



Study guide for
HOW NOT TO PRAY
A CRITIQUE OF THE BOOK
Operating in the Courts of Heaven

Gnosticism. A religious movement popular in the second and third centuries of the Christian church. Gnosticism's influence can be seen in various Christian heresies and in Christian polemics against the movement's tendencies. Gnostics believed in the possibility of a higher level of spiritual knowledge, or gnosis, and recommended various means of achieving this higher spiritual state. Gnostics tended to depreciate the material world in favor of the higher spiritual world. The term is often used more loosely to refer to religious movements of any time period that emphasize esoteric spiritual knowledge.¹.

Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics

From this definition we can understand two types of modern Gnosticism.

- 1.) Movement that focus on the concept and theological content of gnosticism. They would pull hold to the same beliefs as outlined in many gnostic texts.
- 2.) Movements, teachers and practices that follow similar values and trajectories as gnosticism. While not embracing the same content they nevertheless elevate the spiritual over the natural to an unhealthy extent, As well as a valuing of the innovative creative and novel to the dismissal of anything time tested and traditionally experienced. They tend to use scripture in a loose if not creative way, engage in speculative theology, promote stratified and complex spiritual world-views, appeal to secret knowledge often given by direct revelation (vision dreams) without following tests of scripture. Lastly, they often promote an elite class or cast system among Christians based on spiritual knowledge, perceived spiritual endowments and/or proficiency in practices.

Summary of book

Operating in the Courts of Heaven, by Robert Henderson falls into this later category of gnostic-like or gnostic-lite take your pick. But before we get to far into this I would like to give a short summary of the theology argument outlined by the book.

Henderson's theology is build on the idea that God gave Adam, the first man, legal authority over the earth. When Adam sinned, that legal authority was transferred to Satan. Now God is legally barred from taking action on earth unless Christ came and won back the authority but did not fully depose Satan of his rule. Christ then gave His authority to the church empowering us by his Holy Spirit. Now it is up to God's people to take back that authority from Satan and give it to God. Apparently, this is accomplished in a real heavenly courtroom through legal means.

In the book, prayer, particularly an answered prayer, is viewed as a legal matter. God wants to answer your prayers but is constrained by legal rights that the devil has because of your sin, the sin or your forefathers, generational curses.

¹ Pocket Dictionary of apologetics and Philosophy of religion. C. Stephen Evans, (Downers Grove , ILL: InterVarsity Press 2002) pg. 49-50

The teaching is premised on a couple of broad notions

1. Judicial courts are operating in heaven
2. Satan has access to these heavenly courts to accuse us
3. Your sin, generational issues etc. give him the legal right to do so.

The book proposes that to assist God to answer your prayers, you need to go into the Courtrooms of Heaven to deal with sins by the legal process of the heavenly courts. We can get a ruling in our favor, and this will then enable our 'earthly' prayers to be more effective. Yea, it is all about effective prayer, but that should not be surprising in this theology, God wants to bless us, but He may be hindered on technical legal grounds. It is up to believers to grant God the legal right to fulfill his passion which is that believers would be fruitful and flourish and bring the kingdom in power and glory.

The Gnostic-lite aspects of 'Operating in the Courts of Heaven'²

1. The book Prioritization of spiritual over natural.

"We should only involve ourselves in that which is important to Heaven."

2. The book appeals to secret knowledge

Examples

A. Secret books

there are books or scrolls in Heaven that must be opened before the court of Heaven goes into session.

an understanding of 'the books' is foundational to court activity that allows God's Kingdom purposes to be done.

what are these books and what is written in them?... Psalm 139:16 tells us that each person has a book in Heaven.... God wrote down in a book the destiny and Kingdom purpose for each of our lives.Our individual book is a written record of all that God planned for us and the Kingdom impact He has destined for our lives. Every person ever born has a book written about them. The battle is to get what is in the book to manifest on the Earth.

Purpose is what is written in the books of Heaven about them and grace was the empowerment to bring it into the realities of the Earth realm. This was given to them before time began or in the counsel of the Lord.

² Referred to as C.O.H. from now on.

B. Secret judgment

Our judgment will not be so much about this sin or that sin. Our judgment will be based on how closely we lived our lives to what is written in the books of Heaven

C. Secret courts

Joshua the High Priest is told that he will have charge of the courts of Heaven. Notice that it is courts plural. This is significant. Even on Earth there are varying levels and types of courts that decide issues. There are small claims courts, criminal courts, civil courts, divorce courts, city courts, district courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court within my nation of America. All these courts have a different function and jurisdiction. These courts function within the sphere that has been granted to them. In Heaven there are many different courts that operate. Everyone is not recognized or allowed to operate in all courts.

D. Secret witnesses/voices

There is a very real cloud of witnesses in Heaven. They are a part of the court system of Heaven. They have a strategic function as witnesses in this judicial process. They cannot be made perfect without us. May we learn to flow in agreement with them for God's purposes to manifest on Earth."

