

PRAYER IN THE WILDERNESS TRADITIONS: IN PURSUIT OF DIVINE JUSTICE

by

SAMUEL E. BALENTINE

*Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, NC 27587*

The primary focus of this study is on prayer, its form and function in narrative texts. The wilderness traditions have been chosen as the particular setting essentially because they afford different perspectives on prayer—from J and P and Dtr—within the same context, thus providing different angles of vision on the same subject.

Two preliminary qualifications are in order, one major, a second, relatively minor. First, how does one define prayer? By what essential characteristics can it be isolated and identified as distinct from other forms of human communication with the deity, such as oaths or vows or even simple dialogue? It must be acknowledged at the outset that the question is more easily articulated than answered. Primarily this is because exploration of this subject plunges the investigator into a kind of *Catch-22* situation. On the one hand the “prayers” of the Old Testament cannot be isolated without some presuppositions about their distinctive features or characteristics. One must be looking for something which, defined by certain qualities, can be recognized as prayer. Thus, at the front end of the investigation there must be some working definition that will allow texts to be isolated and examined. On the other hand, as more texts are brought into the discussion, the working definition by which these texts have been isolated requires modification. When a variety of texts are available for comparison, then, and only then, can the boundaries of definition be drawn with some agreed upon precision. In the meanwhile the investigator must indeed proceed with caution. But without risking the investigation the research cannot proceed.

With respect to the issue at hand, there is as yet nothing approaching a comprehensive, critical investigation of the form and function of prayer in the Old Testament. Thus the problem of an agreed upon

definition of prayer. In this paper we cannot examine the reason for this apparent neglect of such an important subject. Fortunately, several studies in recent years have begun to probe the edges of this topic and so have initiated the process of compiling a body of texts which will enable us to proceed in working out the definition of prayer. Three discussions have been especially instructive in my own research.

In an investigation of prose prayers within the historical narratives, J. Corvin suggests that prayers be isolated according to one criterion: if the communication is addressed to God in the second person, it is prayer (1972, p. 23).¹ With this broad definition he then distinguishes between "conversational prayers," in which God and his human counterpart simply converse in the normal language of human dialogue, and "formal prayers," which are more liturgical in tone and less intimately dependent on the literary context in which they occur. Though this approach does bring into the discussion some very interesting and obvious texts, e.g., Gen 18:22-33 and 1 Kgs 8:22-61, it includes others that simply do not seem very much like prayer. Is the conversation with God in the garden (Gen 3:9-13) or the dialogue between God and Cain (Gen 4:9-15) really prayer in the sense that most would think of prayer?

Others have recognized the problems that arise when the definition of prayer is too broad and have therefore suggested more specific criteria be utilized. E. Staudt, for example, concludes that prayers in the Deuteronomistic literature are distinguished as communication that is 1) explicitly directed to God; 2) initiated by the individual or the community as a whole; and 3) effective, that is, it brings response from God (1980, p. 58).

M. Greenberg's recent discussion of "biblical prose prayer" has been a most welcome addition to the field of inquiry, especially so because he has rightly seen that in these literary forms we have access to a kind of popular theology in a way heretofore largely ignored. However, though the discussion is unique and highly instructive, it does not, unfortunately, particularly address the problem of defining prayer. Greenberg describes prose prayer rather generally as "non-psalmic speech to God—less often about God—expressing dependence, subjugation, or obligation" (1983, p. 7).

It is far easier to point out the deficiencies of the above approaches than to improve upon them. In my own research I have found Staudt's

1. Cf. recent definitions of prayer as a genre within historical and apocalyptic literature by Long (1984) and Collins (1984), both of whom describe prayer as any "communication/address to God or gods." Prayer so defined, they suggest, encompasses a wide variety of forms depending on content, intention, and setting.

emphasis on the intentionality of the text to be most helpful. To isolate prayers embedded in narrative contexts, such as the wilderness traditions, it is of fundamental importance to inquire whether communication is explicitly and intentionally directed to God. Casual conversation between God and people, like that which takes place in the garden of Eden and frequently throughout narrative literature, ought not therefore be counted as prayer. I have attempted to locate intentionality in texts in two ways, one specific and concrete and easily verifiable, the other less specific, more a matter of interpretation and judgment, and therefore less verifiable. Specifically, prayer may be readily identified by the use of certain key Hebraic words and phrases like *hiṣpallēl*, “pray,” or *qārā bešēm* “call on the name,” which constitute a part of the vocabulary of prayer, or by specific introductory expressions such as “and *X* prayed saying.” In addition to these clearly identified prayers, I have also counted as prayer those texts which, though lacking specific prayer language or clear introductions, do nevertheless, in my judgment, convey intentional address to God. Some texts, for example, begin with the simple statement “and *X* said (*ʿāmar*) to God,” and with this introduction a dialogue is begun between God and a human counterpart that may be understood along the lines of the “conversational prayers” identified by Corvin. These “conversations” usually contain rather specific questions about some facet of the divine-human relationship which, from the pray-er’s perspective, has gone awry or at least requires some clarification. Petition often accompanies these questions as the pray-er seeks to move God to make response by word or deed or both. Both these kinds of prayers—those explicitly designated and those lacking specific linguistic markings—occur in the wilderness traditions. The two primary texts to be discussed below, Num 11:4–34 and Num 14:11–23, represent the second type of prayer.

Let me add one further word on the problem of defining prayer. My own working definition of prayer, like those I have critiqued above, will no doubt require clarification and revision as more texts are brought into the discussion. This represents a vulnerability in the argument of the present article that I readily acknowledge. In other words, it may not be as clear to the readers of this article as it is at this point to me as author that the texts discussed here are obviously prayers. For the sake of the discussion I ask those who are as yet unpersuaded only to consider whether understanding these texts as prayers has any merit. Subsequent reflection may of course require that we understand them differently. But the risk of having to make revision in the light of the further work on this subject which I hope will emerge in due course, in part in response to those who would criticize this position, does not, it

seems to me, cancel out the desirability of pressing forward with a reasonable approach.

