I would argue, provides us with a biblical-theological definition of prayer. This is supported by the other Old Testament occurrences of the phrase.¹²

There is substantial discussion on the significance of the slightly circumlocutory expression 'the name of Yahweh'. Essentially, 'the "name of the LORD" (*yhwh*) is metonymical for the nature of the Lord'.¹³ However, the precise nuance of the use of this phrase has to be determined by biblical usage, rather than general Hebraic (or ANE) usage.

When this phrase is used in the Old Testament, it is asking God to intervene specifically to do one thing – to come through on his promises.¹⁴ In Genesis 12:8 and 13:4 Abram 'calls on the name of

¹⁰ HALOT 1130 9c (but cf. DCH 7: 294 (2)b).

¹¹ See his comment in Carson (1990: 138).

¹² See Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; 1 Kgs 18:24; 2 Kgs 5:11; 1 Chr. 16:8; Pss 79:6; 80:18; 99:6; 105:1; 116:4, 13, 17; Isa. 12:4; 41:25; 64:7; Jer. 10:25; Lam. 3:55; Joel 2:32; Zeph. 3:9; Zech. 13:9.

¹³ Ross 1997: 148. Ross's NIDOTTE article on 'šēm' is excellent.

¹⁴ See the comments of P. D. Miller (1994: 61).

Yahweh' at key moments in the narrative – modelling a 'faith response' to God's promises and showing that as he moves into the land he does so relying on Yahweh himself to do what he has said. Similarly in 21:33, at the climax of the agreement with Abimelech the Philistine (which leads both to Abraham's receiving the title to the well at Beersheba and the neutralizing of the Philistine threat to his 'occupation' of the land), Abraham plants a tamarisk tree and 'calls on the name of Yahweh'. In the only other occurrence in Genesis Isaac responds to Yahweh's reiteration of the covenant promises in 26:24 by building an altar at Beersheba and 'calling on the name of Yahweh'. To call on the name of Yahweh in Genesis, then, is to respond to God's promise-making initiative by asking him to act to fulfil his promises.

This is also the case in the rest of the Old Testament. Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:24 ('And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God') fits neatly into this pattern. It is also clear that (1) Elijah understands this phrase as describing *prayer*, and (2) the prayer he prays revolves around God's promises to the patriarchs:

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.' (1 Kgs 18:36–37)¹⁵

In the prophetic literature it is equally clear that 'calling on the name of Yahweh' is not a vague term to cover all kinds of interaction with the divine – it is intimately connected with Yahweh's declared plans to rescue his people and to act in judgment and salvation. Isaiah 12:3 sets the tone:

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

¹⁵ The only other occurrence of the phrase in the Former Prophets comes in 2 Kgs 5:11 on the lips of Naaman, who expects Elisha to 'call on the name of Yahweh his God' (although Elisha does not). Even though the prophet's actions are counter-intuitive, the Syrian's words add implicit support to my argument.

CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

‘Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.’

In fact ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’ is the definitive mark of the people of God. This can work negatively (see Jer. 10:25) or more positively:

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. (Joel 2:32)

For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.

(Zeph. 3:9)

They will call upon my name,
and I will answer them.
I will say, ‘They are my people’;
and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’
(Zech. 13:9)

In each case there is a clear connection between Yahweh’s prior covenantal commitment to save his people and ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’. If anything, this becomes clearer in the final prophetic example, where the servant of the Lord (here depicted as a Ps. 2 kind of figure of divine judgment) turns out to be the one who definitively ‘calls on Yahweh’:

I stirred up one from the north, and he has come,
from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name;
he shall trample on rulers as on mortar,
as the potter treads clay.

(Isa. 41:25)

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

PRAYER IN THE PENTATEUCH

I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
(Isa. 42:1)

It seems increasingly clear that the phrase ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’ is used to depict prayer, but not simply in a generic sense. Rather, the idea of calling on the name of Yahweh is intrinsically related to God’s commitment to rescue his people and deliver on his promises. This is borne out in the way in which the phrase is used in both Chronicles and Psalms.