Above example, from chapter on The cloud of witnesses. They are dead people in heaven, who testify on our behalf but their testimony can't be legit until we hear them and agree with them.

3. The book interprets scripture in a loose creative way, much like the Gnostics.

One example Rom 8:29-30

"To really understand the "counsel of the Lord" and the books of Heaven we must look at Romans 8:29-30. This passage unveils a five-step process of how to identify and birth the intentions of God into the Earth..... In this Scripture, Paul lists the 5 steps - foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified. To operate in the courts of Heaven and get what is in Heaven into the Earth, we must understand these stages."

Rom 8:29-30 is often called the golden chain of salvation. It is a text about salvation not step by step process on how to manifesting the 'book' of God's perfect plan for my life.

4. The book engage in speculative theology much like the Gnostics.

Ecclesia has a judicial responsibility to establish binding contracts with Heaven that allow God the legal right to invade and impact the planet. The Ecclesia also has the job of legally dissolving contracts with the devil that allow him to operate in the Earth.

The job of the Ecclesia is to grant God the legal right to fulfill His Kingdom passion. Once this is granted, we must land the scrolls/verdicts/judgments that come from the courts of Heaven. This requires angelic help. We need the angelic powers that have been deputized from Heaven to open our eyes and help us land the scrolls. Until these scrolls/books from Heaven are landed that which is standing in the way of God's will being done, will continue to resist. We need angelic and prophetic help to be able to move out of the way all that is resisting God's will from being done.

5. The book's author holds to the preexistence of the soul.

"We came as human spirits into the Earth. But we potentially were all spirits in the presence of the Lord first."

"The Hebrew people believe that before we were on Earth we were with God in Heaven. We were spirit beings with God and a part of the counsel of Heaven. They believe that as a part of this counsel, we 'agreed' to the plan that God needed us to fulfill. We accepted the assignment to be born in the time we were born and fulfill what we had committed to. Once we accepted this as a part of the counsel of the Lord, it was written in a scroll or book and we have now come to Earth to be the 'word' of that scroll made flesh"

6. Like the spiritual leaders of the Gnostics this book promotes class divisions among Christians based on spiritual knowledge and expertise (elitism).

"Our operation in the courts of Heaven is determined by the measurement of rule or jurisdiction we have been given."

"The fact that Paul spoke of great apostles says that there are apostles with different rankings in the spirit realm. Just like there are one star generals all the way up to five star generals in the United States of America military, there are also different levels of authority among apostles."

7. In the same way gnostics develop detailed stratified and complex spiritual worldview this book does the same for something as simple as prayer.

The book describes stratified and complex views of prayer that consists of multiple courts each with a different purposes, 4 types of angles, 8 voices that can give testimony. While Remaining vigilant because the accuser of the brethren is under every rock ready to spit some sick burns and accusations faster than Eminem. If he does call you to account you must silence him often while finding, reading, and declaring book of God's fatherly desire/decreed will over a particular situation. Now step back and consider how ridiculous all that is given the subject matter is prayer.

Taking them to Court

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE COURTS OF HEAVEN DOCTRINE

Let's begin with basics

First, Scripture does call God the Judge (yet not from the text Henderson uses to build his case). God's judicial role is in connection with his kingship. God is King and judge of all the earth thus God's eternal decrees have Sovereign authority behind them.

Second, Scripture says nothing of a legal system that operates in heaven. we have a basic understanding of hierarchy and authority. Scripture does not teach us to use this legal system legal system as a method of more effective prayer. Now Legal metaphors abound in Scripture but they must be treated with care and placed in proper historical context. Consider this advice from the Dictionary Biblical Imagery:

“Legal metaphors abound in the Bible. ... Given the importance of the Sinaitic law and the Mosaic code, the rules of conduct for individuals and the ceremonial law, it is not surprising that metaphors drawn from the law and legal procedures recur. But there are dangers in too simplistic an approach to these matters.

As with all metaphors, figures of speech drawn from the law and legal procedures communicate in proportion as their nonmetaphoric content is understood. In the case of biblical metaphors this presents a difficulty, since a number of different and very diverse legal systems as well as many centuries of development are involved. The cultural history and presuppositions of Anglo-American or any other legal tradition should not be imposed on such material.

A further problem is to know when, or whether, a passage or word that speaks through metaphor is reality or is reality simply expressed and transposed down for our understanding...(Dictionary of biblical imagery pg. 500)

For example, the proper biblical, literary and historical context for the courtroom imagery is found in the prophets. Over and over the prophets describe the imagery of a courtroom. In this imagery, God as judge and king, “god's people” are the ones on trial, the prosecutor is played by the prophet. The prophet's accusations are based on the people's transgression of God's covenant. The process is one of repentance or judgment not one of filing paperwork in the heavenly court clerks office in order to give God the right to bless us.

In light of the proper understanding of this “courtroom” metaphor. I would like to make a case against this book and its argument. In a different study we will look at the exegetical atrocities committed in this book.