A second qualification that deserves attention has to do with the delineation of sources in the wilderness traditions. This particular corpus of texts especially lends itself to our investigation precisely because different sources are involved. But I wish to emphasize at the outset that I do not propose to offer a fresh source analysis of these narratives or even a critique of the traditional views. Rather I have endeavored to determine, where possible, what is simply the consensus opinion and to begin from that point. The discussion that follows will not be seriously affected if it is argued that a text ought to be attributed to a different source. The historical origin or setting of a particular perspective on prayer may have to be reevaluated, but the fact that there are different views on the way prayer functions within the same context will remain, I believe, a consideration worth our attention.

I

The primary texts of the wilderness traditions occur in two blocks, Exodus 15–18 and Numbers 10–21, traditionally assigned to two major sources, J or JE and P, with some Deuteronomistic materials included. The texts may be further categorized as either pre-Sinai or post-Sinai, depending on whether they occur before the Sinai traditions of law and covenant or after them. The following chart shows the general distribution according to the primary sources involved.²

	J/JE	P	Dtr.
Pre-Sinai	Exod 15:22–27 17:1–17	Exod 16:1–36	
Post-Sinai	Num 11:1–3 11:4–34 12:1–16 21:4–9	Num 14:1–10, 26–38 17:6–15 20:1–13	Num 14:11–23

Placing the texts within these categorizations helps to make clear several important differences between the two major blocks. For example, texts in the pre-Sinai position suggest that God responded to the complaints of the people with a positive and miraculous demonstration

2. This chart seeks to illustrate only the *general* distribution according to the *primary* sources involved. For more detailed analysis of specific verses or portions of verses the standard discussions may be consulted (e.g., Coats, 1968; Tunyogi, 1969; Fritz, 1970; Noth, 1962, 1968, 1972; Childs, 1974).

of divine presence. Those set after Sinai, that is, after the stipulations of covenant relationship have been agreed upon, suggest that Israel's complaints provoked God's anger, were understood as evidence of faithlessness, disobedience, and rebellion, and were met therefore with divine punishment. Further, it may be observed that the basis of the people's complaint varies in the two groups of texts. Complaints coming before Sinai are usually related to some specific physical need, e.g., the need for drinking water (Exod 15:22–25; 17:1–17), whereas those occurring after Sinai are described as complaints without foundation. The people grow impatient with God (Num 21:4–9), or they protest against Moses' leadership (Num 12:1–16), or they simply complain in general terms, nothing specific being given as the cause (Num 11:1–3). These and other differences have been highlighted by Childs' delineation of two distinct patterns within the wilderness traditions. Pattern I, represented mostly by the pre-Sinaitic material, consists of an initial need, followed by complaint, Moses' intercession, and God's miraculous intervention. Pattern II, represented in the Numbers texts, differs in that the initial complaint is followed by God's anger and punishment, then by Moses' intercession and a consequent lifting of the punishment (Childs, 1974, pp. 258–264).

Childs' analysis has brought a fresh reexamination of some of the complicated form-critical and traditio-historical problems of these wilderness narratives. On one particular issue, however, I hope to offer a further clarification. It may be noted that he finds intercession to be present in both the patterns above, and, by his selection of texts, he suggests that it occurs in both the J and P materials.³ I will propose in the pages to follow that the Priestly accounts do not describe Moses as a pray-er and do not attribute any role to prayer, intercessory or otherwise, in the wilderness experiences. It is only in the J tradition and more clearly in the one Deuteronomistic version that prayer is present. It is precisely this use and non-use of prayer in texts that purport to describe similar events that prompts our interest in the different roles given to this type of discourse in Old Testament narrative.

We will pursue the question in the pages below by focusing on two parallel texts from J and P: Num 11:4–34 and Exod 16:1–36. With the role of prayer in these traditions before us, we will extend the discussion to consider the Deuteronomistic perspective represented in Num 14:11–23.

3. Note specifically his inclusion of Num 20:6 (=P) among texts describing Moses' intercession (1974, p. 258).

II

Source analyses of Num 11:4ff. show some variation, but there is a general consensus that the bulk of the narrative, excepting vv. 7-9, 14-17, and 24b-30, belongs to J.⁴ The basic lines of the J account then develop as follows:

The people complain; God's anger is provoked
(vv. 4-6, 10: *wayyihar ʿap yhyh*;)

|
Moses' dialogue with God
(1) vv. 11-13, 18-20
(2) vv. 21-24

|
The complaint is resolved with a miraculous provision of quail which at the same time is a manifestation of divine anger (vv. 31-34; cf. v. 33: *weʿap yhyh hārā*).

The outline above illustrates that the framework of the narrative hinges on the peoples' complaint which provokes God's anger. Between the first statement of divine wrath in v. 10 and the final manifestation of this wrath in v. 33, Moses engages God in two dialogues which raise questions concerning God's intentions, questions which provide interpretive guides for understanding the overall narrative. The function of these divine-human dialogues will be clarified by a closer inspection of the narrative.

The narrative moves between three major themes: complaint, prayer, and resolution of complaint. The complaint, described in vv. 4-6 and 10, provides an important and necessary preface to Moses' prayer. In specific terms, the complaint involves the people's lack of meat, a concern that is accompanied by weeping (*bkh*) and a strong craving (*hit ʿawwū ta ʿāwāh*). Though not as explicit as the parallel account in Exodus 16,⁵ this complaint is no less serious, for as v. 20 makes clear these "weepers" have rejected (*mʿs*) God.