The phrase occurs only once in Chronicles, but it does so at a highly significant moment in the narrative. As the chronicler’s insistence that Israel both desperately needs atonement and that God has already put the ‘building blocks’ of a decisive act of forgiveness in place begins to emerge, David recommissions a version of the tabernacle (1 Chr. 16:1–7). At this point Chronicles records an intense burst of Davidic (psalmic) praise, which starts with the call

Oh give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples!
(1 Chr. 16:8)¹⁶

The context is explicitly covenantal (see e.g. 1 Chr. 16:15–18), and the prayer is based on God’s keeping his promises.

As we might expect by now, this pattern is replicated in Psalms, even though the phrase occurs surprisingly few times. It is used to demarcate those who trust in Yahweh from those who do not:

Pour out your anger on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms
that do not call upon your name!
(Ps. 79:6)

Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
(Ps. 80:18)

¹⁶ The chronicler is quoting Ps. 105:1.

CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

Those who call on the name of Yahweh are those who have tasted his salvation, and are enjoying his covenant blessings. This is made clear by Psalm 116, which is virtually a meditation on what it means to ‘call on the name of Yahweh’:

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’ . . .

What shall I render to the LORD
for all his benefits to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD . . .

I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.
(Ps. 116:1–4, 12–13, 17)

It is clear, then, that as the Old Testament unfolds, to ‘call on the name of Yahweh’ is not simply to ‘pray’ in any generic sense. To call on the name of Yahweh is to cry to God to come through on his promises, and specifically to rescue and give life to his covenant people. It is a prayer for salvation, or an expression of the fact that one is relying on God *for* salvation. To put it anachronistically, ‘calling on the name of Yahweh’ in the Old Testament denotes ‘gospel-shaped prayer’.

This conviction finds somewhat unexpected support in two seminal passages in the New Testament. Both Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and Paul, in the middle of his discourse on how the promises of God relate to Israel in Romans 9 – 11, draw on Joel 2:32 in summing up the requisite response to the grace of God long promised and revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Acts 2:17–21 and Rom. 10:12–13. As we will see later, the New Testament simply substitutes *kyrios* for Yahweh, with the assumption that ‘the name of Jesus Christ’ is functionally the same as ‘the name of Yahweh’.

Interim conclusions: the essential nature of biblical prayer

On one level it is surprising how infrequently the phrase ‘calling on the name of the LORD/Lord’ is used in the Bible. But on the other it is clear that when it does occur, it carries significant theological weight. This supports the contention that Genesis 4:25–26 is not simply a historical note, but is a ‘load-bearing’ verse, which establishes the trajectory for at least a significant strand of the Bible’s teaching on prayer. This has at least three far-reaching implications for constructing a biblical theology of prayer.

This is the primary biblical trajectory of prayer

It is rarely noted that the primary biblical trajectory of prayer is not praise, or lament, or intercession, or meditation on the word of Yahweh. Prayer begins in the Bible as a cry for God to do what he has promised – to deal with the reality of sin by delivering on his covenant promises. Even if one does not accept that the Protevangelium (Gen. 3:15) lies behind the cries to God of Genesis 4:26, the link between God’s promises and prayer becomes clear in the Abraham narratives beginning in Genesis 12.

This is a helpful orientation for the rest of my discussion. It will, of course, be necessary to make some comment on the variety of material usually included under the general category of ‘prayer’, but we must take care not to collapse all the biblical material into a single nebulous mass. This study will focus on the main trajectory of the biblical material, which is *asking God to do what he has already committed himself to do*, and will attempt to show how other more peripheral categories (e.g. lament) take their meaning (and their boundaries) from this central, ‘covenantal’ strand.¹⁸

From the beginning, prayer and the gospel cannot be separated

Prayer is established (perhaps even defined as) calling on God to come through on his promises. To pray is to ask God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is to admit our weaknesses and appeal to his awesome strength. According to Genesis, people start to pray because they see both God’s commitment to us and their own

¹⁸ For a broader discussion of the nature of prayer see Keller 2014: 35–49. At a different level, for a discussion of the vocabulary of prayer in the OT see e.g. Verhoef 1997.

helplessness. They pray because they know God is for them, because he has said so, and that they are weak because he has said so. In other words *prayer starts with the gospel*. It always has and always will. Once we recognize this, it will ensure that we avoid the simple but far-reaching mistake of separating what God has joined – *prayer and the gospel*.¹⁹

Surprisingly, this connection is seldom noted, either in commentaries on Genesis or in discussions of prayer (whether at an academic or more popular level). A marvellous exception is the comment of John Calvin noted in the introduction: ‘Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God’s name [Rom. 10:14–17].’²⁰ The starting point of all our discussion of prayer should be the initiative of God in the gospel.