That said,

I would like to state upfront I'm not a prophet nor the son of a prophet but I would like to lay before you dear reader a few lines of evidence. Testimonies if you will, voices of

the court, in support of the claim that this best-selling book is little more than rank falsehood. I have 8 witness lined up so let me call my first witness.....

The testimony of scripture

New Testament never once mentions the concept of accessing the courts of heaven. Henderson builds his case by creating a theological framework to support his method as well as make it appear logical and coherent. At no point does he directly teach what the Scriptures clearly teaching on prayer. Those times he did reference a text on prayer it was always with a thoughtless Interpretation covered over in buzz words and vague Descriptions.

The witness of church history

For 2,000 years Christians have been praying and teaching on prayer and not once has this teaching emerged. The only similarities systems we have are gnostic in flavor.

The testimony of sound hermeneutics

Henderson makes a big categorical assumption that is central to his argument. The assumption is this heavenly legal system is similar to the modern American judicial system. This would be laughable if he hasn't written six books on the various courts of heaven and how they mirror aspects of our modern judicial system. In this way the modern legal system is understood as the blueprint for the heavenly ones.

To define a biblical idea by a cultural categories is wrongheaded. Scripture was not written in 2008 but over 2000 years ago. Ancient court systems function differently from the one's today. Interpreting something in the historical context it was written in is a basic principle of sound hermeneutics.

Let's not forget the caution given us in the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: "There are many legal metaphors in the Bible. One should be careful not to carelessly incorporate modern notions into them." (Dictionary of biblical imagery pg. 505)

The voice of reason

The very concept of a heavenly court dealing in God's decreed will without divine sovereignty places God's authority and justice on the horns of a dilemma.

Reason one:

Premises: Both the concept of heavenly courts and its structure of authority are self-defeating concepts.

Reason: Does the courts of heaven have authority because God commanded it. Or does God only have authority in so far as the court allows it.

If the courts have authority because God commanded it then you say God is more powerful then the courts. If God is more powerful than the courts, it follows that the courts of heaven are unnecessary. God's centralized authority invalidates and makes idolatrous the practices and procedures associated with incurring legal authority

through the authority of the courts. We would not pray to an angel for an angel does not have the final word on a matter, further it would be idolatrous to do so. The same would be true of the courts, If they did not have the final “authoritative” word over a matter.

If you say the courts are more powerful than God then you make God ontologically subject to something, sense authority is a matter of ontology when one is discussing divinity. So for God to be God, such a God must be the greatest conceivable being. It follows necessarily, that if God is the greatest conceivable being, such a God must be the Final authority over all reality, heavenly or otherwise. So for God be God, such a God must be the final authority.

Counter argument: God is the final authority as the judge over the courts of heaven. Such an argument is illogical. It is erroneous to clam that God is the final authority as the judge. Because judges are servants of the court, and subject to the standards of the court. Thus, God as judge is necessarily subject to the standards of the courts and not the final authority. The concept of the heavenly court constituting an authority structure, to which God must be over in order to be God but under in order to be judge. This is illogical.

Given these facts and the above reasonings, Two clear conclusions can be drawn.

- 1) the concept of heavenly courts are meaningless in light of God’s sovereign authority as God
- 2) God under an exterior authority structures is illogical with reference to God in himself.

In summation, based on the authors on logic and theological system, the concept of heavenly courts and the concept of God under the authority of such a courts are both illogical self-defeating concepts.

Reason Two:

Premise: In the system Justice is made relativistic or fictitious.

Reason: It is generally agreed that whatever the courts decree is just. But there remains the question whether it is just because heavenly courts decree it or whether courts decree it because it is just. If it is just because the heavenly courts decree it then divine justice is dependent on human agency, thus relativizing justice. If the courts decree it because it is just. Then justice is a necessary and eternal truth above the nature of God. Yet it is the author’s claim by revelation from this God, that justice is based on God’s perfect individual will written in the books of life which is made of rainbows and leprechaun farts. (I added the last part to Highlight, it’s fictitious footing of such revelation when the source is not the last word on the matter) In the end, such justice is on a fictitious footing.

The witness of experinace

A self-evident arguments rooted in common human experience. Marriage is a good example of how Monomaniacal focus on perfect individual will and destiny for me as a person to the exclusion and denial of God's Sovereign is unlivable. if some one was properly "reading the signs" from God prayed in the courts for a spouse yet the other did not and choose someone else then the do the courts have real authority. If you don't consult the book, don't go to the courts and incorrectly married someone who is not your best does that mean that person is simultaneously missing out on "the best" and stealing someone else's "best". If we can steal someone else's "best" by choosing to marry the wrong person we could singlehandedly destroy the entire institution of marriage via the cascade effect. Dooming countless generations to marry the wrong person. This is the logic of absolute human agency in prayer as the only means of manifesting God's individual will in a believers life.

