

PRAYER IN THE BIBLE

Fr. R. J. Raja S.J.,
St. Joseph's College, Trichy

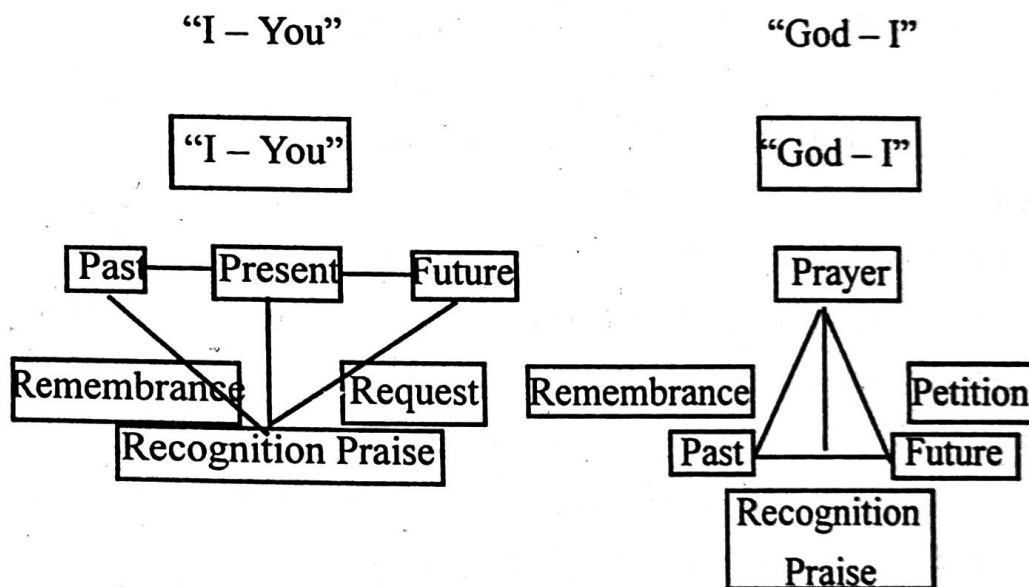
Introduction

The II Vatican Council has marked the watershed in the attitude of the Church towards the Bible. Almost in similar terms it has exhorted the various sectors of the people in the Church to a sincere and serious commitment to the word of God in the Bible.

Those *in priestly formation* are advised to derive “their nourishment from *reading and meditating* on the sacred Books day by day” (OT.16). *Priests* are persuaded that “their knowledge should be drawn primarily from *reading and meditating* on the sacred scriptures” (PO. 19). *The Religious* are not left behind. They are urged “to attain” the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ (Phi 3:8) through *reading* these divine writings and *meditating* on them (PC. 6). In fine *all the Faithful* are exhorted that since, ‘Ignorance of Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’ (Jerome), “they should gladly put themselves in touch with the Sacred Text itself whether it be through *the liturgy* or through *devotional reading* or through *instructions...* remembering that *prayer* should accompany *the reading* of the Sacred Scriptures” (DU 25). With these repeatedly stimulating words of the Council we may enter right away in to our topic ‘Prayer in and according to the Bible’.

General framework of Prayer in the Bible

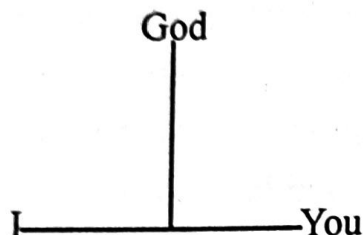
In common parlance biblical prayer may be described as a personal encounter between God and the human beings, culminating in an intimate communion between both. We may visualize this experience analogically in terms of human relationships which take place in the "I – You" plan. What normally transpires when the "I" meets the "you" is a "remembrance", a "recognition", and perhaps, a "request" or "praise". In the divino – human encounter (prayer) too there emerge recollection, praise, thanksgiving, adoration, petition, entreaty, expostulation, confession, meditation etc., leading to some form of communion. All these may be ultimately reduced to the four basic features which characterize human encounters as mentioned above. We may portray these two scenes through the following diagrams.



