

Prayer in Light of the Ancient World

8

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

9

The Prayers of Israel's Neighbors:

1. The Egyptians: Bargaining Prayer
2. The Hittites: Bloodthirsty Prayer
3. The Babylonians: Localized Prayer
4. The Romans: Ritualized Prayer

10

The Egyptians: Bargaining Prayer

11



12

Thirty percent of mummies shown signs of "episodes of intermittent disease or malnourishment."--David Falk, *The Ark of the Covenant in Its Egyptian Context*, L:35.
The greatest fear of the Egyptians, including the king, was starvation. Fear of starvation was the single driving imperative of ancient Egyptian culture and religion. The elaborate burials of the middle and upper classes were done to feed the dead in the next life. The coffin texts are full of references to food, drink, food-offerings, bread, and hunger, for example...--L:97

13

Coffin Text 604

To convey an offering of bread and beer in the realm of the dead. Hail to you, you lords of food-offerings, who grant provisions, who bring food and convey provisions; may you bring to me food and convey provisions to me, for I am a living soul, a follower of Osiris. Come to me and bring me the food-offerings and provisions of Osiris, for I am a "son-who-loves."

14



15

Falk, L:45

[T]he underlying tenets of Egyptian religion held that each god had a good and a bad personality. *Pyramid Text 534* mentions that the gods have a "good" and an "evil coming." Offerings given to deities were meant to assuage the "bad coming" aspect of deity and turn the "good coming" toward the adherent. The adherent offered back to a god an aspect of the god. This offering fueled and energized the deity. Offerings were based upon a notion of reciprocal economy.

16



17



18



19

King Murshili II (~1320-1295 BC)

Because my father killed [his older brother], he therefore later performed a ritual of expiation of bloodshed....] came along, and I performed a ritual of bloodshed....--
COS 1.60.8-12

20

Leviticus 17:11

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement.

21

King Murshili II (~1320-1295 BC)

Because you, the gods, my lords, have taken vengeance for the blood of Tudhaliya [my uncle], those who killed him have made restitution for the blood[, but] this blood has again ruined Hatti. Hatti has already made sufficient restitution for it. Because I have now come along, I and my household will make restitution for it through reparation and propitiatory gift.--COS 1.60.21-40

22



24

1 Kings 18:26-29

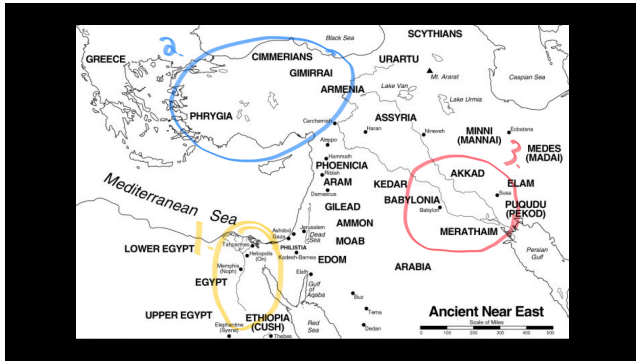
²⁶ So the [prophets of Ba'al] took the bull that [Elijah] gave them, prepared it, and called on the name of Ba'al from morning until noon, saying, "Ba'al, answers us!" But there was no sound; no one answered. Then they danced around the altar they had made. ²⁷ At noon Elijah mocked them. He said, "Shout loudly, for he's a god! Maybe he's thinking it over; maybe he has wandered away; or maybe he's on the road. Perhaps he's sleeping and will wake up!"

25

1 Kings 18:26-29

²⁸ They shouted loudly, and cut themselves with knives and spears, according to their custom, until blood gushed over them. ²⁹ All afternoon they kept on raving until the offering of the evening sacrifice, but there was no sound; no one answered, no one paid attention.

26



27



28

Generically speaking, the ancient Near Eastern worldview held to the existence of many gods. Each of these gods had a primary sphere of influence that was usually tied either to some aspect of nature or to geographic territory. -Blake Hearson, *Go Now to Shiloh: A Biblical Theology of Sacred Space*, 68

After being cleansed of leprosy, Na'aman carried back some Israelite soil to his native land, so that he might properly worship the God of Israel there [2Ki5]. This, of course, reflected the belief that the various gods were limited to geographic regions... [Likewise, t]he idea behind a temple in the ancient Near East was that of a dwelling place for the deity on earth.--Hearson, 70, 77

29

Inscription on the Temple of Nabu, Borsippa

Nabu, the god of wisdom and writing, declare[s], "In Borsippa, the city of my choice, I shall make my dwelling. There, my temple shall stand, and my name shall be honored."

30

Augustine, City of God 4.8

Fields: Rusina
Mountain rides: Jugatinus
Hills: Collatina
Valleys: Vallonia
Crop seeds: Seia
Crops: Segetia
Crop germination: Proserpina
Stem joints & knots: Nodutus
Folded husks: Volutina
Opened husks: Patelana
Doors: Forculus
Door hinges: Cardea
Door thresholds: Limentius

32

The Romans: Ritualized Prayer

33

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 28.2(3).10-11

It apparently does no good to offer a sacrifice or to consult the gods with due ceremony unless you also speak words of prayer. In addition, some words are appropriate for seeking favorable omens, others for warding off evil, and still others for securing help. We notice, for example, that our highest magistrates make appeals to the gods with specific and set prayers. And in order that no word be omitted or spoken out of turn, one attendant reads the prayer from a book, another is assigned to check it closely, a third is appointed to enforce silence.

34

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 28.2(3).10-11

In addition, a flutist plays to block out any extraneous sounds. There are recorded remarkable cases where either ill-omened noises have interrupted and ruined the ritual or an error has been made in the strict wording of the prayer.

35

Cato, *On Agriculture*, 139-140

When thinning a grove of trees, it is essential to observe the following Roman ritual: Sacrifice a pig as a propitiatory offering and repeat the following prayer: "Whether you are a god or goddess to whom this grove is sacred, as it is proper to sacrifice to you a pig as a propitiatory offering for the disturbance of this sacred place, and therefore for these reasons whether I or someone I have appointed performs the sacrifice, provided that it be performed correctly, for this reason, in sacrificing this pig--

36

Matthew 6:7-8

⁷ When you pray, don't babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they'll be heard for their many words. ⁸ Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him.

37

So What?

- 1. Unlike the Egyptians, we needn't fear bargaining.
- 2. Unlike the Hittites, we needn't fear bloodshed.
- 3. Unlike the Babylonians, we needn't fear a limited God.
- 4. Unlike the Romans, we needn't fear imperfect ritual.

38

Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

39

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.