A clear pointer to this is the fact that long before humanity began to call on the name of Yahweh, Yahweh himself had spoken to his fallen creatures. In the immediate aftermath of the fall we read this:

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. *But the LORD God called to the man* and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’ (Gen. 3:8–10)

After rejecting Yahweh, Yahweh still seeks his creatures. He *calls to them* long before they start to call out to him.²¹

Instead of easily, naturally, delighting in Yahweh and enjoying his presence, Adam and Eve hide. They avoid God. Instead of feeling joy, they are ashamed at the very sound of his footsteps. They are afraid, on edge. They pretend. They lie. They justify themselves. Even as they speak, a huge chasm opens between them and God, as the most severe

¹⁹ At an anecdotal level, evidence of this separation is to be found in almost every small-group Bible study prayer time in Christendom.

²⁰ Calvin 1960, 2: 850–851. See also the comment of Patrick Miller (1994: 174) on discussing OT words of divine assurance in the context of prayer: ‘It may seem anachronistic to say so, but it is nevertheless profoundly true that in these words we hear the “gospel”.’

²¹ See the discussion of Goldsworthy (2003: 109–111), who draws out the nature of the divine initiative beautifully. Similarly, Seitz (2001: 15): ‘Prayer is not humanity’s effort to reach God from below by crying out to him. Rather it is the consequence of his having made himself known, and our faithful response to that prior knowledge. True prayer, therefore, means discourse with the one Lord, and that cannot be taken for granted as covered under some generic deity.’

shock in history hits. Before our eyes a huge gulf opens between us and God. But what happens? God calls to Adam long before Adam calls on him. Prayer starts with the gospel and is made possible by the gospel.

Prayer is clearly designed for a fallen world

The third and final preliminary observation is, again, seldom noted. It is the fact that prayer is designed *for a fallen world*. If we are correct in asserting that the conversations in the garden are, strictly speaking, something other than prayer, then prayer is clearly part of life in a post-fall world.

It is almost self-evident that prayer is necessary only in a fallen world. Genesis 4:25–26 is built on the recognition (flowing out of Gen. 3) that despite the profound break in our relationship with Yahweh he continues to speak to his creatures, and makes it possible for us to respond to him. We can call on Yahweh, but only because he has called on us. We can cry out to him to come through on his promises only because he has already made his promises. In this sense *all biblical prayer is covenantal – all prayer is gospel driven*.

That should shape our expectations when we pray. On the one hand, God through the gospel has made it possible for us to speak to him. But on the other? In the Bible God draws close and invites us to ‘call on his name’. This means that prayer in the Bible has a very different tone from all other ANE prayers. We can see and feel that in the ancient Sumero-Akkadian prayer ‘A prayer to every god’, written about the time of Moses:

The lord in his anger of heart looked at me
 The god in the rage of his heart confronted me
 When the goddess was angry with me she made me
 become ill
 The god whom I know or do not know has placed
 suffering upon me
 Although I am looking constantly for help, no-one
 takes me by the hand.
 When I weep, they do not come to my side.
 I utter laments but no-one hears me.²²

This is far from the situation in the Bible. God calls us, and invites us to call on his name.

²² See Pritchard 1969: 391–392.

It is important, however, to realize that the biblical-theological implications of this are significant. In particular it highlights the fact that prayer is an interim measure. Prayer is what we do now – and until God intervenes to straighten everything out. Prayer is God’s gift to help us cope with life with him in the mess – a world where we ache and get distracted and struggle with sin, and fail repeatedly. Prayer is designed for a world in which we hurt people and get hurt, where we let God down and ignore him, even though we belong to him. Prayer is a temporary balm in a world where we so often feel cut off from him, where we feel alone and discouraged and frustrated. But prayer will not always be necessary.