It should be noted that though the people's behavior is rather clearly described as complaint, the present text leaves some question about whether the complaint is directed against Moses or against God. Verse 10

4. Cf. Fritz, 1970, pp. 16-17; Coats, 1968, pp. 96-98; Noth, 1968, p. 83. See further Seebass, 1978, pp. 214-223.

5. The P account in Exodus 16 uses the verbal expression "to murmur against" (*lwn + ʿl*), which Coats suggests ought to be understood as "rebel against" in the sense of a hostile, face to face confrontation (1968, p. 24).

suggests that Moses certainly heard the complaint and responded to it, but the text is curiously ambiguous just at this juncture:

And Moses heard (*wayyišma^c*) the people weeping . . . and the anger of Yahweh burned exceedingly (*wayyihar^c ap yhyh*) and in the eyes of Moses it was evil (*ûbe^c ênê mōšeh rā^c*).

With *waw* consecutives linking the verbs *šm^c* and *hrh* together, one might well have expected to read that Moses heard and Moses was angry and in Moses' eyes⁶ it was evil. But rather abruptly the subject of the second verb changes to Yahweh. With this shift in the focus of the narrative the intent of the last phrase now becomes uncertain. What is it that is *rā^c*, "evil," in the eyes of Moses? Is it the people's crying that is deemed evil and wrong? Or is it God's anger that seems misplaced to Moses? The dialogue that follows between Moses and God leaves little doubt that from Moses' perspective the only legitimate target of this complaint is God. It is God's reputation that is, or ought to be, at stake here, not Moses'. Thus Moses turns to God with an address designed not simply to direct the complaint in the proper direction, but also to raise serious questions about divine intentions.

Moses' address to God in vv. 11ff. is introduced simply with *way-yōmer*, "and he said," the language Corvin designates as characteristic of "conversational prayers." Such prayers, he maintains, are typically dominated by "question-centered dialogue," often initiated by the human partner for the purpose of raising some issue of "a theologico-philosophical nature" such as innocent suffering or proof of God's presence.⁷ These general observations hold true for Num 11:11f. Moses' prayer is initiated with a bold question that immediately focuses on the issue of *rā^c*, "evil," which v. 10 has introduced:

(v. 10) . . . and in the eyes of Moses it was *evil*

(*ûbe^c ênê mōšeh rā^c*)

(v. 11) and Moses said: Why have you done *evil* to your servant?

(*lāmāh hārē^c oīā le^c aḥdekā*)

Indeed this lead question introduces a series of questions put to God that substantiate the description of this engagement as truly "question-centered":

Why (*lāmāh*) have I not found favor in your eyes . . . ?

Did I (*he^c ānōkī*), I conceive all these people, or did I (*im ānōkī*), I birth them?

Where (*mē^c ayin*) will I get meat to give to all this people . . . ?

6. Perhaps this is the thinking behind the proposed emendation in BHS to *be^c enāw*.

7. Corvin, 1972, pp. 166–168. Corvin includes Num 11:11–23 as one of twenty such prayers he finds in the historical narratives of the Old Testament (*ibid.*, p. 256).

These questions serve individually and collectively, both in the specificity of their language and in their general context, to place before Yahweh a strong note of protest.

Twice Moses' questions are prefaced with the word *lāmāh*, "Why?" Of the stock of Hebrew interrogative words available, none features more prominently in questions directed from people to God than *lāmāh* (cf. Balentine, 1983, pp. 118–119). This "Why?" question is especially frequent in, though not limited to, contexts of lament and complaint where a suppliant raises hard questions about something in the relationship with God that seems very wrong (cf. Barr, 1985, p. 8). Thus frequently in psalms of lament questions about God's hiddenness will be framed with *lāmāh* (cf. Ps 10:1; 22:2; 44:24; etc.). In other cases the question may raise the issue of innocent suffering (cf. Jer 15:18; 20:18; Job 7:20) or the perversion of justice (cf. Hab 1:3, 13). Though the questions are certainly more frequent in psalms of lament and in lament contexts like those that characterize Job, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah, they are not lacking in the narrative literature, especially on the lips of Moses who, more than any other major character, so interrogates God (cf. Balentine, 1983, pp. 118–119; Barr, 1985, p. 18).

In Num 11:11 Moses queries God about divine conduct that must have seemed, at least to Moses, to be contrary to God's character. Why is there *rā^c*, "evil," to your servant (*le^cabdekā*) rather than favor (*hen*)? Do not "thy servants" merit more than this? Is not *rā^c* to be the punishment reserved for the one *who refuses to serve*? It is after all the people, not Moses, who have done the crying and the petitioning. Why is Yahweh's anger directed against Moses rather than them? The whole idea of God doing evil to one of his own must have seemed incongruous. Why?⁸

The note of protest carried in these two "Why?" questions is heightened by a third question which follows in v. 12, this one expressed with the form *hā . . . ʔim*: "Did I (*he^cʔānōkī*), I conceive all this people, or did I (*ʔim ānōkī*), I birth them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom . . .?'" The form of the question, used in wisdom circles for pedagogical purposes (cf. Wolff, 1973, pp. 6–16) and by

8. The Masoretes may also have found this idea troublesome, for the *Tiqqune* in v. 15 suggests an emendation away from the attribution of evil to Yahweh in this case. The present text reads: "If you will deal thus with me then kill me at once I pray, if I find favor in your eyes, that I may not look on *my evil* (*weʔal ʔer'eh berāʔāi*)." The original text, however, before emendation, read "that I may not look on *your evil* (*berāʔātekā*)." The uncorrected version makes no attempt to disguise the problem as seen from Moses' perspective. If God is to act in such a manner, to bring evil on a faithful (and undeserving) servant, then Moses does not wish to live to witness it.

prophets as a rhetorical means of disputing commonly held assumptions (cf. Brueggemann, 1973) is here used clearly with the expectation of a negative response. The accusation in Moses' question has a double edge. On the one hand Moses charges that the responsibility for these people properly belongs to God; Moses did not birth them, God did. And secondly, to the extent that Moses does bear some responsibility as God's specially appointed liaison with the people, his abilities are limited. He is no match as one man for "all this people." This latter phrase repeats several times throughout the narrative as Moses presses his complaint that "I am not able, I alone, to carry all this people for they are too heavy for me" (v. 14; cf. vv. 11, 12, 13).