The voice of Conscience:

1.) In the American judicial system, requests are regularly denied because the plaintiff did not file the right paperwork in the right way. We are asked to believe "heavenly judicial system" works in much the same way. If such breaches of protocol can happen then what does that say about the character of the judge. If God is the judge and he allows someone, who would have been healed of cancer, to die a slow and painful death, all because that person did not file the right prayer in the right way. Even if that person in true faith through themselves on the mercy of the court, they would die because of a technicality. It would be only normal to presume such a judge to be cold indifferent, unrighteousness and capricious. Lack of compassion in such a response as well as the repulsive nature of such a judge reveals this is a bad way to understand prayer.

2.) The concept of prayer in this book is based on a selfless impulse to have a comfortable easy Christian life where God is your butler and you're in charge. One's conscience has to be seared by selfish desire to not see that there's may be something wrong with this view of prayer.

The testimony of common sense

The approach to prayer in the book is mechanistic. Henderson has to spend eight chapters constructing a spiritual worldview to make this form of prayer coherent. Now there was another guy who also taught on prayer his name was Jesus. The Jesus method of prayer is all we need. He is the founder of Christianity as well as the Lord and Savior of the world. If asked to choose between a convoluted, formulaic, method of praying built on levels of courts, and whispering angels. A method that has you filing the proper paperwork hopefully based on the right testimony or a method that begins "our father" and was first said by the author and finisher of my faith. I'm going to choose. It is going to be Jesus every-time. No matter how many times someone claims to greater effectiveness. In any case Jesus' petition "for daily bread" reminds me, effectiveness may not be measured in quality.

The witness of the book itself, the voice of a very man-centered theology.

*“The Lord says that He blots out our transgressions for His own sake. This means that **God needs us...**”*

Our words grant the Lord the legal right to fulfill His passion toward us, which is always mercy and goodness...

*I want to make a statement here that is at the core of this book. **It is our job as individuals and the Ecclesia to grant God, as the Judge of all, the legal right to fulfill His fatherly passion.** We should remember that God is a Father. In his heart, he carries dreams, desires and longings for His family, just as earthly fathers do. He longs to see these desires of His heart towards His family come to pass. God is also the Judge of all who must render legal judgments in righteousness and holiness. As we have discovered, there can be legal issues that hinder His fatherly desires being fulfilled. God will never compromise Himself as Judge in order to fulfill His fatherly desires. To do so would make Him less than God. Therefore, it is our job as His people, His Ecclesia, **to put in place the legal precedents needed for God to legally fulfill His desires as a Father.***

*The Judge of all also needs evidence presented that warrants the verdicts He desires. This is why I say, it is our job to agree with the voices of Heaven and present our case until **we grant God, as Judge, the legal right to fulfill His fatherly passion.***

I rest my case.

Basic New Testament teaching on Prayer

Part One: a study from the example of people praying

Prayers abound in the Bible.

From the time of Seth when, we are told, “men began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26 NIV) to the culmination of history in Revelation, the people of God pray. The Bible contains nearly fifty lengthy prayers recorded in prose sections and several hundred shorter prayers or references to praying. The writers are far more interested in showing people at prayer than in telling about prayer. Consequently, the images of prayer discussed in this article are drawn from the actual practice of prayer (e.g. Dan 6:10). These prayers show that *the primal images for prayer are relational. The major terms for prayer are conversational; it presupposes a mutual posture of trust and devotion; it concerns the range of life concerns; like a conversation between friends, it provides both comfort/support and challenge; and its purposes include service of others.*

Prayer as Conversation.

The dominant metaphor for prayer in the Bible is conversation with God. Ordinary words for speech and conversation (e.g. said, spoke, say, call, cry) describe acts of prayer as humans address the God who seeks relationship with his people. Expressive verbs for prayer (e.g. cry, beseech, seek) largely reflect the emotional state of the one praying rather than a technical vocabulary related to elaborate prayer ceremonies. In other ancient religions prayer can appear to involve a mastery of technique and esoteric knowledge. In the Hebrew Scriptures the primary image of prayer is simple asking, in a conversational manner. Implicit in this asking, which is neither demanding nor mere wishing, is the expectation that the asker is both humble and expectant.

The elements of speaking, waiting and listening in biblical prayer suggest a tone of conversation face to face. The person praying offers words to God and is confident that God hears the sentiment they express (Ps 34:6; Rom 8:26–27). Abraham's prayer for Sodom uses ordinary speech and even adopts a persuasive tone (Gen 18:23–33). David notes the need to wait on God in prayer (Ps 37:4; 40:1; see also Is 40:31). He describes calling out to God and receiving an answer (Ps 18:13; 30:10–11; 81:7): “When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted” (Ps 138:3 NIV). Isaiah calls the people to repent, reminding them of the conversation to which they can return: “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’ ” (Is 30:21 NIV). The constant nature of the prayer dialogue is essential to the intimacy of relating to God.