The book, letter or vision of Revelation alludes to several prayers (e.g. Rev. 5:8).²³ However, these prayers are prayed in John’s present. When, at the end of the book, John is shown the new heavens and the new earth, rather than doing nothing but praying, there is no suggestion that we will pray at all. All the apparatus of earth-bound religion is replaced by the Lamb himself, and it seems reasonable to assume that, as in the first ‘garden temple’, immediate conversation (along with celebration) takes away any need to ‘call on the name of Yahweh’.²⁴

If prayer in the Bible is gospel-shaped, covenantal prayer, as we call on the name of Yahweh to come through on his promises, then this is exactly what would be expected. However, we need to ask if this understanding of prayer is reflected by the text of the rest of the Pentateuch itself.

Prayer in the Pentateuch – a thesis tested

So far, one might be forgiven for thinking that rather a lot has been built on one slightly cryptic phrase (calling on the name of Yahweh) in Genesis 4. If, however, it becomes clear that this same understanding of prayer is reflected elsewhere in the Pentateuch, that significantly strengthens my argument.

²³ Beale (1998: 357) helpfully argues that the prayers of 5:8 and 8:3–4 are to be identified with 6:10: ‘Therefore, the prayers mentioned here are not just praises but especially requests that God defend the honour of his reputation for justice by judging the persecutors of his people.’ Apart from this, all dialogue directed at God in Revelation happens in his immediate presence and is usually linked with the term ‘worship’ – clearly a different beast (!) to general biblical understanding of ‘prayer’.

²⁴ These ideas are developed at some length in chapter 9.

Prayer in Genesis

It is interesting that prayer does not play a hugely significant role in Genesis – many of the key incidents unfold without any reference to anything resembling prayer.²⁵ However, that does not mean that the narrative has nothing to contribute to a biblical theology of prayer.

In the midst of the furore created by his fathering a son with Hagar, Abraham prays for the first time. After God announces that Sarai (now Sarah) will conceive and bear his heir, the child of promise, Abraham falls on his face, laughing, and says, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you!’ (Gen. 17:18). The subject of his prayer is, of course, the fulfilment of Yahweh’s promise – a point underlined by God himself in the very next verse: ‘God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.”’ This connection between prayer and covenant (or, as I have expressed it more generally, between prayer and the gospel), dominates the prayers in the rest of the book.²⁶

After God himself alludes to prayer as he appears to Abimelek in a dream (20:4–7),²⁷ the next person to pray is the unnamed but godly servant who is sent by Abraham to procure a wife for Isaac:

And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, ‘O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.’ (24:11–12; see also vv. 26–27)

Given the wider context, the focus of these prayers is undeniably the fulfilment of the covenant promises – the God who gave Abraham

²⁵ E.g. there is no reference to prayer in the Noah narrative, nor in the opening scenes of the Abraham cycle.

²⁶ Many (e.g. Clements 1985: 20; Balentine 1993: 40; P. D. Miller 1994: 262–280) simply assume that the dialogue between God and Abraham in v. 18 is a prayer, although there is nothing in the context to suggest this. This is a divine–human encounter that is more like the envisaged discussions between Adam and God in Eden than anything resembling ‘prayer’.

²⁷ The reference is to Abraham as a *prophet* praying for Abimelek so that he may be forgiven. This is clearly *intercessory* prayer. However, we must not miss the fact that the context of this prayer is the *continuation of the covenant* in the face of Abraham’s repeated actions that jeopardize it (see also 12:8–20).

this son of promise is now called upon to provide a wife for him, thereby ensuring that the covenant family continues.²⁸

Isaac's own subsequent prayer life, it is fair to say, is limited. In fact it is limited to asking God to work to ensure the continuance of the life of the covenant family: 'And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived' (25:21). The verb here is *'tr* (entreat), and it is paired with its own niphal form in the second half of the verse ('and Yahweh *granted*'). Prayer is depicted quite straightforwardly as Isaac's requesting and God's fulfilling his request in line with his prior covenantal commitment.

It is important not to overstate this – there is clearly significant overlap between the *personal desires of Isaac* (and the other patriarchs) and the urgency of preserving and extending the line of promise. Their prayers do reflect deeply personal longings, and these are brought to Yahweh. However, this does not mitigate the fact that *the emphasized focus in the text is tied to the history of redemption and the survival of the covenant line*.

