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Author(s): Sheldon H. Blank

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MEN AGAINST GOD

The Promethean Element in Biblical Prayer*

SHELDON H. BLANK

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION, CINCINNATI

MEN who pray figure prominently in Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish tradition. But these men do not all pray alike. Some of them pray in a mood of submissive penitence — this is the commoner, the approved way. Others, strange though it sounds, stand up to God in prayer and demand their due. In distress and danger, they defend their rights, the rights of men, against the encroachments of an arbitrary or tyrannical God. We may call these others “Promethean.” In the modern romanticized sense of the term, these men and the spirit of their prayer are Promethean.

Also, these men and the spirit of their prayer do not agree with the prevalent mood of Protestant theology and its doctrine of man. Nevertheless, or for that very reason, these men and their spirit may have some meaning for our times.

This study is a descriptive review of such Old Testament material as may be termed “Promethean.”

The sources for this study are of two kinds. First, there are the narratives — the tales of colorful personalities who figure in the Bible story and play the Promethean role. And secondly, there are the Promethean prayers, the motifs of which form the subject proper of this study. The characters boldly drawn illuminate the manuscript on which the words of prayer are written.

Not all of the biblical personages, real or mythical, who challenge divine authority, illustrate our theme. “The infernal serpent” and “all his host of rebel angels” (the Lucifers of the Bible) who rivalled or sought to supplant God or to share his prerogatives — these form a separate category.

The Promethean personalities do not, for example, include that mythical figure “Helal, son of the morning”¹ nor his fellow who “walked

* The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 29, 1952, at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

¹ Isa 14 12 ff.

up and down in the midst of the stones of fire" in the "mountain of God"² nor yet those "sons of God" whose forbidden commerce with "daughters of men" failed to lift the veil of man's mortality, instead of which they themselves were doomed to "die like men."³

Nor do they include those paler shadows of the stars, the men who questioned God's primacy and sought to frustrate his decrees, not "our grand parents" who, had they only eaten of the right tree, might have compelled God to share his immortality, not the ill-fated builders of the "tower," not, in later generations, that boastful axe the stout-hearted king of Assyria,⁴ nor his successor the king of Babylon who made the earth tremble and kingdoms quake,⁵ nor yet the "virgin daughter of Babylon" who said in her heart "I am and there is none else,"⁶ and not the prince of Tyre, proud because of his beauty, who said "I am a god."⁷ Fascinating though they are themselves, these are not the Promethean figures associated with biblical prayer.

It is not, indeed, among the rebels that we find them, but among the faithful. They hold fast to God even while they question his decrees. Though they defy, they do not deny him.

It is seldom, too, that we find them in physical contest with God. Isolated are the obscure narratives of Jacob who struggled through a dark night with God and prevailed, and Moses the "bridegroom of blood," whom also God proved at Massah, with whom God strove at the waters of Meribah.⁸

But we do find them among the numerous accounts of men wrestling with God in prayer; it is these which illustrate our theme.

Two biblical passages list persons apparently credited with more than ordinary influence, persons whose prayers God cannot lightly ignore. In the one,⁹ speaking to Jeremiah, God denies that either Moses or Samuel, much less the prophet himself, could sway him now towards the faithless nation and, in the other,¹⁰ similarly, God reveals to Ezekiel his intransigence: In a time of retributive calamity, Noah, Daniel and Job would intercede with him in vain; though for their own righteousness the three might themselves escape, they could not rescue any others. But both passages imply that if the prayers of any mortals could avail, it would be the prayers of these named heroes of virtue: Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Noah, Daniel and Job.

² Ezek 28 11-19.

³ Gen 6 2 f.; cf. Isa 25 7 f., Ps 82 7.

⁴ Isa 10 12, 15; cf. 37 23-25.

⁵ Isa 14 4, 16. ⁶ Isa 47 1, 7, 10.

⁷ Ezek 28 2, 17.

⁸ Deut 33 8.

⁹ Jer 15 1, cf. 14 11.

¹⁰ Ezek 14 12 ff.