It is not just the form of these questions, however, that conveys the note of protest in Moses' prayer. The questions themselves strike at the very heart of common assumptions about God's character. Two key ideas combine in vv. 10 and 11 to focus the major concerns: the burning anger of God (*hrh* + *ʔp*) and God doing evil (*r^{cc}*, *Hip^{ʕil}*). Both these ideas, divine anger and divinely initiated evil, are most frequently attested in Deuteronomistic literature and in the judgment speeches of the prophets, especially Jeremiah. In both settings God's behavior is described typically as a justified reaction to a sinful people. Westermann has recently evaluated the prophets as "messengers of anger" (*Boten des Zorns*), concluding that in Jeremiah, for example, where 56 words for divine anger occur in some 30 places (none more frequently than *ʔap* with 24 occurrences), in all cases where the anger of God is directed against Israel it is the consequence of the guilt of Israel (1981, pp. 151–154). Similar conclusions may be drawn with respect to *r^{cc}* and the noun derivatives *r^c* and *r^{ch}*. There are 12 occurrences of *r^{cc}* *Hip^{ʕil}* with God as subject, with about half of these connecting God's intention to do evil specifically with the evil designs of the people.⁹ The nouns *r^c* and *r^{ch}* combine with a number of verbs, again primarily in Deuteronomistic and prophetic texts, to describe God's "bringing evil" (*bw^ʔ* *Hip^{ʕil}*, some 31x; 17x in Jeremiah); "planning evil" (*hsb*, 5x; *zmm*, 1x), "pronouncing evil upon" (*dbr*, 13x); "doing evil" (*ʕsh*, 4x), "requitting/returning evil" (*ʕlm*, 3x; *ʕwb* *Hip^{ʕil}*, 2x), and so on. Here too God's actions are most frequently set in the context of just and expected punishment for "evil" behavior (cf. Noort, 1984).

With respect to these ideas there is then something akin to a "party-line" view, at least as early as the Deuteronomistic editors if not considerably before. That is, the outbreaking of divine anger and

9. Exod 5:22; Num 11:11; Josh 24:20; 1 Kgs 17:20; Jer 25:6, 29; 31:28; Mic 4:6; Zeph 1:12; Zech 8:14; Ps 44:3; Ruth 1:21. See further Stoebe, 1976, cols. 794–803.

divinely ordained evil is primarily retributive in nature, the just reaction of a just God to specific manifestations of human sinfulness. In the course of Israel's history there would of course arise various challenges to the party-line, various "rumblings" of discontent as Crenshaw (1970) has suggested, designed to test theological maxims against the realities of life. Traditionally these challenges have been understood to have emerged principally in the exilic era when the demise of stabilizing institutions is thought to have encouraged rampant skepticism amongst the general populace.¹⁰ The J text of Num 11:11ff. now suggests an important supplement to these traditional views concerning the questioning of divine justice.

Of the 12 cases where God is the subject of *r^{cc} Hip^{cl}il*, 3 put the issue in question form, all three in direct address to God that may be understood as prayer (Exod 5:22; Num 11:11; 1 Kgs 17:20). Two of these are especially important for our discussion.¹¹ Exod 5:22 and Num 11:11 both consist of prayers placed on the lips of Moses, both in texts usually attributed to J. The former is set in the context of Moses' initial failure with Pharaoh after which he raises with God the double question, "Why (*lāmāh*) have you done evil to the people (*hārē^cōtāh lā^cām hazzeh*), why (*lāmāh*) did you send me?" The rhetoric of the address makes clear the nature of the complaint. Moses charges that the evil he perceives in Yahweh is no different than the evil which the people now experience at the hands of Pharaoh: "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name he has done evil to this people (*hēra^c lā^cām hazzeh*) . . ." (v. 23). This challenge to God, though in a different historical setting, is fundamentally similar to Moses' protest in Numbers 11. Of especial significance for our analysis is that here in the J source, if the traditional dating to the 9th–10th century can be retained, we have an early questioning of the party-line view which not only anticipates the

10. Cf. my discussion and critique of the traditional view (Balentine, 1983, pp. 169ff.). Hard questions about divine justice are especially frequent in Deuteronomistic texts, but it is typical of their perspective that these texts also seek to provide answers that reaffirm traditional views. With respect to the issue under consideration here, divinely initiated evil, Jer 16:10ff. may be taken as but one example of the Deuteronomistic perspective:

- Question: And when you tell these people all these words and they say to you, Why (*al meh*) has Yahweh pronounced all this great evil against us (*kol hārā^cāh haggedōlāh*) . . . ?
- Answer: Then you shall say: Because your fathers have forsaken me . . . and you, you have done evil more than your fathers (*we²attem hārē^cōtem lā^cāsōt mē²āhotēkem*)

11. The third text, 1 Kgs 17:20, sets forth a typical Deuteronomistic use of prayer which receives an immediate response from God.