This understanding of prayer in Genesis finds its most compelling example in Jacob's prayer in chapter 32. This is the longest recorded prayer in the book, and Jacob's first.²⁹

It is worth including this prayer in full:

And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good," I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude."' (Gen. 32:9–12)

²⁸ Interestingly, no special 'prayer vocabulary' is used in the narrative (or its repetition as reported narrative). The servant simply 'says to God'.

²⁹ At the end of his vow in 28:22 Jacob does move from the third to the second person – however, it is not clear that this should be understood as a prayer. And in any case Jacob's theological comprehension at this point is hardly exemplary, so it would be wise not to read too much into this.

Once more, the preoccupation of the prayer is the survival of the covenant line. In many ways this is the high point of ‘patriarchal spirituality’. It is hardly replete with extravagant praise, but is built on a sense of personal unworthiness, gratitude for past interventions and a plea for Yahweh to honour his covenant promises. These words of Jacob are the perfect expression of the emerging biblical theology of prayer that this chapter has sought to highlight.³⁰

Prayer in Exodus

The opening chapters of Exodus are closely tied to the book of Genesis, providing a transition from the Joseph Cycle to the advent of Moses. This bridging section concludes with these words:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew. (Exod. 2:23–25)

The vocabulary differs from that of Genesis, but the thought is exactly the same.³¹ To pray is to cry out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for rescue.³²

This same understanding is reflected consistently in the prayers of Moses, which are scattered throughout the Exodus narratives.³³ So, for example, in 5:22 Moses ‘turns’ to Yahweh:

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I

³⁰ There are no other explicit prayers in the book of Genesis. The related category of ‘blessing’ does occur at e.g. 43:14, 48:15–16, 20, but ‘blessing’ is beyond the purview of this study. P. D. Miller (1994: 165) makes the interesting observation that there are no prayers in the Joseph Cycle. This may be because in this story the focus is on the preservation of the line of Judah and little else.

³¹ The language is particularly intense here – with groans, sighs and cries (understandably).

³² Interestingly, P. D. Miller (1994: 94–95) discusses this passage at some length, but does not seem to recognize its foundational nature.

³³ In keeping with the treatment of God’s interaction with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, ‘face to face interactions’ with Yahweh (or perhaps, better, theophanic encounters) are not included in my discussion, on the basis that they are not, strictly speaking, prayers. However, particularly in ch. 32, it is not easy to distinguish between these two situations.

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came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.' (5:22–23)

His complaint is essentially that Yahweh has not kept his promises. This is confirmed by the specific response from God:

But the LORD said to Moses, 'Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.'

God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'" (Exod. 6:1–8)

There has, of course, been much discussion of the origins of this material, and the perceived problems created by 6:2 in reconstructing the history of Yahwism.³⁴ However, we must not miss the obvious point the writer is making about prayer – Moses' prayer is based on confidence in the commitment of Yahweh to his people, and God's answer does not disavow him of that notion. Rather, Yahweh answers by affirming his commitment to the covenant, and therefore underlines that he will, in fact, answer Moses' prayer.

The same could be said of the interactions in chapters 17 and 32:

So Moses cried to the LORD, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' And the LORD said to Moses, 'Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of

³⁴ See e.g. the discussion in Dozemann (2009: 163–168).

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Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.’ And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’ (Exod. 17:4–7)

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, ‘O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, “I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it for ever.”’ (Exod. 32:11–13)

In both cases what is at stake is the survival of the newly formed ‘people of God’. In Exodus 17 the thought is that without the presence of Yahweh not only will the people fail in every project, but they cannot lay claim to being considered Yahweh’s people at all. In chapter 32 the connection with the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is more explicit. But in both cases Moses’ prayer is focused on the continuation of the covenant, and the survival of hope in the promises of God.

The final ‘prayer’ in Exodus comes later in the same chapter. On the surface the sentiments expressed by Moses seem broadly similar, but there are profound differences. Rather than simply asking Yahweh to honour his commitments to Israel, Moses raises the possibility of *making atonement* for the people:

The next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if

not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.’ But the LORD said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.’ (Exod. 32:30–34)³⁵

In seeking to ‘make atonement’ (a piel cohortative form of *kpr*) Moses may reflect the common thinking of the ANE.³⁶ What is fascinating, however, is that Moses brings no offering (or religious activity) to cause this forgiveness, other than a plaintive request that he be blotted out in place of his people. It seems as if he is trapped somewhere between traditional ANE modes of thought and a Yahwistic (grace-based) approach.³⁷ The fact that Yahweh effectively ignores his request in verses 33–34 and simply asserts his divine right *and commitment to keeping his promises to those who have not abandoned him* draw these threads of covenant and atonement together, in a way that creates an intriguing link with the material that follows in Leviticus.