Properly the name of Moses leads all the rest; for he more often than others and more successfully takes issue with God. When, after they had made the golden calf, God decided to destroy the stiff-necked people, Moses produced two reasons why he should not do so. And, whether because of the cogency of his argument or because it was Moses who presented it, God acceded to his request.¹² And when the people, alarmed at the majority opinion of the spies, determined to return to Egypt and God lost patience, again it was Moses who intervened and again "the Lord said: סלחתי כדברך, 'I have pardoned according to your word.'"¹³

Probably it was the record of these incidents which, in later centuries, created the rabbinic legends of a Promethean Moses. Two such legends refer, in fact, to the scene at Sinai:

An authority in the Babylonian Talmud comments on the somewhat remarkable words spoken by God to Moses in Exodus 32: "Now therefore let me alone." This teacher exclaims: "Were it not written in the Bible, it could not have been said. Moses held on to God as a man his friend by the garment and said, 'Lord of the world, I will not let you go until you forgive and pardon them.'"¹³

And an aggada in the Palestinian Talmud, less restrained than the Bible, permits Moses on this occasion in fact to prevail over God in physical contest. When God was about to hand the two tablets of stone to Moses, God still grasping them above and Moses below, the people sinned with the golden calf and God resolved to withhold the gift. Indeed, the precious ten commandments would never have come into man's possession had not Moses then, at the last moment, with sheer physical strength, wrested the tablets from the hands of God.¹⁴

The reference to Samuel as an intercessor comparable to Moses may be related to the passage in the first book of Samuel where his persuasiveness is concisely noted: "ויועק שמואל אל ה' בעד ישראל ויענהו ה'" "And Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel and the Lord answered him."¹⁵ In its present form, this narrative makes him responsible for a military victory; but originally Samuel may here have prayed successfully for rain — here as in the 12th chapter where there can be no doubt of it. There Samuel calls for rain and it falls on that same day.¹⁶

A latter-day Samuel went by the name of "Onias the circle drawer." According to a familiar tradition, he received his byname as a result of

¹² Exod 32 9-14; cf. Deut 9 25-28; Ps 106 23.

¹³ Num 14 11-20. Cf., also, Exod 5 22 f. and Num 11 11-15 where Moses is quite out of patience with God.

¹⁴ *TB Berakot* 32a. — Here and often (see below) rabbinic fantasy sharpens the point of the biblical phrase.

¹⁴ *TP Ta'anit* IV.8, 68c.

¹⁵ I Sam 7 5-10.

¹⁶ I Sam 12 16-18.

an heroic deed. By means of prayer he ended a drought of two years' standing, but only because, in the course of his prayer, he drew a circle in the dust around him and vowed not to step outside until God gave the needed rain. Nor was he satisfied with drizzle or with cloudburst; he stood his ground until he got a rain of suitable proportions.¹⁷ Simeon ben Shetaḥ was the rabbinic authority in the time of Onias, the first pre-Christian century. According to the Mishnah, Simeon was displeased at the manner and tone of his prayer. He said were this not Onias, he would in fact excommunicate him. But what can Simeon do? Onias speaks petulantly to God and God does his bidding, even as a father whose son speaks so.¹⁸

At the time of the drought to which Jeremiah's list pertains, however, so great was the offense that neither a Moses nor a Samuel would have done any good. Nor yet a Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah, too, deserves his place among these bolder spirits; repeatedly in times of trouble he prayed for the people¹⁹ and repeatedly God denied him this high privilege.²⁰

If we ask why — Why was Jeremiah forbidden to pray? Could God not merely turn a deaf ear to his prayers? — we may be left with the surmise that God did indeed find it hard to wave aside his prayers and the prayers of men like him. And if we ask further why this is so, why God cannot simply refuse their petitions, we are reminded of Abraham of whom it is said: והאמין בה' ויחשבה לו צדקה, "he believed in the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness,"²¹ even as it is said of Moses that he found favor in God's eyes²² — and of Noah.

Noah heads Ezekiel's list of potential mediators. If, at such a time, any mortal could persuade God to spare his fellows, Ezekiel implies, it would be such a one as Noah. Of him it is said: "Noah had found favor in the eyes of the Lord";²³ and it is also said: "Noah in his generations was a righteous man and blameless."²⁴

Along with Noah, Ezekiel names Daniel and Job. But, since the biblical books which celebrate these two heroes of the spirit are most certainly later than Ezekiel's reference and are, therefore, no sure guide to his meaning, all we may confidently say about Daniel and Job is that already in Ezekiel's day (if not before),²⁵ they enjoyed a reputation

¹⁷ *Mishnah Ta'anit* III.8.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*; cf. *Judith* 8 31.