Deuteronomistic ruminations but is perhaps even paradigmatic for them.¹²

Verses 18–20 provide Yahweh’s response to Moses’ complaint. Moses is instructed to inform the people of the requirement for consecration in preparation for receipt of the meat they had been craving. Their complaint will be resolved. Moses’ question—“Where am I to get the meat?”—will be answered. Now they will eat, because God will provide. Indeed they will eat not one day or two days or five, ten, even twenty days, but a whole month of days until their gift becomes a burden, a punishment rather than a blessing. God himself supplies the reason for the judgment: 1) because you have rejected (*m^ʿs*) Yahweh; 2) you have wept (*bkh*) before him; and 3) you have complained, saying “Why (*lamh*) did we come out of Egypt?” This latter quotation of the Israelites’ complaint shows a subtle shift in rhetoric that reveals, along with the other reasons already given, God’s interpretation of the people’s behavior. As reported in vv. 4ff. and again in v. 18, the substance of their complaint revolved around dietary concerns (*bāsār*, “meat,” vv. 4, 18). In God’s review of the complaint, however, the people are quoted as questioning not only their diet, but also the whole of their exodus deliverance. Taken as a whole, God’s response in vv. 18–20 explains the divine reaction as a justified punishment for their rejection of God’s leadership and their doubt about God’s ability to provide for them. The response does not address as such Moses’ question about God’s evil intents. Nevertheless the questions have been raised and given a rather full articulation. From a literary perspective they provide a distraction to the blazing anger of God introduced in v. 10 and so shift the focus of the reader/hearer, if only temporarily, away from the divine concern for punishment to a very human concern for clarity and understanding.

The second dialogue between Moses and God (vv. 21–24) takes up where the first one leaves off, with Moses pressing for further clarification about his responsibility in providing the meat God has promised. One of Moses’ concerns, repeated several times in his first discourse with God, has to do with his individual responsibility for “all this people” (*kol hā^cām hazzeh*; vv. 11, 12, 13, 14). In this second address Moses raises the same issue by contrasting in stark terms the impossible statistics involved in the fulfilling of God’s promise. A rather literal translation can best illustrate the emphasis the Hebrew syntax gives to

12. Others have seen in the wilderness narratives an early form of the quest for divine justice so prominent later in Deuteronomistic texts (e.g., Carroll, 1979; Adamiak, 1982, e.g., pp. 84–89), but without recognizing the importance of prayer as a literary vehicle for introducing the concern.

the numbers Moses faces: "Six hundred thousand on foot, the people, (among whom) I am in their midst" (v. 21). Here too Moses sounds a note of protest. Is Moses alone to provide for all this people? Is Moses "in their midst" now to replace Yahweh "in their midst" (cf. v. 20), and so to fulfill as proxy a rejected God's promise of sustenance? God's response (v. 23) is couched in language almost identical to that which occurs in Exod 6:1 where, as noted above, a similar prayer of protest from Moses is recorded: "Is the hand of the Lord shortened . . . ? Now you will see . . ." Once again the divine response makes little attempt to address Moses' questions directly. Rather God's rhetorical counter-question calls attention to divine power and, by so doing, prepares Moses for the final manifestation of this power in the miraculous provision of quails (vv. 31–34).

We may summarize the role and function of Moses' prayers in the J tradition of Numbers 11 by comparing this narrative with its Priestly counterpart in Exodus 16. A number of differences in these two accounts are readily apparent and often discussed. We may simply note them as follows: whereas Numbers 11 is set in the post-Sinai period, in route from Sinai to Canaan, Exodus 16 is located in the pre-Sinai period, in route from Egypt to Sinai; in Numbers 11 Moses is the primary and only intermediary, but in Exodus 16, Moses and Aaron share jointly this responsibility; in Numbers 11 the people's complaint is judged as disobedience and is punished as such, but in Exodus 16 there is no mention of divine anger, and the people's murmuring is met with a miraculous provision of quails that is received as a wholly positive response from God. There are, in addition, a number of details unique to Exodus 16 which can be attributed to the special interests of the Priestly tradition, e.g., the reference to the people as a "congregation" (³*dh*), the description of Presence with the term "glory of the Lord" (vv. 7, 10), and the concern to relate the gathering of the quail to instructions for Sabbath observance.

For the purpose of this study, however, the most important difference between these two traditions lies in an area that has not as yet received sufficient notice. In the J account, as we have shown, Moses addresses God directly in two places with "conversational prayer." By way of these prayers Moses engages God in close discussion of issues relating to the overall context, issues that, from Moses' perspective at least, need clarification. Moses questions God, God responds, and the narrative moves on to its conclusion, which is presented as having emerged out of their joint deliberations. In the Priestly narrative there is no such interchange between God and his earthly minions. Moses and Aaron do not engage in prayer. In fact, they do not once address God, directly or

indirectly. They are addressed *by* God, and they relay messages from God to the people, but they do not themselves engage in dialogue with God. The point can be illustrated by isolating the narrative introductions to dialogue:

- v. 2 The people murmured against Moses and Aaron . . . and said to them . . .
- v. 4 Then the Lord said to Moses . . .
- v. 6 So Moses and Aaron said to the congregation . . .
- v. 9 And Moses said to Aaron . . .
- v. 10 And Aaron spoke to the whole of the congregation . . .

These references are not exhaustive, for the same pattern runs throughout this Priestly account. Moses and Aaron are consistently pictured as keeping a certain distance from God. They do not come into immediate contact with God. They do not question God. They do not seek clarification about divine plans. They do not protest or express concern over God's behavior. Unlike the J account, the Priestly version sees no issues to be resolved, and therefore assigns to Moses and Aaron no role in the narrative other than that of divine message runner.