Prayer in Leviticus

One of the intriguing features of Leviticus, the sacral text par excellence in the Old Testament, is the fact that there is *not a single reference to prayer in the entire book*.³⁸ This is not often noticed, although both Israel Knohl and Jacob Milgrom have highlighted the issue.³⁹ Knohl contends that there was neither music nor prayer in the pre-Hezekian (*sic*) temple. Milgrom, however, dismisses his argument as ‘an argument from silence’, and insists that there are no grounds at all for conceiving of an Israelite temple ritual that was silent.

³⁵ In this case it may be that Moses said all this to Yahweh ‘face to face’, which would mean that, strictly speaking, it is not a prayer. However, there is little evidence that the writer is emphasizing this dynamic here in the narrative – the question is one of whether or not a mediator/intercessor can bring about atonement for sin.

³⁶ Mesopotamian thinking reflected a concern for sin and guilt; their prayers seek absolution/stay of punishment. See e.g. the Mesopotamian wisdom text (Walton 2006: 144) stating, ‘reverence begets favour, sacrifice prolongs life, prayer atones for guilt’. General ANE knee-jerk reaction to misfortune was to assume one had done something wrong and to pray, offer restitution, etc. in hope of restoring the god’s favour (ibid. 144–146); but it is hard to ascertain if this is atonement in its proper sense.

³⁷ The standard ANE response to wrongdoing is to try to appease God with something, but what he offers is a sort of desperate prayer for mercy (note pleas for mercy and compassion were common in Egyptian prayer; see ibid. 109–111).

³⁸ This point is seldom observed, let alone addressed, in the literature.

³⁹ Knohl 1988; Milgrom 1991: 18–19.

I strongly suspect that Milgrom is right to assert that there must have been both prayer and music in the temple. In particular Leviticus 16:21 at least implies that something close to prayer was involved in the Day of Atonement.⁴⁰ The weakness in his discussion is that while exposing the problems in Knohl's position, he gives no adequate explanation for the absence of prayer in the book. Given the all-pervasive nature of prayer in other similar ANE rituals, it is hard to believe that this is simply accidental, or the result of a focus on the mechanics of sacrifice.⁴¹

This is where the unfolding theology of prayer in the Pentateuch provides us with a credible (if not yet completely compelling) explanation of the 'silence' in Leviticus when it comes to prayer. In Exodus 32 Moses has already inadvertently highlighted the fact that Yahweh alone can provide atonement. Performing ritual actions (including prayer) cannot influence the God of Israel, nor can even the most godly individual act as a substitute. The logic of Leviticus takes us further along this trajectory. The need for atonement is abundantly clear. However, the shortfall in provision in the sacrificial system⁴² leading to the necessity of the Day of Atonement as a proleptic celebration of God's intention to provide the ultimate sacrifice and the comprehensive symbolism of the Holiness Code underline the fact that God alone has the power to atone for the sins of Israel. It is also possible that the absence of prayer in Leviticus is built on the idea that Israel is a 'kingdom of priests' where access to Yahweh (calling on his name) is not simply limited to the priestly class.⁴³

To summarize, given the material on prayer in Genesis and Exodus, it may well be that the absence of prayer in Leviticus functions both *to distinguish prayer in Israel from prayer in the ANE* (which typically consisted of pleading with the gods to be favourable) and *to establish that prayer does not lead to forgiveness*. This, of course, is completely

⁴⁰ Wenham (1979: 61) argues that prayer is also implied in the laying on of hands in Lev. 1:4.

⁴¹ I am aware that this line of argument is vulnerable to Milgrom's criticism of being an argument from silence, but where the absence of material is so striking (and completely out of step with other contemporary material) it is perfectly reasonable to seek a credible explanation for the silence.

⁴² This centres on the oft-noted virtual absence of any sacrifice for *deliberate* sin. This 'omission' is picked up by the chronicler in his use of the concept of *ma'al* (see e.g. Johnstone 1986).