¹⁹ *Jer* 42 4; 18 20; 15 11; cf. 32 16. ²⁰ *Jer* 7 16; 11 14; 14 11.

²¹ *Gen* 15 6; cf. *Neh* 9 8; *Ps* 105 42 and *Ps* 106 30 f.

²² *Exod* 33 17.

²³ *Gen* 6 8.

²⁴ *Gen* 6 9.

²⁵ Cf. the Daniel who figures in the Ugaritic "Tale of Aqhat" V 4–8, etc. to be found in translation in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton, 1950, p. 149 ff. Before he became the hero of the biblical book, Job, too may have been celebrated in

like that of Noah, whose virtue had set a limit to God's freedom and prevented the extinction of mankind.

Noah became the pattern for other later heroes, too — those who on the "last day" will survive the cosmic catastrophe, those in the Isaiah apocalypse instructed, like Noah, to enter their chambers, to close the doors behind them, and to hide "until the indignation be overpast."²⁶

Although the intimacy between God and Israel prevented the development in Old Testament times of the idea of intermediaries between them, the author of Isaiah 63 toys with the idea even while rejecting it: ". . . Abraham knows us not," he lets the people say,

"And Israel does not acknowledge us;
You, O Lord, are our Father,
Our Redeemer from everlasting is your name."²⁷

Nevertheless Abraham ranks with Moses and with Noah among the biblical personages whose persuasive powers God had to acknowledge. Abraham would surely have snatched Sodom from destruction if only those few — ten, even — had been worthy of his prayer.²⁸

The mention of two later personalities, one almost modern, concludes the first part of this study:

Day after day, day after day, in sackcloth and ashes, a legend relates, Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im prayed aloud: "O Master of the World, let not this be the day on which you enter into judgment with your people"; and so compelling was his prayer that the Romans could not conquer Bethar, last stronghold of Bar Kokeba, until a means was found to silence this pious man. Ironically, it was Bar Kokeba himself who caused the death of his protector, and then Bethar fell. This was in the second Christian century.²⁹

In 18th century Volhynia there lived a ḥassidic rabbi, Levi Isaac of Berditshev, whose prayer out of the depths has become a Yiddish classic. He addresses God familiarly in this prayer and some might think that he makes impudent demands. He says, in part:

"Good morning to you, Lord of the world!
I, Levi Isaac, son of Sarah of Berditshev, am come to you in a legal matter
concerning your people Israel.
What do you want of Israel?"

tradition as one who possessed intercessory powers (cf. Job 42 8 ff.). Job and Prometheus are frequently compared; see E. Bussler, *Hiob und Prometheus, zwei Vorkämpfer der göttlichen Gerechtigkeit*, Hamburg, 1897; W. A. Irwin, "Job and Prometheus," *Journal of Religion*, XXX (1950) pp. 90–108; H. G. May, "Prometheus and Job," *Anglican Theological Review*, XXXIV (1952).

²⁶ Isa 26 20.

²⁷ Isa 63 16; cf. 51 1 f.; Jer 31 15.

²⁸ Gen 18 22 ff.; cf. 20 7, 17.

²⁹ *TP Ta'anit* IV.8, 68d.

It is always: Command the children of Israel!
 It is always: Speak unto the children of Israel! . . .
 I, Levi Isaac, son of Sarah of Berditshev, say:
 I shall not go hence, nor budge from my place until there be a finish
 Until there be an end of exile . . ."³⁰

It is reported that Rabbi Nahman (a fifth generation Amora) said: חוצפהא אפילו כלפי שמיא מהני which Marcus Jastrow rather tamely translates: "Boldness will carry its point even against heaven."³²

Now, our sources afford glimpses not only of the persons who strove with God in prayer but also of the strife itself. And for news of the strife, we can turn to other persons than those who are mentioned by name — others in addition to Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Jeremiah. The Promethean figures include many an unnamed psalmist and advocate whose personalities are preserved only in the daring words they spoke. The words of these named and unnamed heroes reveal a number of recurrent themes, propositions with which a man armed himself when he approached God in unequal contest. These propositions are not the more common expressions of submissive piety and humble petition. Like the figures in the narratives, these are the compelling reasons, the cogent postulates, the barbed weapons in the arsenal of prayer.