Jesus models the intimate nature of prayer as conversation. He related to God as a father, using the Aramaic Abba (an intimate term for “father”), yet this intimacy does not diminish his sense of God's holiness. Except for his agonizing cry on the cross (Mt

27:46 par. Mk 15:34), he always addresses God as Father in prayer and teaches his disciples to do the same (Mt 6:5–15; 7:7–11; Lk 11:2–4). Thus he makes the dialogue between God and his people a more personal conversation. He prays often (Lk 5:16) and urges his disciples to make prayer a part of their lifestyle (Lk 18:1). He instructs his disciples in prayer (Lk 9:28; 11:1) and makes prayer his first action in times of trouble. The Gospels record his praying at all important events in his life (baptism, Lk 3:21; transfiguration, Lk 9:29; selection of twelve disciples, Lk 6:12; Gethsemane, Mt 26:36–46 par. Mk 14:32–42; Lk 22:39–46).

An exchange of confidence. Prayer is an exchange of confidence: we assume the stance of a trusting child and pray with faith that is matched by obedience; God remembers our frailty, loves us as his children, hears and answers our prayers. Biblical praying must be set in contrast with many other schemes for influencing deity common in the ancient Near East. Biblical faith excludes any attempts to use magic or formula to control or placate God. Elijah offers a simple, straightforward prayer clearly rooted in his relationship with God, “I am your servant,” while the priests of Baal vainly seek to win the favor of deity through “frantic prophesying” and bloodletting (1 Kings 18:16–38 NIV).

Our posture of trust and obedience. In many societies certain times and postures become symbols of prayer: a bowed head, closed eyes, folded hands or a kneeling position. In Scripture, posture, movement and time are mentioned in relationship with prayer, but no single time, place, gesture or posture becomes a metonymy for prayer. When Hezekiah prayed for deliverance he took a threatening letter to the temple and “spread it out before the Lord” (Is 37:14 NIV). People pray while standing, kneeling, lying down, lifting their hands, sitting, bowing or pounding their chest. The physical activity symbolizes an engagement of the whole being in the act of praying. But the bodily symbol is significant only if it accurately reflects the heart's position toward God.

Prayer is deeply affected by the fact that human beings look “on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7 NIV). Long prayers in public places oppose the stance that Jesus taught (Mk 12:40). Likewise, even eloquent prayers are shunned if they are spoken by the unrighteous (Prov 28:9; Is 16:12). The posture most important in prayer is a posture of rest (trust in God) and of action (obedience).

There is a deep and necessary connection between our praying and our living (Prov 15:24; Jas 5:16). Moses and Samuel are singled out as ones who prayed effectively (Jer 15:1). Jesus modeled the posture of submitted action as he prayed in Gethsemane: “May your will be done” (Mt 26:42). Most important, his lifestyle and prayers said the same thing (Heb 5:7). Those whose prayers God honors come to him with humility and trust, as a child to a father or like a weaned child in a mother's lap (Ps 131:2), seeking love and a sense of belonging.

God's posture of mercy and grace. God positions himself to assist the upright in heart; he answers prayer to be faithful to his own character and trusts humans with a

choice of actions toward him. Often biblical characters suggest to God that he should act in a given way because his honor, glory, grace, mercy or trustworthiness demands such a response. The narrative accounts of these prayers leave the distinct impression that God is pleased when his character is appealed to but not presumed upon (Ex 32:11–14; Num 14:13–22; Deut 9:26–29; Neh 1:4–11). For example, Abraham based his prayer on God's character—"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25 NIV)—and Moses appeals to God's faithfulness to himself when he prays, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people" (Ex 32:12–13 NIV). One of Scripture's most stunning pictures of God answering prayer comes in response to this prayer: "the Lord relented" (Ex 32:14 NIV). Joshua prays with similar logic after the defeat at Ai (Josh 7:6–9); he forms his plea in the question "What then will you do for your own great name?" (NIV). Daniel and Jesus also recognize God's stance in prayer as being that of a benevolent master whose goal is to be faithful to his own ideal (Dan 9:19; Lk 11:2).

Prayer is an exchange of confidence between God and his covenant people: God is positioned in mercy, waiting for his people's obedience, while God's people are positioned in trust, recalling his promises. Moses and Samuel exemplify a right relationship with God: "They called on the Lord and he answered them. He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud; they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them" (Ps 99:6–7 NIV).

The prayer life shown in the Bible does not involve technical achievement limited to a few who have learned a system of symbols and incantations, but is open to all because of God's relationship with his chosen people. The relational basis of biblical prayers is captured by Moses' great invitation to prayer: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" (Deut 4:7 NIV). This accessible, inviting aspect of prayer is captured in David's statement "This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps 34:6 NIV).

Prayer across the range of life experience. God is near to us in every moment of life. Thus all realms are open to prayer. Prayers are prompted by distress (Ps 18:6), by sickness (Ps. 30:2), by a need for guidance (Ps 119:18), by repentance from sin (Ps 30:8–9), by bewilderment at God's ways (Ps 22:1) or by the hollow feeling of distance from him (Ps 33:12). The verb seek typically describes the action of prayer and depicts it as part of the quest after wisdom and life (Ps 119). The book of Psalms is made up entirely of prayers, reflecting the range of emotions people experience throughout their lifetime.