Biblical Prayers comprise basically of these four elements (cf. Dt 26:5-11). Some may have one or two or all of these in varying proportions.

Still another characteristic of Biblical prayer which needs to be underscored, especially in our times, is its *social dimension*. It is far from an exaggeration to affirm that our interpersonal relationships affect our relationship with God (Mt 5:21-26; 25:31-46). In different terms, Biblical prayer has both a *horizontal* as well as a *Vertical* orientation. Both are so

intertwined that when one is affected the other too experiences the consequences. Diagrammatically we may portray the picture so:



Our general analysis of Biblical prayer therefore is based on the following two premises:

- I) It consists of: Recognition, remembrance, request and praise
- II) It is: Vertical – Horizontal (= communitarian)

These are best understood in their development through the major sources of the Bible in their chronological sequence.

I. God – Humans encounter

1) The OT

A) The J.E. Sources (J – 10th C; E – 9th and 8th C)

Prayer is portrayed here as a conversation between God and the human beings (Gen 3:8-19; 4:9-15; 15:1-6 etc). While in the prayer of Noah (Gen 9:25-27) there appear elements of petition and praise, in that of Melchizedek (Gen 14:19-20) we find praise and recall. In the prayer of Jacob (Gen 32:24-29) the J editors suggest (after the “river – demon” myth) that prayer implies *a struggle*, which imagery will be used later on by our Lord (Lk 11:5-8; 18:1-8). By use of the terms “agonizomai” (Col 4:12) and “Synagonizomai” (Rom 15:30) to denote prayer, Paul intends the same. When Th. Merton writes, “Man’s real power lies hidden in the agony which makes him *cry out* to God, and there he is at the same time *helpless and omnipotent*” he subscribes to the same idea. Gen 24:12-14 and 24:26-27 must both be considered parts of one prayer in which all the 4 elements of prayer appear.

24:12-14 – recognition and petition

24:26-27 – Praise and recall.

The characteristics of a natural encounter as well as a *two – way intercourse* are preserved generally by the J. E., sources, though the individual elements themselves are not so well organized.

B) The Deuteronomic School (8th to 6th C)

Since prayer is formulated within the framework of the *covenant* (Dt 4:23), the emphasis here is more on the element of recall of God's mighty deeds in favour of Israel (Dt 4:32-39; 7:18-19; 9:25-29). Prayer is more organized around the central sanctuary and becomes part of *temple liturgy*. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple exhibits a well-knit and coherent pattern of prayer:

I Kgs 8:23-40:

8:23,36,28	-	recognition
: 23,27,40	-	praise
: 25-26,29-30,		
31,33,34	-	petition
: 24,26,35,39,40	-	recall

As one can see the seeds of the prayer of the Christian liturgies are already sown here.

C) Prophets before the Exile (Before 587 BC)

Moral requirements more than ceremonies and rituals receive prominence in the early prophets (Am 4:4-5; Is 1:1-11; Hos 8:11-13; Mic 6:6-8). Prayer becomes more personal and a matter of *the heart* (Hos 7:14) and its basis is of course the past deeds of God for his people Israel (Hos 11:1-8; Mic 6:4-5).

Is. 6 is the first clear testimony to a *personal experience* of God in prayer. Familiar worship is transformed into an ecstatic theophany in which confession (6:5) leads to cleansing (6:6-7); cleansing to commitment (6:8)

and commitment to commission (6:9-10) – a clear foretelling of the true goal of prayer as developed later in the NT. *Jeremiah's* prayer too is a *personal meditation*, where in his intercourse with God the elements of recognition, praise, recall and petition are harmoniously blended together. Although he condemns temple worship (7:4,21-26), yet one finds the basic elements of prayer in his disappointed cry.