Prominent among these arguments is the appeal to God's self-interest. If unwilling to act on behalf of the individual or the nation in distress, God is advised then to act for his own sake, for his name's sake.³³ This is the first of the two arguments with which Moses persuades God not to destroy the nation worshipping the calf. "What will people say?" Moses asks. "Egypt, for example. That you delivered the Israelites from bondage only to slay them in the wilderness."³⁴ In the incident of the spies, he repeats this argument more pointedly still: "What will they say? That it was for want of ability to fulfill your promise that you slew them in the desert."³⁵

In a spirit of independence, the one who uses the argument "for thy name's sake" renounces any claim for special treatment. "I am not," he seems to be saying, "asking any favors. I merely call your attention to the fact that in your own interest you must act in such and such a manner."

"Arise, O God, plead thine own cause;
 Remember thy reproach all the day at the hand of base men . . ."³⁶

³⁰ The complete prayer, the "Kaddish of Levi Isaac of Berditshev," may be found in the "Jewish Reader": *In Time and Eternity*, Schocken, New York, 1946, p. 94 f.

³¹ *TB Sanhedrin* 105a.

³² In a *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud, etc.*, s. v. חוצפהא.

³³ Jer 14 7; Ps 25 11; 79 9f. and often.

³⁴ Exod 32 12.

³⁵ Num 14 15 f.; cf. Isa 59 1 f.

³⁶ Ps 74 22; cf. 74 10, 18.

As a matter of fact, the argument “for thy name’s sake” is theologically respectable. It is not, as it may sound, an appeal to God’s vanity. It is an aspect of the larger concept of universal salvation, which has to wait until God’s sovereignty is universally accepted. In this context God is expected to be jealous for his good name with an altruistic jealousy.³⁷

But the theme of God’s own interest is given a special twist, somewhat less respectable, in three of the Psalms (the sixth, the thirtieth, and the eighty-eighth). Assuming as they do, that human adulation is pleasing to God, the authors of these psalms remind him, with what amounts to blackmail, that none but the living render him praise — and it is not to his interest to surrender his worshippers to death.

“For in death there is no remembrance of thee;
“In the nether-world who will give thee thanks?”³⁸

“What profit is there in my blood when I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise thee? Will it declare thy truth?”³⁹

“. . . Do the shades arise and give thee thanks?
Is thy mercy declared in the grave?
. . . Are thy wonders known in the dark?
Thy righteous deeds in the land of forgetfulness?”⁴⁰

The second decisive argument with which Moses confronts God in the molten calf affair is the reminder that God himself has, so to speak, restricted his own freedom. Once in the past, when he chose Abraham and the seed of Abraham forever, God exercised his freedom — and in doing so limited that same freedom henceforth. His choice then became a commitment for the future. “Remember,” Moses says, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants to whom thou didst swear by thine own self and saidst unto them: I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.”⁴¹ Again and again, as in this argument of Moses, men refer to God’s commitment not only to Israel in general⁴² but also specifically to the house of the kings of Judah by way of their founder, David.⁴³

They had what amounts to a technical term for the divine commitment; they called it a קסר. To designate God’s alleged commitment

³⁷ I Kings 8 41–43; Isa 45 6; Ps 98.

³⁸ Ps 6 6.

³⁹ Ps 30 10.

⁴⁰ Ps 88 11–13.

⁴¹ Exod 32 13.

⁴² Deut 9 5; II Kings 13 23; Jer 32 22; Mic 7 20; Neh 9 8 and often.

⁴³ II Sam 7 13b, 15 f.; I Chron 17 12b–14; Ps 89 29 f., 34–38; Jer 33 17, 20–21a; II Chron 6 42; Isa 55 3. Cf. Blank, “The Dissident Laity in Early Judaism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* XIX (1946), pp. 11 f., 33 ff.

to the patriarchs, they used this term along with the words ברית ("covenant") and שבועה ("promise"),⁴⁴ but to designate his commitment to the line of David, they definitely preferred the term חסד.⁴⁵ Having the tradition of these divine commitments, it is perhaps understandable if the presumed beneficiaries sought the presumed benefits. They could, by the way (and this is a significant aside) — they could have respect only for a God whose word was sure.

