

- 29 For a complete treatment of the issues in modern day foster care and adoption, see Berridge, David. *Foster Care: A Research Review* (London: The Stationary Office, 1997); and Parker, Professor Roy, et al. *Adoption Now: Messages from Research* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1999).
- 30 While recognizing its importance, this section must be kept relatively brief to remain within the scope of this dissertation. It is hoped, however, that brevity will in no way undermine priority.

- 31 Cited in Switzer, 2000, 9-10 – emphasis added.
- 32 The ten outlined steps in this section are modified from Branigan, Andrew, 'Developing a Youth Work Strategy.' Youth Ministry – Lecture Notes. Belfast Bible College: 6 April, 2001. These steps can be modified for application to individual carers, but for the purposes of this section, references will be made to caring teams.
- 33 Swindoll, Charles R. *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity* (USA: Word, 1987), 125.
- 34 Jn. 21:15 (NIV).

Putting Attitude Back into Gratitude

Desi Maxwell

KEYWORDS: prayer, blessing, provision, guidance, creation, faithfulness, justice

'Pray at all times' always struck me as an impossible imperative. The Pauline demand seemed as unrealistic as it was idealistic until I started to explore the Hebraic thought world inhabited by the apostle. Exploring the Jewish concept of 'blessings' in particular opened a whole new world that proved as theologically rich as it was practically useful. The Jewish Prayer Book was one of the doors into that world and while recognizing the collection of many of the prayers came after the time of Paul, the origin of many of them predated him by some time.

First of all I had to overcome my inbred suspicion of prayer books. Coming from a dissenting tradition proud of all things extempore I naturally asked whether any good thing could come out of a collection of set-texts. Furthermore, in Jewish tradition a man is expected to say at least one hundred blessings each day. Surely this must be susceptible to legalism and mere formalism?

However, the Jewish name for the prayer book, the 'Sid-dur' arrested my attention. Like most Hebrew words the word has a genealogy that allows us to trace its origins back to a three-letter root verb meaning 'to set in order'. Implicit

in the name is a challenge to the all too common notion that spirituality and structure must be polar opposites. Structure need not draw stricture if it is infused with life and proves to be both personally and pastorally useful. This, I found to be the case with the section on 'Blessings'.



There is a 'blessing' for virtually everything in life. Sights and sounds, tastes and smells, good news and bad news, wind and rain, physical and spiritual experiences are all covered. Even the arrival of the new sewing machine elicited a blessing from the old rabbi in the musical 'Fiddler on the Roof'. However, before examining these responses to the rich diversity of life it is vital to examine what gives unity across the wide spectrum of responses. The composition of the blessings is regulated rigidly.

Every blessing shares the same basic two-fold structure. A standard opening formula directed to God and declaring his reign is followed by a specific reference to what the person is responding to. The same six Hebrew words always introduce the blessing.

'Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melech ha-olam.'

Translated into English the opening phrase never alters.

'Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe.'

Here is a wonderful affirmation of the goodness of everything that God has made and the fact that he rules over everything. In the Hebrew text of the opening formula the personal and unique covenantal name of God (the tetragrammaton) is used. According to Jewish tradition that name is never pronounced but is replaced by 'Ha-shem' which literally means 'The Name'. The clear assumption is that despite all his transcendence the Lord may be addressed directly as the speaker goes on to affirm his universal kingship.

The Jewish sages built their theology of thanksgiving upon the opening verse of Psalm 24 which affirms 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof'. So here is a wonderfully simple but profound acknowledgement of God's kingdom as his rule or reign over everything. Strikingly, Paul appeals to this idea and to this very verse when addressing those who had had qualms about eating some things bought in the meat market at Corinth. (1 Corinthians 10: 26). The Hebrew theology of blessing recognized the innate goodness of all that God had made (c.f. Genesis 1:4,10,12,18). People were thus encouraged to bless the creator and provider of every benefit derived from creation.

Having addressed the Lord directly the speaker then changes gear in the second half of the blessing. We might

say that the prayer starts off in second gear. God is addressed in terms of the second person singular, 'you' before shifting into third gear in the concluding phrase which specifies the nature of the blessing. For the last and most specific part of the blessing there is a move up to third gear as the third person pronoun is used.