Jer 20:7-13:

20:12	-	recognition
: 13	-	praise
: 12, 12	-	petition
: 7, 10	-	recall

We now pass on to what is called “The Prayer Book of the Bible” namely the psalms and see how the elements of prayer as mentioned above are verified here.

D) The Psalms (900 – 150BC)

Most psalms are situated in actual life of the people (“Sitz im Leben”) and are often liturgical in their origin. The prayer experience of Israel reaches its peak in them. Indeed the psalms constitute the prayer – world of Israel. Though all the psalms are prayers in various forms, yet five of them (17; 86; 90; 102; 142) are specifically called “prayers” (“tephillah”). Some of the psalms, especially the so-called lament psalms contain in themselves all the four basic elements of prayer. See for example:

Ps. 17		Ps.86
1, 6, 7, 13, 14.....	recognition.....	1, 2, 12, 15
5, 7, 15, 17.....	praise.....	8, 9, 10, 13
1, 2, 6, 14,	petition.....	1, 2, 6, 7, 11, 16, 17
3, 4, 5, 17.....	recall.....	5, 13, 17, 18

The rehearsal (recall and recognition) of God’s deeds in history (9:1; 44:1-8; 66:5-12; 68:7-8; 77:11-20; 106-114) leading to prayers of

praise (Hymns and Thanksgiving pss.) and *Petition* (Lament pss.) form the warp and woof of the psalmic prayer world of nearly ten centuries!

E) After the Exile (537 BC—)

The destruction of the Temple (587BC) and the dispersion of the Jews (the Diaspora) gave rise to numerous *Synagogues* which played a major role in the prayer life of Israel of this period. Though the predominant elements in the synagogue service were the reading of the scriptures and the prayer of thanksgiving ('Shema' – Benedictions), yet one does not fail to find the basic elements of prayer at this period too. We may cite two examples:

Nehemiah 9 (Ezra's Prayer)	-	II Mac. 15:21-34
9 : 6, 7, 32.....	recognition.....	15 :22, 23, 29
: 5, 6, 17, 31, 32.....	praise.....	: 23,29,34,36
: 32-37.....	petition.....	: 21,23,24,26,27
: 9- 15,19-31.....	recall.....	: 22

Thus the ground is prepared for NT prayer where once again, both in the prayers of Jesus and in his teaching on prayer and in the prayers of the early Church the same elements are underscored and realized.

2) The NT

A) Jesus and prayer

It is the same Jesus who taught: "Ask, it will be given you" (Mt 6:7 – petition), says, "I glorified you on earth" (Jn 17:4 – *praise*), and addresses God, "Father" (Jn 17:24-25-recognition), and reminisces the past deeds of God: "You have given them to me" (Jn 17:6-11-recall). Different elements receive prominence at different moments in his prayer life.

Jesus prayed at all the important moments in his life (cf. especially Luke), and he has instructed us to pray always (Lk 18:1), more especially in the moments of temptation (Lk 22:40). The basic dispositions of Jesus'

prayer: surrender (Lk 22:42) and perseverance (Lk 11:5-7; 18:1-8) portray the true prayer mood of all times. His own prayer (the 'Our Father') which he has taught as, is a sure guide for our prayers, and at the same time a summary of both the Jewish piety and Christian teaching on prayer:

Mt 6:9-13	-	Lk 11:2-4
6: 9	- recognition	11:2
: 9-10, 11-13	- petition	: 3-4
: 9-10	- praise	: 2
: 10	- recall	: 4

Through this prayer the Gospels reflect the life situation of the early Church and present at the same time, the basis for her practice of prayer. The explication and the revitalization take place in the actual prayer life of the early Christian community (as revealed in the Acts of the Apostles), and especially in the letters of Paul and in his own prayers.