At times this second argument appears disguised as a hymn. Here the recital of God's former mercies is not a mere mentioning of gratitude. Since to the faithful it is axiomatic that God is consistent, his past conduct is also a warranty for the future. Having not only pledged his word (the חסד) but also embarked upon a matching course of action, God is not now at liberty to depart from that course, for in him caprice would be intolerable. Therefore, if God has acted as, in a lament, his worshippers claim, the mention of past favors, so different from his recent inexplicable conduct, is not praise but a reproach and the hymn not wholly innocent.⁴⁶

"I remember" is the common introduction, and the recollection is clamorous rather than nostalgic. Remembered for the most part is the deliverance from Egypt with the attendant wonders and subsequent care,⁴⁷ or — evidence not only of God's good will but of his unlimited power as well — the epic of the world's creation.⁴⁸

How, indeed, can a friendly and powerful Lord betray his servants whom he has, so to speak, trained to put their trust in him?

We should, of course, not overlook the fact that the atmosphere of complacency in which this argument thrives is the same as that which evoked the heated polemic of the eighth and seventh century prophets. Repeatedly subsequent centuries saw reaffirmed, as here, the notions those prophets opposed.

The third argument is one which Abraham proposes, which God accepts as valid, and which all but saves Sodom. It is the demand that God remain true to his moral nature. "Wilt thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? . . . Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט.⁴⁹ All biblical writers bear witness to this basic concept, notably, among them, Jeremiah and the author of Job. The "confessions" of Jeremiah are one persistent demand that, by repudiating Jeremiah's detractors and upholding the prophet himself,

⁴⁴ Cf. the references in n. 42; also Deut 7 8 f., 12; Dan 9 4; Isa 54 10 *et al.*

⁴⁵ Cf. the references in n. 43; also II Chron 1 8; Ps 18 51; Isa 16 5, *et al.*

⁴⁶ E. g., Ps 22 4-7; Ps 44 1-10; Ps 80 9-13; Isa 63 7-15. In each of these examples note the reproachful tone of the final verse.

⁴⁷ Pss 44 4; 80 9; Isa 51 9 f.; 63 12; Dan 9 15 *et al.*

⁴⁸ Pss 74 12-17; 77 12 ff.; 102 26; 143 5 *et al.*

⁴⁹ Gen 18 25.

God should give evidence of his just nature.⁵⁰ And what does Job require of God but that he be merely just?⁵¹

There are two courses open to the afflicted: they may confess, repent and seek atonement — that is the usual course; or they may regard themselves as victims of injustice and adopt the attitude of aggrieved innocence, disclaiming guilt and insisting upon a rectification of the wrongs they have suffered. It is the bolder spirits who take this latter course, the Jobs and Jeremiahs who claim that the fault is God's, not theirs.

Their disclaiming of guilt takes a variety of forms. They say: though our fathers sinned, *we* are innocent and with manifest injustice we suffer for *their* sins. These are the authors of the "sour grapes" proverb repudiated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.⁵² In the sense that the youth is father to the man, one psalmist expresses a variant of this same thought when he pleads: "Remember not the sins of my youth."⁵³ Sometimes the denial of guilt takes the form: If we have sinned, we are indeed not aware of it; and what kind of a God would exact a penalty for an unrecognized offense?⁵⁴ And now and then it is said: God's standards are simply too high. Men cannot be expected to attain perfection. "There *is* no man that sinneth not."⁵⁵

The author of Psalm 143 betrays ambivalence: he both wants and does not want God to judge him. Although he appeals to the righteousness of God: עוני בצדקתך, "Answer me in thy righteousness,"⁵⁶ without transition he continues: "Enter *not* into judgment with thy servant; For in thy sight shall no man living be justified."⁵⁷ Perhaps it is untempered justice, which in the latter verse he fears, whereas the divine righteousness, which in the former he invokes, recognizes and discounts the common frailty of mortals. Let God judge, he seems to say; let him judge indeed, but let him not be petty, let him not be unreasonable.

Similar is the denial — not of all guilt, but of guilt commensurate with the penalty. The thought is that a quantitative relationship must prevail between them. According to Deutero-Isaiah, even God accepts this principle. This is the prophet's meaning when he says of Jerusalem: "She has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." The penalty has been excessive and Zion may now claim reparations.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Jer 11 20; 12 1; 18 19 f., etc.; cf. Blank "The Confessions of Jeremiah and the Meaning of Prayer" in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XXI (1948).

⁵¹ Job 13 15, 18; 23 3 f.; 27 2, etc.

⁵² Jer 31 28; Ezek 18 2.

⁵³ Ps 25 7.

⁵⁴ Job 13 23

⁵⁵ I Kings 8 46; cf. Job 4 17; Ps 130 3.

⁵⁶ Ps 143 1.

