Prayers of Thanksgiving

Prayers that give thanks to God) for a rescue from some crisis, and thus give public testimony to God’s acts.

Thanksgiving is a prominent theme in Chronicles and in Paul’s letters, and thanksgiving prayers are one of the main types of psalm. Such thanksgiving prayers can be offered by communities (e.g., Psalms 107; 124; 136), by individuals (e.g., Psalms 30; 92; 138), or by a leader—a cross between the other two (e.g., Psalms 18; 116; 118).

The distinctiveness of thanksgiving prayers emerges from a comparison with the most common kind of psalm, the prayers of protest and petition (nowadays often termed “laments”), many of which close with a thanksgiving in light of the awareness that God has heard the prayer (e.g., Psalm 22). The difference in a thanksgiving prayer is that it presupposes God’s now having not only heard but acted in response to the prayer.

Their distinctiveness also emerges from a comparison with praise psalms (e.g., Psalm 100), which urge people to recognize God’s greatness in light of his nature and of his acts such as the exodus; they may thus “give thanks” for what God always is, and it is likely this sense that the “Thanksgiving Psalms” among the Qumran Scrolls give thanks. But the distinctiveness of a thanksgiving psalm is that it relates to something God has done just now in the lives of the person or people praying.

Thanksgiving psalms characteristically work by telling a story. They give an account of the situation before things went wrong, of how they did then go wrong, of how the person or people prayed, of how God heard the prayer, and of how God acted to put things right. The problem they most often describe is the attacks of other people, and the act they celebrate is thus God’s deliverance from these attacks. The thanksgiving then commonly makes a commitment to living in praise and trust in the future, in light of what God has done.

Thanksgiving prayers regularly incorporate an exhortation to other people to join in this praise and trust. They thus address other people in the community as well as addressing God, and they could be termed testimony psalms as well as thanksgiving prayers. The vocalizing of thanksgiving is vital. It is by speaking so other people can hear that a thanksgiving goes about glorifying God. Thanksgiving prayer would not work if it were silent. Conversely, testimony would not work if it were not an act of praise for what God has just done.

A thanksgiving offering would naturally accompany a thanksgiving prayer (see Leviticus 7; Psalm 50; Jonah 2:9); it would be an occasion on which the public testimony could be given.

In such worship people thus speak to one another as well as to God (Ephesians 5:19-20). The testimony aspect of thanksgiving is also a reason why thanksgiving needs to be intelligible (1 Corinthians 14:16).

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--John Goldingay