Other Prominent Images for Prayer.

Intimacy with God.

Prayer is an intimate meeting with God, like resting in a mother's lap (Ps 131:2). The prophet promises that in prayer God “will quiet you with his love, ... will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph 3:17 NIV).

An avenue of service. Those who offer prayer in the OT and in the NT agree that one central goal of prayer should be for power to help others. Abraham, Moses, Joshua and Daniel pray on behalf of the Israelite people, as do all of the prophets. The apostles request prayer from the churches for their ministry (Rom 15:31; Col 4:3; Heb 13:18–19).

Jesus taught the disciples to use prayer as an avenue of service, not as a means of personal power. He prayed for those seen as a burden, such as children (Mt 19:13). He withdrew to pray when in need of strength to continue ministry (Lk 5:16). His prayer of blessing and intercession in John 17 echoes the language of public prayers of the OT , furthering his image as prophet, priest and king (Jn 17:1–26). The book of Hebrews gives the picture of Jesus as high priest who “always lives to intercede for [us]” (Heb 7:25 NIV), in contrast to the image of Satan's continual slandering of us (Rev 12:10).

Images of prayer's unique power.

Uniquely, prayer allows God's children to take part in two worlds. In Revelation the elders who minister before the Lord hold “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Rev 5:8). Prayer is unlike most other communication, for when we pray we can expect that the One being addressed will understand our inarticulate groans and translate them into effective prayers. The picture is of a loving parent who listens to a child's confused complaint and responds to what is deeply wished but not well expressed. “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom 8:26 NIV).

Though we may often feel that prayer is of little consequence, Jesus reminds us that it can do remarkable things: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you” (Lk 17:6).

Those who prayed well.

Perhaps the most indelible images of prayer in the Bible involve those who model authentic praying, such as Abraham's other-oriented prayer for Sodom (Gen 18:16–33) and his prayer for his infertile wife Sarah (Gen 15:1–4). When Israel is in bondage in Egypt, we are given a moving picture of God interpreting the exhausted cry of his people and acting (Ex 3:7). Moses engages in poignant dialogue with God about his fitness to lead the people (Ex 3:1–4:7). Joshua's prayer life is rich with imagery. He prays after the defeat at Ai and is told that the problem is hidden sin (Josh 7:6–15). A negative example is found in Joshua 9, when the Israelites make a foolish treaty because they “did not ask direction from the Lord” (Josh 9:14 NRSV). Joshua receives a dramatic answer to his prayer that the sun would stand still (Josh 10:12–14).

Hannah's prayer—vow for a child (1 Sam 1:10) is gripping. Solomon's prayer for wisdom must be considered one of the major models for prayer (1 Kings 3:5–9). Elijah and Elisha show themselves to be persons of great prayer, especially in the contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:2–18). When surrounded by the Assyrian army, Hezekiah spreads out a threatening letter before the Lord, who is then described with majestic images (2 Kings 19:15–19). At two points Jeremiah is told to stop interceding for the people (Jer 7:16; 11:14), and his outburst of anger at God shows how true prayer is marked by honesty (Jer 20:7–18). Daniel prays three times a day and records one of the most other—oriented and God—centered prayers of Scripture (Dan 9:4–19).

Jesus' prayers are remarkable for their sheer frequency, their simplicity and their direct address of God as “Abba.” Paul's prayers as recorded in his epistles show a person who is deeply thankful (Rom 1:8–9; Eph 1:3–14; 3:14–21). Hebrews gives picture of Jesus always interceding for the saints (Heb 7:25), and prayer is pictured as allowing us access to the throne of grace (Heb 4:4–16). James provides a picture of caring for the sick through prayer (Jas 5:13–18), and Revelation 4–5 vividly describes the prayer-filled heavenly worship of the Lamb.

Prayer is shown in Scripture to be a key dimension of the divine-human relationship. It marks the people of God and is rooted in human need and divine love and sufficiency. Asking for help is the primary image for prayer in the Bible, but images of nurture, confrontation of God by his people and of people by God), quiet communion and dialogue are very present as well.

Biblical and Historical Survey of the Practice of Prayer

Prayer in the New Testament Period

In the New Testament period, prayer retained many of its connections with Judaism—particularly in the recitation of the Shema and the set times of prayer. Jesus' example and teachings initiated a return to honest, genuine prayer to the God of Israel.

Connections with Judaism

Charlesworth notes that the earliest Christians “took with them ... not only the tradition of personal, spontaneous prayer, but also some revered fixed liturgies” and traditions (Charlesworth, “Prolegomenon,” 266). One such tradition was the daily recitation of the Shema (Deut 6:4–9), which was important not only in Jesus' praying, but in His teaching that the entire Law stemmed from its principles (Mark 12:29–31; Matt 22:37–40).