B) The Early Church

A typical example of the prayer of the early Christians is portrayed by Luke in Acts 4 in the context of violent persecutions against the community. It is a good model for how our prayer should be in the context of trials and difficulties, hardships and sufferings:

4: 24	-	recognition
: 29 – 30	-	petition
: 24	-	praise
: 25 – 28	-	recall

In the letters of Paul too we see the Christian practice of prayer in all its fullness. Almost every letter of his begins and ends with a blessing to God (*praise*). He then makes his *petitions* to God on behalf of the various communities (I Cor 16:23; Rom 15:13; II Thes 3:16) and recalls always the faithfulness and the goodness and the blessings of God (I Cor 1:9; Rom 15:5 I Thes 5:24). Of course his prayers are always addressed to God through Christ Jesus (*recognition*). See:

I Cor 1:2 – 4	-	II Thes 3:16-18
1: 3 -	recognition	- 3: 16
: 2 – 3 -	petition	- : 16
: 3 -	praise	- : 16 – 18
: 3 – 4 -	recall	- : 16 -17

From the above brief analysis of both the OT and NT prayers, we could gather a few conclusions which could be of help to us in our own prayer life, before we pass on to consider the communitarian aspect of Biblical prayer.

i) Biblical prayer is *a dialogue* and a two-way process where both God and the human person meet. Both speak and both listen and react (Gen 12:1-4; 15:1-6; Ex 32:11-13; Lk 19:1-10; Mt 17:1-8; Jn 4:1-42 etc).

ii) Biblical prayer derives its origin from *the covenant* that establishes “father – son / daughter” relationship between God and the people. The “God – humans” relationship, The “God – Israel” relationship (OT) yields place to the “God Israel” relationship which in turn becomes the “father – son / daughter relationship of both the OT and the NT” (Ex 6:7; Dt 26:17; Jer 7:23; Ez 14:11; Mt 26:26-29; I Cor 11:23-25; Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-17 etc).

iii) Biblical prayer is very *personal* in so far as a remembrance is made of God’s mercy as displayed in one’s own past life, both in joys and in sorrows (Jer 11:18-20; 12:1-5; Pss 51; 103; II Cor 12:7-8 etc).

iv) Biblical prayer is something *divine*. Because we are children of God, the Spirit himself / herself cries from within us “Abba” (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-17; Eph 5:19-20). Prayer is “the Divine in us crying to the Divine above us”. We only join the Spirit in prayer. We live in Christ, we also pray in Christ and more obviously, we pray in His spirit.

v) Biblical prayer flowers in a deep *experience of God* in one's life, as is portrayed in the examples of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, Jesus, Paul etc. In all that we think, speak and do, in joy and sorrow, amid noise and in quiet, we must taste God, see him, hear him, touch him, feel him and sense him. This is indeed the life of prayer as well as the prayer of life. When God becomes the centre of our life, that life becomes prayerful (Pss 63; 23; 27; 121; 139; Jer 15:18-19; Eph 4:25-31; I Cor 10:31; I Jn 1:1-4).

vi) Biblical prayer takes place in an atmosphere of *humility*. The attitude that of myself I can do nothing, but with him I can achieve anything, is the starting point of all prayers and petitions in the Bible. For, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Cor 12:10; 6:4-5; Rom 5:3; Gal 6:4) is the 'mantra' which is behind all successful prayers in the Bible.

vii) Biblical prayer is rooted in a *strong hope coupled with faith* and the strength that flows from it (Mt 6:25-34; Mk 9:23; Lk 8:50; 12:22-31). This hope is born from the experience we have of God's loving providence over our own life and in the history of the world (Mt 7:7-11; Lk 11:9-13).

viii) Biblical prayer is always within as well as for *the community* which is dealt with in the following section.

II. The Communitarian Aspect of Biblical Prayer

In the previous section we dealt with Biblical prayer as God-centred, namely, people recognize God, recall his past deeds in their favour, praise him for the benefits received from him and implore and petition him for further gifts in the future. But human beings are not lonely islands by themselves individually, but *a community* willed by God (Gen 1:26-27; 2:18; 4:9-10) like himself. Both in the OT and the NT God relates

himself to the humans as a community. The idea of corporate personality among Israel is also the natural outcome of the covenant (Ex 19:1-6; 24:1-8).