⁵⁷ Ps 143 2; cf. 130 3.

⁵⁸ Isa 40 2.

Zechariah agrees: the agents of God's anger, turned loose against Israel, exacted a disproportionate penalty — "for I was only a little angry and they wrought excessive evil."⁵⁹ The seventy shepherds in Enoch are guilty of the same excess and, according to that apocalyptic parable, they are treated accordingly on the Judgment Day.⁶⁰

Finally, the denial of guilt may be only that and nothing more. The author of Psalm 44 does not mince words. He bluntly declares:

"All this has come upon us although we did not forget you —
Although we were not false to your covenant.
Our heart did not turn back
Neither did our steps decline from your path. . .
If we had forgotten the name of our God
Or spread forth our hands to a strange god
Would not God search this out?
For he knows the secrets of the heart."⁶¹

And boldly the author of the great lament in Isaiah 63 and 64⁶² calls the people's guilt an illusion. No fault of theirs invited this disaster; quite the contrary! the disaster produced the guilt — no, it produced only the appearance of guilt.

"Behold you were wroth with the result that we appear guilty;
[You were angry] and we are accounted transgressors.
Yea, we are all become like an unclean thing
And all our virtues like a polluted garment."⁶³

So much, then, for the compelling arguments. Not these alone but also the manner of the praying was counted on to insure the prayer's effectiveness. The psalmist applied to his own situation the mocking words which Elijah addressed to the prophets of Baal: "he is musing, or he is gone aside, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleeps and must be awakened";⁶⁴ and, thinking thus, the psalmist also called him "louder" and louder, and louder still, until, in spirit, his prayer resembled the tempestuous clamor of the Baal prophets in the oratorio.

The psalmist is sometimes overwhelmed by the thought, not that God is being unusually severe with him or his people, but that God is doing something much, much worse, that he is looking the other way, indifferent to their fate, that, in biblical terminology, he is "hiding his

⁵⁹ Zech 1 15 (though the last phrase is awkward Hebrew this seems to be the meaning). Cf., also, Isa 10 5-7; 47 6; 61 7.

⁶⁰ Enoch 89 f., especially 89 62, 69; 90 22, 25.

⁶¹ Ps 44 18-22.

⁶² Isa 63 7-64 11.

⁶³ Isa 64 4b-5a; cf. Blank, "'And All Our Virtues' — An Interpretation of Isaiah 64 4b-5a" in *JBL* LXXI (1952), p. 149 ff.

⁶⁴ I Kings 18 27.

face." This phrase denotes various degrees of estrangement, from a passive forgetting or not heeding⁶⁵ to an active rejecting and leaving unprotected.⁶⁶ When the terrifying thought arises that God is indeed hiding his face, at such a time unimpassioned, temperate speech gives way to an insistent, importunate demand bordering on panic.

The arguments are the same, but there is an added urgency. This urgency is expressed in three different ways. It is expressed as an accusation — an accusation addressed to God bluntly and directly: "You have enticed me,"⁶⁷ "You have been to me like a deceitful stream."⁶⁸

Or it has the form of an impatient demand, a variant of the imperative: "Look at me!"⁶⁹ or its companion "Awake! Why sleepest thou, O Lord?"⁷⁰

This demand, "Awake! Why sleepest thou, O Lord?" is cited in the Talmud. In a list of the reforms of the High Priest John Hyrcanus, the Mishnah says: "He abolished the מעוררים, the awakeners."⁷¹ And in the Babylonian Talmud⁷² someone fortunately asks: "Who were these awakeners?" They were the levites, he learns, who were assigned the special duty, day by day, to ascend a platform and to cry aloud: עורה למה חישן אדני, "Awake! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake! Why sleepest thou, O Lord?"

And last among the forms which give expression to this unbridled urgency is the desperate question. The question is a variant of "How long, O Lord?"⁷³ or "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁷⁴ The question "How much longer?" occurs apparently as a conventional formula in Babylonian ritual laments⁷⁵ and its use in our psalm literature seems at times to be similarly conventional. Indeed, a liturgy adopts and repeats bold phrases which were no mere phrases when a crisis begot them. And, certainly, not every occurrence in this literature of the accusation, the question and the demand, is equally earnest. The psalms will contain the borrowed conventional phrase as well as the fresh hot demand.