The New Testament texts indicate that early Christians in and around Jerusalem continued to pray in the temple. For example, Acts notes that Peter and John traveled to the temple for mid-day prayer (Acts 3:1; see 2:46; 5:12) and continued to observe the set times for prayer (Acts 10:9, 30; 11:5; see also 10:3–4). Luke's comment that believers “devoted themselves ... to the prayers” (ταῖς προσευχαῖς, *tais proseuchais*; Acts 2:42) reflects early Jewish Christians' adherence to the set times for prayer. Both Jews and Christians recognize similarities between the Amidah and the Lord's Prayer, despite the Amidah's considerably longer length (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4; Baumgardt, “Kaddish in the Lord's Prayer,” 164–69; Keener, *Matthew*, 140–46).

Similarities include:

- Sanctification of the name of God (Benediction 3; “hallowed be your Name,” Matt 6:9);
- A desire for the glory of God to be manifest “on earth as in heaven” (Benediction 3; Matt 6:10);
- Petition for forgiveness of sin (Benediction 6; “forgive us our debts,” Matt 6:12);
- Requests for adequate material provision (Benediction 9; “give us today our daily bread,” Matt 6:11);
- Hope that God will cause the ruin of evil (Benediction 12; “deliver us from the evil one,” Matt 6:14).

While Jesus' prayer is in some ways an abbreviation of the Amidah, its theological themes remain. The rabbis debated whether the people were required to recite the standardized prayers of Judaism (especially the Amidah) in their entirety but eventually conceded that abbreviated forms were better than no prayer at all (Mishnah tractate Berakhot 4:3; Babylonian Talmud tractate Berakhot 28b).

The Aramaic terms that periodically appear in the New Testament also point to the early Christian connection with Judaism in prayer. The terms “Abba” (“Father”; Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) and “Maranatha” (“Come, Lord”; 1 Cor 16:22) are used in direct address to God. Additionally, Jesus' citation of Psa 22:1 (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34)

in its original language points to the Jewish influences upon the prayer life of the early church. Cullmann suggests that even the terms “Ephphtha” (“be opened,” Mark 7:35) and “Talitha kum” (“little girl, arise,” Mark 5:42) could be understood as “invocations in prayer” (Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 26).

Paul’s prayers have many connections with Jewish traditions due to his Jewish upbringing—most prominent are his doxologies and thanksgivings. While Paul offered spontaneous prayers, petitions, and doxologies, he did so from the basis of his Jewish training and heritage. Doxologies—short ascriptions of praise to God, often written in the third person and with an optative verb—reflect the berakoth prayers (short “blessing” statements) of Paul’s worship heritage. Jews recited the berakoth at various points during the worship liturgy. They often began with the phrase, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe.” Descriptive suffixes were commonly attached to these berakoth (e.g., “who made the heavens and the earth”). Multiple doxologies appear throughout the New Testament (Eph 3:20–21; Rom 11:33–36; 16:25–27; 1 Tim 6:15–16; Heb 13:20–21; 1 Pet 5:10–11; 2 Pet 3:18; Jude 24–25; Rev 5:12, 7:12). Short “blessing” ascriptions are also common (e.g., “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”; see Phil 4:20; Rom 9:5; 2 Tim 4:18).

The God Who Listens

Although prayer in the earliest church still had ties to Judaism, New Testament prayer reflects a move away from the standardized Jewish forms of prayer and a return to a simpler, more heartfelt communication. Jesus taught that genuine prayer did not involve “babbling like the pagans” (Matt 6:7) to garner God’s attention, for God is eager to hear the prayers of His people and knows their needs before they ask for them (Matt 6:8). Two of Jesus’ parables describe Yahweh as a God who listens and acts quickly. The parable of the Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1–8) places prayer in contrast to a poor, defenseless widow requesting justice of a town magistrate, who refuses the widow until her persistence wins him over (Luke 18:2, 4, 6). Rather than recommending continual petitioning of God until He grants our requests, this parable demonstrates that God is not like the judge. Unlike the judge, God “will see that they get justice, and quickly” (Luke 18:8). The parable of the Friend Knocking at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8) has the same effect, for petitioners do not have to keep knocking to get God’s attention. As Snodgrass notes, “God is not like the sleeper in that God is not reluctant but is eager to respond” (Snodgrass, “Anadeia and the Friend at Midnight,” 512).

Christian Innovations to Prayer

“Abba, Father”. The New Testament introduces several innovations to prayer, including the use of the term “Abba” (αββα, abba) or “Father” as a term of direct address. While Yahweh is described as a father on several occasions in the Old Testament, He is never addressed as such (Deut 32:6; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Pss 68:5; 89:26; Isa 63:16; Jer 3:4, 19; Mal 1:6; 2:10). Jesus’ address of God as “Abba, Father,” communicates an intimacy with God that was absent from Jewish prayer of His day (Mark 14:36). Paul taught his readers that the use of “Abba” in prayer signified their adoption as children of God (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Barr notes that while “Abba” reflects intimacy and affection, it was a “solemn, responsible, adult address to a Father” (Barr, “Abba Isn’t ‘Daddy,’ ” 46; Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 22–24).