The contrast suggested above between the J and P perspectives on prayer in Numbers 11 and Exodus 16 finds further support from a survey of the remaining J and P wilderness traditions. J texts routinely cast Moses, and Moses alone, in the role of pray-er, in both the pre- and post-Sinai situations. In Numbers 11, as we have seen, the prayer is introduced with conversational language that is addressed directly to God. In other texts introductions are drawn from the standard stock of prayer vocabulary such as *pll*, "pray," (Num 11:2; 21:7) or *š^cq*, "cry out" (Exod 15:25; Num 12:13). Sometimes the prayers are offered on Moses' initiation (Exod 15:22–25; 17:1–17); on other occasions the prayer is offered in response to a specific request (Num 21:4–9). Some of the prayers are recorded (Exod 17:4; Num 11:11f., 21; 12:13), others are only mentioned, omitting the actual words (Exod 15:22–25, Num 11:1–3; 21:4–9). We may conclude, then, that J consistently gives to Moses the high responsibility of prayer. In the wilderness traditions this prayer appears to function in two ways: 1) to procure divine forgiveness and release from punishment (Num 11:2; 12:13);¹³ and 2) to question the justice of divine plans (Num 11:11f.). That is to say, J assigns to Moses the work of both intercessor and interrogator in prayer. Both these roles demand of the pray-er a high level of *participation* with God in the accomplishing of the divine will.

13. For discussion of the role of Moses in securing forgiveness in Num 12:1–15 see Coats (1982).

In Priestly wilderness traditions the situation is described quite differently, as is illustrated by the discussion above of Exodus 16. Priestly texts characteristically describe the “congregation” murmuring against “Moses and Aaron” (Exod 16:2; Num 14:2; 20:2). The complaint that repeats most often begins, “Would that we had died in Egypt . . .” (Exod 16:3; Num 14:2; 20:3). This is followed by an encounter with “glory of the Lord” at the tent of meeting, in response to which Moses and Aaron “fall on their face” (Num 14:5; 20:6). The Priestly scenario describes a judgment setting in which Yahweh summons the people to hear and receive divine punishment. Throughout Moses and Aaron function to receive and communicate God’s plans. They do not pray or attempt to dissuade God from his stated intentions.¹⁴ At only one place does there appear to be any intervention on their part, and in this case it is not prayer that they offer but rather a ritual atonement (Num 16:46f.). The implication seems to be that ritual activity, not prayer, is the way to respond to the crisis. Such an understanding would in fact be consonant with the typical Priestly emphasis on ritual and sacrifice and its seeming disinterest in the practice of prayer (cf. Haran, 1984, pp. 129–131).

III

With the J and P traditions above we may now compare Num 14:11–23, a Deuteronomistic perspective on Moses’ role as a pray-er during the wilderness period. The literary context of Moses’ prayer is complicated, but most would understand Numbers 14 as consisting of a basic Priestly framework setting forth the congregation’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron and Yahweh (vv. 1–10) and the pronouncement and execution of divine judgment (vv. 26–38). This framework is supplemented by material from J (vv. 1b, 4, 11a, 23b–24) and the Deuteronomistic editors (vv. 11b–23). The development of the narrative in each of the three layers may be illustrated as follows:

14. Childs cites Num 20:6 as illustration of intercession in a Priestly text, though he offers no discussion on the issue (1974, p. 258). Two ideas may lend support to Childs’ suggestion: 1) the tent of meeting as a place of theophany and therefore communication with the deity (e.g., Haran suggests, on the basis of comparison with Exod 34:5–9, that perhaps prayer would have been part of the rite for anyone who sought the Lord in the solitude of a tent like *ʔōhel mōʿēd*; 1978, pp. 268f.); and 2) the gesture of falling on the face (*npl + pnm*) may suggest obeisance in preparation for prayer. While both these ideas *may be related* to intercession, the evidence is far from conclusive, and in the present text do not seem to justify the conclusion that Moses and Aaron serve as intercessors. See further Balentine (1984).

J	P	Dtr.
v. 1b, 4 The people complained . . .	vv. 1a, 2–3 All the congregation raised their voice and murmured against Moses and Aaron	vv. 11b–12 God’s complaint and statement of intent to punish
v. 11a And Yahweh said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me?” (<i>nʾš</i>)	vv. 5–10 Moses and Aaron fall on their faces . . . The “glory of the Lord” appears at the tent of meeting	vv. 13–19 Moses’ intervention with prayer for forgiveness (<i>slh</i>)
vv. 23b–24 All the ones despising me (<i>nʾš</i>) will not see the land	vv. 26–38 Divine punishment is announced	vv. 20–23a God forgives (<i>slh</i>) according to Moses’ word, and punishes

All three traditions agree that the people’s behavior in the wilderness provokes God’s intent to punish. They agree further that the punishment announced is in fact to become reality. What is noticeably different is that in the Deuteronomistic version, and in this version alone, Moses intervenes with a prayer that seeks to persuade God to reconsider his plans. And, significantly, it is only in the Deuteronomistic version that the judgment announced is accompanied by a statement of divine pardon. In the paragraphs that follow I will seek to demonstrate that here, as in the J account of Numbers 11, Moses’ prayer for divine reconsideration introduces a concern about God’s justice that serves as a guide for understanding the larger narrative.

Within its immediate literary context this Deuteronomistic account is shaped by three major issues: God’s complaint (vv. 11b–12); Moses’ prayer for forgiveness (vv. 13–19), and God’s response (vv. 20–23). The divine complaint and response are rhetorically linked by the accusation and punishment of all those who have not believed in “the signs which I did” (*hāʾōtôt ʾāšer ʿāsītī*; vv. 11, 22). Taken together, the complaint and response describe God’s punishment as typically *quid pro quo*: a guilty people receive a just punishment. The structure of the narrative, however, will not allow a direct linkage between complaint and response, for wedged between the two is the lengthy dialogue between Moses and God. This dialogue, couched in the form of a prayer for forgiveness, creates a literary break between the introduction and the conclusion and thus an interruption in the cause-consequence sequence. The con-

sequence is to be understood as emerging out of and in response to the intervention of Moses. Simply put, Moses' prayer influences the outcome of the story.