⁶⁵ Pss 10 11; 13 2; 44 25; 22 25; 69 18; 102 3; Isa 59 2; Micah 3 4; cf. the "iron plate" of Ezek 4 3, *et al.*

⁶⁶ Pss 27 8; 88 15; Deut 31 17 f.; 32 19 f.; Jer 33 5; Ezek 39 23 f.; Isa 54 8; 57 17; Pss 89 47; 30 8; 104 29, *et al.*

⁶⁷ Jer 20 7; cf. Blank "The Confessions of Jeremiah, etc.," p. 344.

⁶⁸ Jer 15 18.

⁶⁹ Ps 13 4; cf. Isa 64 8; Pss 25 16, 18 f.; 59 5; 80 15; Lam 1 9, 11; 5 1 *et al.*

⁷⁰ Ps 44 24; cf. Pss 35 22 f.; 59 2-6; 80 2-4; Isa 51 9, *et al.*

⁷¹ *Mishnah Sota* IX.10.

⁷² *TB Sota* 48a.

⁷³ Ps 13 2 f.; cf. Pss 74 10; 79 5; 89 47; 90 13; 85 6; Hab 1 2, *et al.*

⁷⁴ Ps 22 2; cf. Pss 10 1; 42 10; 43 2; 74 1; 88 15; Lam 5 20; Jer 14 8, 19, *et al.*

⁷⁵ H. Zimmern, *Babylonische Hymnen u. Gebete in Der Alte Orient* VII, Leipzig, 1905, p. 8; M. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens u. Assyriens* II¹, Giessen, 1912, pp. 16, 43, 109.

The sixty-second chapter of Isaiah is one of the finest compositions in the minor anthology that goes by the name of Trito-Isaiah; it is also the best biblical expression of this fresh urgency; and it is this striking chapter which suggested to me this theme. Its author is the true Prometheus among the psalmists. His opening words reveal his spirit:

ולמען ירושלים לא אשקוט ולמען ציון לא אחשה

“For Zion’s sake I will not hold my peace,
And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,
Until her triumph go forth as brightness
And her salvation as a torch that burneth.”⁷⁶

We miss the whole point of the chapter if we fail to recognize the speaker of these lines. It is not God but the psalmist who vows to hold not his peace nor rest. And it is still the psalmist who is speaking in verses 6 and 7:

“Upon your walls, O Jerusalem
I have stationed watchmen.
Neither by day nor by night —
Never shall they hold their peace.
You remembrancers of God
Allow yourselves no quiet (אל דמי לכם);
Yea, and allow him no quiet (ואל חתנו דמי לו)
Until he establish it
Until he make Jerusalem
An object of praise in the earth.”⁷⁷

As, in verse 1, the speaker denies himself peace until he sees salvation dawn for Jerusalem, so precisely, in verse 6, he denies his watchmen peace until that day. And these appointed שומרים are men like him — men who pray, who pray urgently and ceaselessly ever the same prayer for the salvation of Jerusalem.⁷⁸ It is their business, his business and theirs, to remind God of his commitment to Jerusalem. Their function as “remembrancers” is very like what God requires of Israel in Isaiah 43:⁷⁹

“Put me in remembrance; let us argue together;
State your case that you may be justified,”
הזכירני נשפטה יחד ספר אחת למען תצדק

As in that passage, so here, the מזכירים are “stating their case” and stating it with all the power they can muster and with unwearying persistence.

⁷⁶ Isa 62 1.

⁷⁷ Isa 62 6 f. — Note that God is referred to in the third person.

⁷⁸ Compare the Sumerian “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur” translated and annotated by S. N. Kramer in Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 455 ff., especially line 80 ff. and note 25. — Cf., also, I Kings 8 59 and Ps 55 18.

⁷⁹ V. 26.

So sure of himself and the right of his cause is the author of Isaiah 62 that he leads a protesting chorus in uninterrupted prayer designed to force the hand of God.

Which is more striking, this man's audacity, or the simple faith by which he knows men's prayers disturb God's peace?

And with this thought we may conclude, pausing only to say one special word to those members of this Society whose major interest is the New Testament rather than the Hebrew Bible. If, in thinking of this presidential address, you feel the need to characterize it briefly for filing in your memory, may I suggest you think of it as a Jewish commentary on a saying of Jesus preserved by Luke. I refer, of course, to the words:

"Ask, and it will be given to you;
Seek, and you will find;
Knock, and it will be opened to you."⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Luke 11 9.