Prayers of Thanksgiving. New Testament prayer—particularly Paul’s prayers—also emphasize thanksgiving more than the typical Graeco-Roman prayers (Aune, “Prayer in the Greco-Roman World,” 36–37). Thanksgiving is more prominent in Paul’s letters than any other prayer vocabulary. In this respect, he prayed like Jesus, who spontaneously prayed with thanksgivings (Matt 11:25–26). Cullmann notes that prayers of thanks are noticeably absent from Jesus’ lips in the Gospels because thanksgivings were staples of liturgical and meal-time prayers and unnecessary to record for a Jewish audience (Prayer, 29–30).

Prayer in Jesus’ Name. An additional characteristic of Christian prayer is prayer in the name of Jesus. In ancient cultures, people’s names were tied to their character, and names often had communicative effect (Exod 15:3; Psa 54:1; Prov 18:10). For example, Abram (אַבְרָם, avram, “great father”) became Abraham (אַבְרָהָם, avraham, “father of multitudes,” Gen 17:5); Jacob was so named because he “grasps the heel,” an idiom for “he deceives” (יַעֲקֹב, ya'aqov; Gen 25:26); Jesus was so named because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21; יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, yehoshua', Ἰησοῦς, Iēsous, “Yahweh is salvation” or “Yahweh saves”). Jews revered the name of God and connected it to His reputation. He is identified in Exodus as “Yahweh, Yahweh,” (היה היה, hyh hyh; Exod 3:14), the God who is loving and compassionate but does not leave sin unpunished (Exod 34:6–7). This introduction connects God’s name with His character as a just, righteous, and merciful God. To do harm or bring shame to the name of God was to dishonor His reputation (Lev 22:32; Isa 42:8; Jer 23:27; Ezek 36:23).

Jesus taught His disciples to honor God’s name as they pray (Matt 6:9). He also tied His own character and personality to the reputation of God by asking them to pray in His name. Jesus saw His character as so identified with that of God that anything requested in His name would be granted (John 14:13–14). The earliest believers continued to pray “in the name of Jesus,” knowing that “if we ask anything according to his [God’s] will, he hears us” (1 John 5:13–15). In a limited number of cases, prayer was addressed to Jesus Himself (Acts 7:59; 1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20), but the pattern of the New Testament was to pray to God in the name of (or on the basis of the person and work of) Jesus.

Intercession of the Spirit. Divine assistance in prayer from the Holy Spirit is a distinctive characteristic of Christian prayer in the New Testament. Whereas the prophets, priests, and holy men of Jewish tradition served as intercessors between God and His people, so now the Holy Spirit serves as intercessor (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:38; Rom 8:15–17; Gal 4:6; Eph 1:13–14). The Spirit’s intercession grants believers immediate access to God while offering help in times of need: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us” (Rom 8:26).

Prayer in the Early Church

In the post-apostolic era, the early church continued to mix spontaneous elements of prayer with liturgical and standardized forms, following the pattern of Jesus and Paul.

Dugmore believed that the Daily Office—a set of fixed times for daily prayer and worship—originated in the synagogue, with the early church adapting the liturgy for its own use (Dugmore, *Influence of the Synagogue*, 7–58, 111–113). More careful study demonstrates that the early church, while retaining some Jewish practices, adapted those traditions toward authentic expressions of faith as a watchful anticipation of Jesus’ second coming (Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 39–40; C. Jones, *The Study of Liturgy*, 399–403).

The Lord’s Prayer became the standard prayer in the Daily Office (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). As Jews recited the Shema and the Amidah at fixed hours during the day, so Christians in the second century prayed the Lord’s Prayer morning, mid-day, and evening (Didache 8; Apostolic Constitutions 7:47–49). The prescribed prayers of the Apostolic Constitutions retain characteristics and themes inherited from Judaism that were Christianized for the church (Fiensy, *Prayers Alleged to Be Jewish*, 1–10, 129–154; van der Horst, *Early Jewish Prayers*, 1–97). Believers also said prayers at mealtimes during the services of the church (see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 65, 67).

The prayer practices of the early church continue to influence believers in the modern world. The “A.C.T.S. Model” of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) has its genesis in the teaching of Origen³ (ad 185–225). Origen counseled that good prayer consisted of four components: ascriptions of glory to God through Christ, common thanksgivings, a recitation of personal sin, and then “the asking for the great and heavenly things, both personal and general” (Origen, *On Prayer*, 23.1).⁴

Leslie T. Hardin, “Prayer,”
in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*

³ in my [Dawson] estimation Origen is just the church father/Heretic(jk) who just keeps on surprising me. Just when I think I understand the existent of his influence he swoops in and surprise me.

⁴ Leslie T. Hardin, “Prayer,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), n.p., Logos Edition.