Further, because the God of the Bible is not only “the other”, but the “Emmanuel – God” (Is 7:14; Mt 1:22) who “became a human being and lived among us” (Jn 1:14) he also belongs to the human family (Heb 2:10-18; 4:15-16; 5:1-8) of which all of us are brothers and sisters (Gal 3:26-28). This becomes the basis of communitarian prayer in the Bible.

In the OT, we could specially limit ourselves to the psalms for our consideration, since in these the prayer of the Israelites reaches its climax and since these also cover fairly a large period (900 – 150 BC roughly) in the history of Israel.

The individual Israelite was conscious of his solidarity with the rest of the community. Some of the psalms express this solidarity as we see below. The “I” in these psalms could and does represent the whole Israel:

- egs: Ps 85:7-8 : “Show *us* your steadfast love.... Let *me* hear what God the lord will speak”
- 118:27-28: “The Lord is God; he has given *us* light... you are *my* God; I will give thanks to you”
- 44:4-5: “You are *my* king and *my* God... through you *we* push down our foes...”
- 40:9-10: “*I* have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation”.
- 106:4, 6, 47: “Remember *me*, O Lord.... both *we* and our ancestors have sinned... save *us* O Lord our God”.

From these random examples it is clear how the singular and the plural intermingle and coalesce and stand one for the other. Thus when an individual Israelite prayed, he/she prayed for Israel and with Israel as one nation and one people.

In the NT, because of Christ's insertion of himself to assume our human lot, our solidarity with one another becomes more profound (Mt 25:32-46; I Cor 12:14-26 etc). We are "the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (I Cor 12:27). Hence the Christian's prayer world too assumes a communitarian aspect. A few examples may illustrate our contention.

Luke is called the evangelist of prayer. His Gospel contains ten passages on prayer which are found only in him. In the Acts roughly thirty times prayer is mentioned. Though Lk portrays Jesus alone in communion with his Father (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:28-29 etc), yet his concern for the people is shown in many places which could be called prayer situations in the life of Jesus (4:18-19; 7:36-50; 15:11-32; 19:2-10 etc). Only Lk presents Jesus as praying for Peter (22:32).

John of course in his inimitable way shows that the incarnation passion, death etc, of Jesus took place in and for the community (1:11-12, 14). The great priestly prayer of Jesus was for the community (14-17). Especially Ch. 17 having been rooted in communion, and seeking and yearning for communion is the climax of Biblical prayer.

Paul prays for the Christians in all his letters, especially the Romans (1:9, 16, 17). It is in ch. 12 of Romans where Paul eulogizes the charity of Christians as a spiritual worship pleasing to God, he gives us an inkling into his own concept of prayer (Phi 14:18), which is not different from Christ's own prayer. One cannot fail to notice too how he begins and ends his letter with prayers for the particular community.

We could conclude from the above brief seminal exposition that Biblical prayer is a communitarian in the sense, i) that people pray in fellowship and ii) that they pray for the community.

Conclusion

The over all understanding, gained from the notion of and the development of prayer in the Bible, is of more importance than the elaborate piecemeal application of isolated passages, all of which have to be seen in the context of and as part of a great and wide-sweeping movement. The Biblical term "*draw near*" frequently used in the Letter to the Hebrews (4:16; 7:25; 10:1,22; 11:6; 12:18,22) seen in relation to the revealing God, seems to suggest that those who understand what it means "*to draw near*" to *majestic holiness* which is at the same time *redeeming mercy*, will acquit themselves accordingly. If they utter no syllables, they are still truly at prayers, for in the last analysis it is God alone who must inform our prayers. Paul surely understood this (Rom 8:15-17, 26-28; 16; Gal 4:4-7). And Vat II, with whose stimulating words with which we began this article, may close this too: "In the sacred books *the Father* who is in heaven *meets* his children with great love and *speaks* with them; and the force and the power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength and faith for her sons / daughters, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life" (DV. 21).