⁴³ See Balentine 1993: 45; Greenberg 1983: 52. I am also grateful for discussions with David Peterson on this subject.

consistent with the thoroughly Levitical idea that only a perfect sacrificial death can possibly achieve atonement.

Prayer in Numbers

When reading through the Pentateuch canonically, the ‘silence’ in Leviticus becomes all the more noticeable when we reach Numbers, and the key section of Numbers 11 – 14 in particular.

The notion of Moses’ praying for the people is introduced in 11:1–2:

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down.

There is a clear (and deliberate) contrast between the people (who complain *to each other* ‘in the hearing of Yahweh’, and then cry out in an intensified complaint about Yahweh to Moses) and Moses himself, who is the only one who addresses God.⁴⁴ The implication seems to be that only Moses is thinking in covenantal terms, and therefore is the only one to whom it occurs to ‘call on the name of Yahweh’.

However, the situation becomes more complex when, in the wake of the rabble’s ingratitude (11:4–9), fire from God falls again, and Moses rails against him:

Moses said to the LORD, ‘Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, “*Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling child,*” to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, “Give us meat, that we may eat.” I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favour in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.’ (Num. 11:11–15)

Moses’ prayer is extremely forthright – so what is it that gives him the right (or at least the boldness) to express himself to the Lord of all in

⁴⁴ Incidentally, this is the first reference to the conventional verb ‘to pray’ in the Bible.

such blunt terms? The answer is found in verse 12 – Moses’ complaint (or perhaps better, rant) is based on the implications of God’s covenant commitment to his people. Once again, prayer is based on the prior fact of God’s promise.

In chapter 12 the existence of the covenant people is once more under threat – this time because of the sinful attitude of Miriam and Aaron, who along with Moses carry the burden of leadership of the nation. Their resentment (which was a mixture of jealousy and naked racism) spills over into an implicit rejection of the word of God himself:

‘With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.

When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. (Num. 12:8–10)

In the ensuing dialogue Aaron pleads with Moses as the leader of Israel to intercede on behalf of their sister, which Moses does.⁴⁵ However, it is vital to see that this prayer for healing (the first in the Bible) cannot easily be extricated from its context – (1) it is a prayer in *direct response* to an intervention of Yahweh to punish Miriam in real time, (2) it is deeply embedded in a narrative in which the future of the covenant people of God is under threat, and (3) it is tied to the complaints of the people in the previous chapter, making the point that rebellion is endemic among the Hebrews under Moses. It then becomes clear that this is not a ‘prayer for healing’ in any straightforward sense – this prayer is part of a nexus of events in which God reasserts his leadership (through Moses) of the covenant people. Even this prayer cannot be separated from covenantal concerns.

This becomes even more obvious in the climax to this section in Numbers 14. The events at Kadesh Barnea call into question once more the viability of God’s ‘covenant project’ given the propensity of the people to disobey. The words of Yahweh himself are ominous:

And the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs

⁴⁵ Moses’ prayer is simple: ‘O God, please heal her – please’ (v. 13).

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that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.' (Num. 14:11–12)

At this point Moses intervenes.

Once more, it is not completely clear that Moses is *praying*, rather than 'speaking with Yahweh face to face',⁴⁶ but either way his words serve to underline the theological point that interaction with Yahweh (including prayer) is predicated on his commitment to his people through his promises:

But Moses said to the LORD, 'Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, "It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness." And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, "The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation." Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.' Then the LORD said, 'I have pardoned, according to your word.' (Num. 14:13–20)

Yahweh answers Moses' prayer not because of the character of the intercessor, nor his negotiating skill, but on the basis that appeal is made to his prior 'gospel' commitments.⁴⁷ This also undergirds Moses and Aaron's response to the rebellion of Korah in 16:22, and Moses' request that Yahweh appoint a godly successor in 27:16–17, when Moses is told of his impending death outside the land. Prayer

⁴⁶ See the discussion of Gen. 18 above.

⁴⁷ Contra Levine (1993: 280), who regards this as a confrontation between Moses and God. For a more helpful discussion of this passage see Olson 1996: 80–84.

is made and answered in Numbers purely on the basis of appeal to God's promises, and for the well-being of his people.