Moses' prayer, addressed directly to God and introduced with conversational language (*wayyōmer*), seeks from God a reconsideration of his plans to punish. In support of his petition Moses offers three arguments, each of which reflects the concerns of the exilic audience the Deuteronomistic writers are addressing. (1) First, Moses argues that God's reputation as a powerful, delivering God is at stake. The Egyptians will hear of the punishment of this people and will draw the wrong conclusions. They will spread the rumor that this God, who formerly led them out of Egypt "by his power" (v. 13) and who led them by pillar of cloud and fire through the Red Sea (v. 14; cf. Exod 13:21), is *now unable* to bring the people into the land which he has sworn to them (v. 16). The status of God's reputation among the nations is a concern expressed frequently in Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic texts (e.g., Deut 9:28; Exod 32:12; cf. Ezek 20:14). It was during the exilic era that Yahweh's reputation was most in question, at least from the perspective of those who had to endure the exile. Ruled over by Babylonian powers whose very presence cast a pall over Yahweh's abilities to protect and defend his own, and faced with a distant, silent, seemingly defeated God, an exilic audience would be eager to know if Yahweh could be persuaded to intervene to protect his standing among the nations *and* among his own.

(2) Moses' second argument questions the justice of God's apparent intent to "kill this people as one man" (v. 15). The question echoes the concern for justice with respect to the individual that is addressed in other texts of the exilic period. It is the question of Abraham in Gen 18:22–33 as he presses God to discriminate between the righteous and the wicked in the judgment of Sodom. From Abraham the issue is clearly stated: "Shall not the judge (*špī*) of all the earth do justice (*mišpāṭ*)?" (Gen 18:25). It is the same concern reported by Ezekiel to have been circulating among the exiles: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18:1). Both Abraham and Ezekiel argue for a divine justice that distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked at every level, whether between individuals and communities or children and parents (cf. Schmidt, 1976, pp. 131ff.; Blenkinsopp, 1982). An exilic audience, reeling under the judgment of Babylonian oppression, would be relieved to hear that in the execution of divine judgment Yahweh is ever mindful to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty. As long as this is so the hope for ultimate justice does not die, not even in exile.

(3) Finally, Moses contends that God's own nature requires that he be guided as much by grace as by the need for justice. The text has Moses quoting God to God, reminding God of the promise to be "slow to anger, abounding in loyalty (*hesed*; cf. Sakenfeld, 1975, pp. 323ff.; 1985) and a forgiver of iniquity." This formula appears in various contexts throughout the Old Testament and with different functions. It clearly does not represent an idea that is restricted to the exilic period, but there can be little doubt that for an exilic audience the description of a God who is characterized by loyal love as well as just punishment would be particularly welcome.¹⁵

In the progression of Moses' prayer these three arguments provide the introduction to and support for the petition for forgiveness. The petition is carried by the verb *slh* "forgive," a verb that is used in two primary literary contexts in the Old Testament, always with God as the stated or implied subject of the action. First, it is frequent in Priestly texts where the priest offers a sin offering that will atone (*kpr*) for sins and result in the forgiveness of the guilty (e.g., Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35). Second, *slh* occurs with notable regularity as a petition for forgiveness in prayer. It occurs in a wide assortment of texts and contexts: in poetry (e.g., Ps 25:11; 86:5; 103:3; 130:4) and in narrative, as here in Numbers 14; in "conversational prayers" (e.g., Exod 34:9; Num 14:19) and in "formal" prayers (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:30, 35, 36; etc.; Neh 9:17; Dan 9:19).¹⁶ In some instances the petition is specifically linked to further actions on God's part, e.g., Exod 34:9: "forgive our sin and take us for thy inheritance"; 1 Kgs 8:34: "forgive . . . and bring them again to the land. . . ." In other cases the petition for forgiveness stands alone, though further divine involvement is implied, e.g., Num 14:19: "forgive . . ." (and do not punish). In some prayers forgiveness is requested on the strength of confession of sin (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:50; Dan 9:19), while in other prayers the petition is supported in other ways. It is to be noted that in Numbers 14, Moses petitions God's forgiveness not on the basis of repentance but rather based on the fact that God is a loving God who ought to forgive if he is to act in a way consistent with divine character. Thus Moses' petition states the matter clearly, gathering together in summary fashion the crux of his request: "Forgive . . . according to the greatness of thy steadfast love, and according as thou hast forgiven this people from

15. For form-critical and traditio-historical analyses of the formula see Scharbert, 1957; Dentan, 1963; Sakenfeld, 1975; *ibid.*, 1985, pp. 47–52.

16. The terminology is Corvin's, who describes some fifteen prayers in the Old Testament as somewhat more "liturgical" and "formal" in tone than conversational prayers, and therefore not as closely related to their immediate narrative context. For further stylistic peculiarities see Corvin, 1972, pp. 206–211.

Egypt even until now" (v. 19). It is a prayer for forgiveness not deserved yet expected.