- Blessed are you, Hashem, our God, King of the universe,*
- (He) Who brings forth bread from the earth.
 - (He) Who creates the fruit of the tree.
 - (He) Who places a good aroma into fruits.
 - (He) Who makes the creatures different.

This rather abrupt change of gear is all the more striking when we examine some contemporary prayers. A lot of modern prayers never get out of first gear. First person singular pronouns prevail and the listening ear is struck by the number of times 'I', 'me' and 'my' punctuate the petitions. The Jewish sages teach us to start in second gear and then move up to third gear. In second gear we are conscious that the Lord is accessible and we speak directly to him. However, we can move up a gear into third to make objective declarations that transcend subjective experiences. This latter declarative aspect highlights the discipline of prayer. It is not just for petition but also for declaration and affirmation of who God is and what he has done. Irrespective of my feelings I am called daily to worship God and remind myself as well as my world just who he is. To use only first gear in my car would be to limit its usefulness severely and so to think of prayer only in terms of the first person singular is to narrow its focus inexcusably.

The wonderful effect of these blessings is to lift our eyes from the personal experience and the immediate situation without ever trivializing either one. The blessing recognizes the present reality but refocuses on the ultimate reality, namely the Lord God himself. His rule is recognized for its

sheer ubiquity and amazing creativity. As humans we have the opportunity to respond and to declare the multi-dimensional manifestations of his sovereign rule.

Upon awakening in the morning the Jew is instructed to be aware of his dependence upon God for everything

from the moment his eyes are opened as he experiences the phenomena of the new day.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who gave the heart understanding to distinguish between day and night

The ability to make such a distinction not only bespeaks the presence of life itself but also is a reminder that God's wisdom is necessary to make all the right distinctions that are to be confronted in the course of the day. There then follows a series of fifteen blessings in the course of which God is blessed as the provider of every need. As he rubs his sleepy

eyes and as he sits up and stretches he acknowledges God has the power to release the bound. In getting out of bed there is a reminder God may straighten the bent. On touching the floor with his feet there is an acknowledgement that God alone has spread out the earth. Of these early morning blessings one in particular is open to misunderstanding by the modern mind. A man prays,

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman.

Despite appearances, this is not a piece of male chauvinism but rather an occasion to explore the rabbinic (and post-biblical) mindset. The prayer is not about the relative merits of the two sexes and the implicit superiority of one over the other. To be fair this must be understood in context. Here, a man, who is bound by the 'laws of time', gives thanks for this opportunity to gather merit that a woman does not have. A mother, whose primary role is raising the children and keeping the home 'clean' is not to be distracted by these so-called 'laws of time' requiring prayer at set hours. Such a discipline would undermine the primacy of home and children in her life and so she is freed from the intrusion of this discipline. However, her husband must observe these laws but in so doing the rabbis taught he would accumulate merit – hence the gratitude expressed in the prayer for having been born male rather than female. Obviously this a patent example of where rabbinic Judaism diverges from our Christian understanding but even while acknowledging such disagreement in places there is still much for us to learn from the Hebraic mindset.

The early morning blessings emphasize the unique privileges of having and studying the Word of God. Torah still exercises a centripetal force in the life of the Jew and study is the very lifeblood of the committed.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to engross ourselves in the Words of Torah. Please, Hashem, our God, sweeten the words of your Torah in our mouth and in the mouth of Your people, the family of Israel. May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel-all of us-know Your Name and study and Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people Israel.

I must admit that my own understanding of Torah was revolutionized when I came to understand the roots of the word itself. As with most Hebrew words the ultimate derivation is from a verb.

In the case of 'Torah' the root verb was originally used of shooting arrows and in time came to mean 'give direction', 'guidance' or 'instruction'. So Torah was not intended to be a legalistic code full of negatives but to serve the wonder-



fully positive purpose of guiding the people of God. No wonder that Paul could refer to Jesus as the 'telos' of the Torah (Romans 10:4). In his mind Christ is the 'end' of Torah not in the sense of its termination but in terms of teleology or its goal. This blessing gives daily prominence to the Torah, the foundational Scripture that Jesus would have known so intimately and that we in the modern western world tend to overlook. It creates a profound sense of history and continuity with the past as we read the Word of God.