Prayer in Deuteronomy

The final piece in this covenantal puzzle is found in Deuteronomy. The only unique prayer in Deuteronomy is the prayer of Moses before his death, reported in 3:23–26:⁴⁸

And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, 'O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, 'Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again.'

This is the first example of a prayer in the Bible that is explicitly rejected. Not only does Yahweh refuse to answer this prayer, but he is 'angered' by the request. Why is this? This is a vital question, as any attempt to outline a biblical theology of prayer must say something about the delicate and pastorally sensitive issue of 'unanswered prayer'. So why is the prayer of Moses, the great intercessor, portrayed in such a negative light, and why does it receive such a severe rebuke from Yahweh?

Yahweh's response here is completely predictable, because it is completely consistent with everything we have seen about prayer in the opening books of the Bible. Prayer is inherently *covenantal*, and is both driven by and based on the commitments Yahweh has made concerning the future of his covenant people, and his plans to reveal his glory to all nations. How does Moses' prayer fit with all this? The short answer is, 'It does not!' Despite beginning with an admirable statement of the greatness of God, it moves quickly on to a request that can only be described as 'selfish'. Moses' prayer may be completely understandable from a human point of view, but, for the first time in the Pentateuch we have a prayer that has no essential

⁴⁸ See Deut. 9:25–29 for the rehearsal of the events of Exod. 32. If anything, the focus on the nature of Israel as God's covenant people is intensified in the Deuteronomic version (see the phrases 'your people and your heritage').

connection with the progress of the plans of Yahweh. Moses, it seems, should have known better.⁴⁹

The other statement in Deuteronomy that demands some attention (even though it is not a prayer itself) comes in the fascinating declaration of 4:5–8, which celebrates the uniqueness of Yahweh’s dealings with Israel. In 4:7–8 Moses exclaims, ‘For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?’ One of the twin privileges enjoyed by Israel is the proximity of Yahweh when they ‘call on him’, which clearly carries with it the implication that he hears and answers, acting on their behalf.⁵⁰ As Daniel Block vividly expresses it:

When other people pray to their gods they remain both aloof and silent. Craftsmen may design them with big ears, but they remain silent. Ironically, although the Israelites’ God was not represented by images they could set up in their homes or anywhere else, he was near, and although he had no ears, *he heard their cries whenever they called on him.*⁵¹

Yet again, prayer is understood in the context of Yahweh’s covenant commitment to his people.⁵²

Conclusion

In most previous studies of prayer in the Pentateuch discussion has been dominated either by a ‘history of religions’ approach to the text,

⁴⁹ Of course, there are times when what we long for and what may be good for the growth of the kingdom overlap – it is not always easy to discern what is best for the work of the gospel in the world. This passage should not lead us into the paralysis that comes from endless self-examination in a desire to pray with pure motives. But it is also equally clear that sometimes we simply pray for *what we want*, without any thought of or reference to the glory of God. Those prayers, it seems, are best left unprayed.

⁵⁰ The other benefit is, not surprisingly, possession of the Torah.

⁵¹ Block 2012: 119 (emphasis mine).

⁵² Seitz (2001: 17) makes an interesting point on the relationship of prayer to Deut. 30: ‘It is prayer, Deuteronomy insists, which re-establishes the relationship (30:1–5). Here we touch upon the fundamental sacrificial reality, which lies just below the unitive character of sacrificial offerings, a broken and a contrite heart.’ While it would be extremely helpful to the argument of this chapter if this were true, I can find nothing in Deut. 30 to suggest that the text describes the envisaged repentance and resultant return from exile as involving prayer.

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or by discussions of the types of prayer presented. I would suggest that these approaches have missed something fundamental to the text as we now have it. Reading these five books canonically, it is startlingly obvious that a coherent biblical-theological approach to prayer emerges, which, as we will see, sets the trajectory for the rest of the Bible. Prayer in the Pentateuch is restricted to texts predicated on God's covenantal initiative. Speaking in terms of biblical theology, then, prayer is made possible only by 'the gospel'. All prayer is *gospel prayer*. It is calling on the name of Yahweh, who is the God of the covenant, the God of salvation. This has profound theological and practical implications. As I will now seek to demonstrate, this view of prayer is also borne out as we move through the rest of the Old Testament.