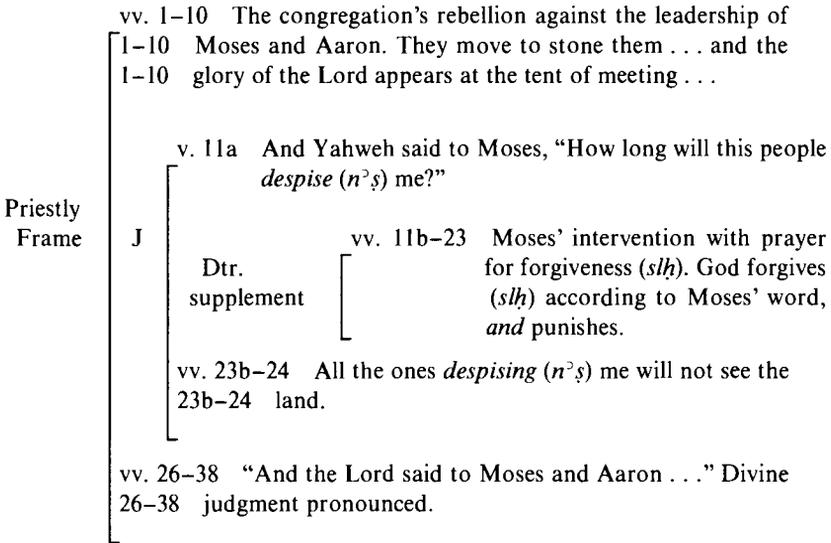
God's initial response, recorded in v. 20, is immediate, brief, and positive: "I have pardoned (*slh*)." The accompanying expression, "according to your word" (*kidbārekā*), links the response directly to Moses' petition. It is not, however, a blanket forgiveness, as vv. 20–23 go on to make clear. The pardon will involve judgment, albeit in a modified form. God's intention as expressed in v. 11f. had been to disinherit this people as a whole and start all over with Moses. Now, in the aftermath of Moses' prayer, God relents. The judgment is to be restricted to those who had seen the miraculous acts of deliverance and sustenance in Egypt and in the wilderness and yet had not heeded them. God would not punish his people without discrimination, "like one man." Moses' prayer would achieve its goal.

Thus, within its immediate literary setting in vv. 11b–23, the Deuteronomistic account suggests a narrative that moves from an announcement of divine judgment to an execution of divine judgment, with a very significant prayer for forgiveness sandwiched in between. It is primarily this prayer that informs the Deuteronomistic image of a God who not only tolerates but invites participation in the accomplishing of divine will. It is an optimistic image both of humanity's potential to influence divine intentions and of God's openness to dialogue, counsel, and persuasion. To an audience in exile this image promotes prayer as a legitimate and effective response to the concerns that erupt in Babylon about the availability of divine forgiveness, the justice of divine judgments, and the reliability of divine character.

To complete our investigation we may now return briefly to examine the contribution of this particular tradition to the larger composite narrative in Numbers 14. The Priestly framework of the narrative, from a literary perspective, provides the themes of sin and punishment, which may be illustrated by the chart on the following page.

If the basic source analysis of Numbers 14 outlined below is reliable, then it is striking that this Priestly frame is "interrupted" precisely at the point where the glory of the Lord appears at the tent of meeting (v. 11). The divine word which one expects to follow in this situation is in fact delayed until vv. 26ff. This literary delay allows for the development of a rather lengthy address from Moses to God in which fundamental questions concerning God's intentions are raised and ultimately resolved with an assurance of divine forgiveness. When the narrative returns to report the expected word of judgment from God, the reader/hearer has been prepared to receive it as a judgment now tempered with divine love

The Prayer of Moses in Numbers 14



and limited by divine commitment to justice and fair play. The composite narrative is in agreement that disloyal behavior in the wilderness period resulted in God's punishment. But in its final form this judgment is attributed to a God who both judges and forgives, a God who can be addressed and moved to show mercy to a guilty people. In its final form, the narrative assigns to Moses' prayer a position of major importance. Positioned between the announcement of punishment and the execution of the punishment, the prayer occurs at precisely the point of literary climax and from this point determines the outcome of the story.

IV

To summarize, prayer plays a rather important role in the wilderness traditions, especially in the Yahwist and Deuteronomistic narratives. J texts repeatedly portray Moses as a pray-er who addresses God directly with petitions for divine reconsideration and with questions concerning divine justice. In this role Moses is presented as a dialogue partner who has immediate and personal access to the deity almost as a peer. By the same token God is portrayed as one who entertains such dialogue, even if he does not always respond directly to it. The Priestly narrative, by contrast, never makes use of the prayer motif, preferring instead to describe Moses and Aaron as conveyers but not influencers or interrogators of divine intentions. And God, according to the Priestly view, is

portrayed as one who responds swiftly and without interruption to the disobedience of the people.

In the one Deuteronomistic wilderness narrative, prayer also plays an important role. In fact, both literarily and theologically, Moses' prayer in Num 14:11b–23 dominates the account. It is especially significant that the prayer functions to introduce into the narrative questions about divine intentions, particularly the justice of divine intentions, and thereby to persuade God to alter or modify these intentions.

We are not surprised to find such issues addressed in Deuteronomistic texts, or even that prayer is utilized in this literature as a literary vehicle for their articulation.¹⁷ What does emerge as significant is that the questioning of divine justice and the prayer forms that give expression to these questions are anticipated as early as J, if not before.¹⁸ It would appear that divine intentions are the subject of rather constant scrutiny, interrogation, and evaluation, frequently within the literary framework of prayer which seeks to influence the deity's final decision. In this respect prayer emerges as an important resource, heretofore little appropriated, for understanding the various concerns relating to theodicy in the Old Testament.

17. Noth raised the suggestion in his publication analyzing the Deuteronomistic History (1943, e.g., p. 5), though for the most part he did not pursue the implications of his own observations. Others have advanced the discussion in ways both general (e.g., Weinfeld, 1972) and specific (e.g., Staudt, 1980); however, a comprehensive investigation has yet to be offered.

18. As von Soden (1965), Schmid (1966), and others have recognized, the social, cultural, and historical situations that produce crises of faith for Israel existed in Mesopotamia at least as early as the second millennium.

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