While blessings may transport the mind back to Sinai they also serve to highlight the ongoing and daily provision of the Lord for his people. A whole series of blessings relate to different types of food.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe,

- *Who brings forth bread from the earth* (before eating bread)
- *Who creates species of nourishment* (wheat, barley or oats products)
- *Who creates the fruit of the vine* (before drinking grape wine or juice)
- *Who creates the fruit of the tree* (before eating tree-grown fruit)
- *Who creates the fruit of the ground* (anything harvested from the ground)
- *through whose word everything came to be* (before any other food or drink).



Perhaps our western minds may balk a little at the apparent punctiliousness of the blessings and the apparently endless differentiation may seem needlessly burdensome. Nonetheless, when we get over that hurdle we find timely reminders of God's provision in the course of everyday products. In a typically Jewish fashion Jesus gave thanks for food and blessed God the provider (Luke 9:16). So often this action has been understood as the template for the Christian practice of saying grace or asking someone 'to bless the food'. However, to interpret Jesus' action as 'blessing the food' rather than blessing the provider would be most un-Hebraic. David Flusser, one of the great authorities on the Jewish origins of Christianity, has pointed to a few manuscripts, including the uncial Codex Bezae that would indicate Jesus said his blessing *over* the bread. In other words, he blessed the provider not simply the provision. (See further *Jesus, the Jewish Theologian*, Brad H. Young, Hendrickson, Massachusetts, 1995, p. 123). This is more than a semantic quibble since the popular notion of us 'blessing' the food is a striking example of Greek dualism that has crept into our thought world. Down through church history the idea has gained ground that human beings can somehow or other bless water, buildings, land or bread and in so doing set them aside from all common use. However, without deprecating the motives behind such actions we can see the implication is clearly that what

God has made is not good enough as it is. If these things are to be used for holy purposes then an action on the part of some human being is required. This flies in the face of the fundamental Jewish and indeed, biblical teaching that the earth and all that he has made in and on it is the Lord's. However, our popular notion creates a hierarchy of values that is indefensible biblically. Often, at the Lord's Table there is a prayer that the bread be set aside from all common use but I often wonder was it not the fact that bread was so basic and common that added force to our Lord's use of this very element? Certainly in the reformed tradition where there is no belief in any actual change in the bread it is more consistent to bless God rather than the element itself. To this day the rabbis speak of 'the miracle that is with us daily' when referring to the loaf of bread and in an age of virtual wonders it is good to be grounded by this reminder of God's actual working in the course of the ordinary.

It is precisely in this area of the ordinary that the blessings function so powerfully. They afford us a way of acknowledging the presence and power of God in the course of the mundane. Everyday phenomena afford us opportunities to recognize the reality of God in the totality of life.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe,

- *Who makes the work of creation* (on seeing lightening)
- *for His strength and power fill the universe* (upon hearing thunder)
- *Who made the great sea* (upon seeing the ocean)
- *Who has such in His universe* (upon seeing exceptionally beautiful people, trees or fields)
- *Who remembers the covenant, is trustworthy in His covenant, and fulfils His word* (upon seeing a rainbow in the sky).

On the one hand memorizing such a catalogue of specifically oriented blessings could become an onerous task. A legalistic approach would surely prove tiresome at best and mechanical at worst, despite the best intentions in the world. On the other hand the very existence of these many blessings reminds us of the many opportunities that life affords us to respond to the Creator. I may find myself sitting in the car waiting at the traffic lights when a rainbow appears on the horizon. I may not be a Jew, my Hebrew may be faltering, (even non-existent) and my memory of the words inexact but I can still lift up my heart and mind to the Lord at that particular moment. Sitting there at the red light surrounded by a world of fads and fickleness, I find myself thanking God for all his faithfulness in the midst of it all. Such blessings have served to sensitize me to the reality of God in the course of the ordinary.



The discovery of these blessings and the Theo-centred thought world to which they belong has obliged me to re-examine the realm of the ordinary. For many, God can be God only when he is engaged in the supernatural when in reality he is at work in the course of what we regard as the mundane. If familiarity has not bred contempt it has been no less dangerous because it has fostered indifference in the minds of many. Jostein Gaardner illustrates this very point at the opening of his history of philosophy, *Sophie's World*. He describes the excitement of parents as their young child gradually acquires new words. There is the initial joy as the child learns to say 'Bow-wow! Bow-wow!' every time a dog is encountered. However, he asks, how long is it before the rapturous outburst turns into an irksome interruption. The adults have seen it all before and the dog no longer enthral them. Gaardner comments astutely,

This rapturous performance may repeat itself hundreds of times before the child learns to pass a dog without going crazy. Or an elephant, or a hippopotamus. But long before the child learns to talk properly – and long before it learns to think philosophically – the world will have become a habit.

A pity, if you ask me. (*Sophie's World*, Phoenix House, London, 1995, p.14)

Let me suggest we re-read Gaardner's observation and substitute 'theologically' for 'philosophically'. For all too many the world has been robbed of both its innate wonder and its creator. Indeed, to paraphrase another philosopher, Abraham Heschel, our society is not going to die for a lack of information but it will suffer irreparably due to a lack of awe and wonder. The tantalizing world of virtual reality is dulling our senses and many are rapidly losing touch with the actual wonders of a world where God is still at work. The Jewish blessings help us re-evaluate the ordinary and alert us to countless opportunities to recognize the hand of the Almighty.

There is one particular blessing that makes this very point with striking effectiveness. In fact it is so down to earth that some actually take offence at the sheer earthiness. Such a reaction makes for a telling comment on how deeply some Christians have been influenced by dualistic thinking. The blessing in question refers to some very basic human functions.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who fashioned man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.

Here is a blessing that begins by celebrating both the wonder and wisdom of God's creation of the human body. There is the marvel of the orifices such as the mouth and nostrils which act as entrances and exits while in the 'cavities' the lungs, heart, stomach and brain work away. However, as a result of the influence of Greek dualistic thinking down through the centuries there are many Christians who are not comfortable with the whole idea of the body and struggle

with the concept of a prayer that has been linked to a man relieving himself at the toilet. Such frankness does not always sit easily with high-minded and otherworldly spirituality but such delicacy is the outcome of a worldview that has come down to us via Athens rather than Jerusalem. For me, at least, here is a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge my total dependence on the Lord for even the most mundane aspects of my life. Here is a striking reminder of God's care that is woven into the very fabric of daily existence. Such phrasing reminds and roots us in the reality of a divine care that is both present and pervasive.

I cannot recall any recent encounters with something that was patently supernatural but my faith is constantly challenged by the ordinary events of life. This is precisely where this spectrum of blessings functions best. There is the opportunity to respond when I get a piece of good news that either benefits others or me.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who is good and does good.

Yet, the composers of these blessings had a wonderful sense that any who are heirs of ultimate reality need an air of reality about them. This is reflected with disarming honesty in the provision of a blessing to be repeated upon hearing bad news.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe the true Judge.

Such a blessing bespeaks an awareness of the realities of life and indicates a faith robust enough to cope with them. This blessing is eminently useful when faced by those situations that rock us to the very fabric of our being. When faced by dilemmas that seem to cast doubt on the very existence of God, never mind his care, this blessing takes us back to stand with Abraham as he confronts the Lord outside Sodom. The patriarch, wrestling with the ethics of God's proposed annihilation of the city, is faced with a situation that he cannot get his mind around. However, it is in the very perplexity of these circumstances that he reflects that surely 'the Judge' of all the earth must do right (Genesis 18: 25). It is the designation 'judge' that is the common denominator between Abraham's and my personal dilemma. Geographically I may not stand where Abraham stood but theologically I stand before the same God. Like him, I am confounded by the circumstances, but the blessing helps reassure me that despite my lack of comprehension that same 'judge' is still in control. That control extends over both the good and the bad news! Such realism is often lacking in naïve evangelicalism today. Here we meet a robust acknowledgement of the difficulty but a pastoral response that is both intelligent and affirming.

This is further reflected in a blessing provided for meeting exceptionally strange-looking people or animals.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe Who makes the creatures different.

In a refreshingly honest look at life Annie Dillard's book *For The Time Being* makes us face some of the harsher and inexplicable phenomena. Her reflections are stirred by a perusal of *Smith's Recognizable Patterns of Human Malformation*, a collection of case studies graphically illustrated by photographs. The pictures raise some hard-hitting and heart-

rending questions. She does not pretend that there are easy answers but at the same does not argue they disprove the existence or love of God. Rather Dillard quotes this Jewish blessing which once again challenges us to deal with both God and the reality of our fallen world.

While allowing for the possibility that the range and detail of the blessings make them susceptible to formalism, legalism and mechanical repetition, there is still great value in exploring them. Every single blessing focuses on God and his kingly rule. Christians who pray 'Thy kingdom come' can only be edified by familiarity with these. Here is a range of prayers, many of which are impossible to date and may well

pre-date the days of Jesus himself that will enrich and encourage us. They bring God into the world of everyday life and they face the dilemmas, discrepancies, hardships and paradoxes of that life with theo-centred hope. Their value does not depend on our memorizing every one of them but at least they serve to prompt us to respond no matter what the situation. When Paul called the saints to pray at all times he was not putting a three line whip on the mid-week prayer meeting. More likely he was reflecting that all embracing Hebraic approach to life which once embraced, allows us to pray at all times without going mad.

Desi Maxwell is a Tutor at Belfast Bible College.

Evangelical Preaching in Northern Ireland – a Brainstorming Response.

Drew Gibson

KEYWORDS: irrelevance, guilt, self-esteem, contextualisation, discernment, interactive teaching, dialogue, contemporary interpretation, listening discussion

These days I am more often listening to someone else preaching than doing the preaching myself and I have come to the conclusion that two of the clearest features of much contemporary Evangelical preaching in Northern Ireland are blandness and irrelevance. This is not to say that all evangelical preaching is of poor quality but far too often in my work as a theological teacher I chat with students of all ages who find themselves unable to relate to what they hear from the pulpit. This would not be a problem if these students were nineteen year old budding academic theologians whose new-found theological 'enlightenment' had made them impatient with the less 'sexy' theology of their pastor. But the students who complain to me are full time and part time; more and less intelligent; male and female; old and young. They cover the social, economic and denominational spectra but they are united in their complaint that what they hear from the pulpit is remarkable only for its irrelevance. Curiously, some will maintain that their pastor is a 'great teacher' but this often means no more than that he is hard to understand or that he rehearses the old truths faithfully.

How can it be that someone listening to a sermon can think that the sermon is both 'good teaching' and completely irrelevant? My guess is that it is because statements of accurate biblical facts and doctrines, even when accompanied with real spiritual passion, are just not enough. It is possible to be completely faithful to the truth contained in Scripture but to so present this truth that the presentation itself alienates the hearers from the truth. In other words, truth telling is not the same as preaching, either in form or in content.

Thielicke considers this practical irrelevance to be 'a Docetic view of human beings [in which] . . . the very hearers who are troubled by real situational problems feel that they have been bypassed'.¹ From a more down to earth perspective Banks quotes the comment of a middle-aged businessman to a preacher, 'But when you spoke, I didn't hear a sermon at all. Instead I heard someone talking about what was actually going on in my own life.'² The businessman's presupposition was that a sermon is, by definition, irrelevant to everyday life.

Evangelicals in Northern Ireland do guilt very well. We know how to bring people face to face with their sins and shortcomings; this is right and necessary. Alongside this we have a very correct desire to elevate the majesty of God, his purity and transcendence. But the way in which we combine these often has the effect of diminishing our self-esteem and lowering both our sense of worth and our ability to face the world head on. The practical effect on many Christians is to send them out with their shoulders drooping and their tails between their legs; they are cowed rather than empowered.

I offer this little piece of self-analysis on the basis that it is not only Northern Irish Evangelicals who must address this issue but many Evangelicals in other parts of the world also.

Hermeneutics and Homiletics

I have the feeling that this state of affairs is at least partly a result of our understanding of the nature of homiletics and hermeneutics. Putting this another way, the patterns of interpreting Scripture and proclaiming the results of this interpretation have been inherited from the past and in the past have been blessed by God but I wonder if the time has now come to question both, lest, in our desire to be faithful