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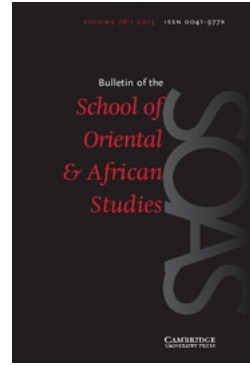
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The literary form of prayer: Qurān sūra one, the Lord's Prayer and a Babylonian prayer to the Moon God

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THE LITERARY FORM OF PRAYER:
QUR'ĀN SURA ONE, THE LORD'S PRAYER
AND A BABYLONIAN PRAYER TO THE MOON GOD

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> *Even those I consider wise cling desperately*
> *to fragments and persuade themselves and*
> *others that they have the whole vessel.*
> (I. Klima, *My golden trades*, 1992, 79.)

In his article ' Lecture de la *Fātiḥa* ' Muhammad Arkoun develops principles for a contemporary rereading of scripture which differ markedly from those of classical exegesis. The latter rests upon the dogmatic certainty that scripture constitutes the only truth and the whole truth; hence it sees its task as rendering this truth accessible by recourse to a wide range of explanatory techniques. Arkoun's principles, on the other hand, are based upon the realization that in the present circumstances man's understanding of himself must be acquired not by remaining within the fold of one assumed source of truth but by transcending the panoply of 'biophysical, economic, political, linguistic constraints' which delimit his condition. As result, such knowledge must consist in repeated and risky forays ' beyond the enclosures which all cultural traditions tend to erect after a phase of intensive elaboration' (Arkoun, 1982: 50).

The present article proposes to follow Arkoun's advice and go beyond such cultural enclosures by studying two canonical prayer texts which occupy a prime position in the scriptures of their respective faiths: the *Fātiḥa* and the Lord's Prayer. The purpose is to examine whether such a comparison can advance our understanding of these texts and thereby give us further insight into the devotional act of prayer which they are meant to express. While this re-reading of scripture is not undertaken for the purpose of doctrinal apologetics it does not aim to ignore the religious efficacy of these texts. Rather it is a matter of understanding how this efficacy is made manifest through the medium of artistic form. For indeed, both prayers are remarkable artistic creations arising out of an ancient tradition of liturgical poetry which encompasses not only the Judeo-Christian heritage but also the hymns and prayers of the Ancient Near East, in particular of Mesopotamia and Egypt. The scope of this comparison is therefore extended to include also an ancient Babylonian prayer to the Moon God, Sin. It is an example of the widely attested *shu-ila* form, which of all Ancient Near Eastern prayer forms lends itself best to comparison because of its similarity to the thematic sequence of the *Fātiḥa*.

While the methodology of this study is thus literary, this does not mean that the rich exegetical tradition is to be ignored. On the contrary it will be seen that many observations made by medieval commentators can readily be cited in support of conclusions derived from literary analysis.

I. *The Fātiḥa*

Syntactical structure

The first *sūra* of the Qur'ān is now habitually subdivided according to the rhyme scheme. With the inclusion of the opening formula, the *basmalla*, it has seven verses, whereby the number seven has acquired a particular significance.

The phrase *sab'an min al-mathāni* (Qur'ān 15: 87), the 'Seven Oft-repeated Verses' (Ali, 1937: 652) is commonly understood to refer to the *Fātiḥa* and confirm its canonical subdivision. However, as argued by Rubin (1993), this interpretation of the phrase is very much open to question, not least because 'the fixed numbering of the quranic verses in general is secondary to the quranic text' (ibid.: 149). Moreover, Nöldeke has shown that the *sūra* has in the past also been subdivided into six, eight or nine verses both with and without the opening formula (1909: 115 f.)

Rather than add to the complex debate over the canonical subdivision of the *sūra* I propose, for the purpose of analysis, to structure the text on the basis of the parallelistic phraseology it so prominently exhibits. In doing so I have included the opening formula as it is an integral part of that structure.

١. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

1. In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate.

٢. الحمد لله رب العالمين

2. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds,

٣. الرحمن الرحيم

3. the Merciful, the Compassionate,

٤. مالك يوم الدين

4. Master of the Day of Judgement.

٥. اياك نعبد

5. Thee we worship

٦. وأياك نستعين

6. and Thee we ask for help.

٧. اهدنا الصراط المستقيم

7. Guide us along the straight path

٨. صراط الذين انعمت عليهم

8. The path of those whom Thou hast favoured

٩. غير المغضوب عليهم

9. not those who incur anger,

١٠. ولا الضالين

10. nor those who go astray.

As can be seen at a glance, the *sūra* is composed of ten parallel phrases which form a highly symmetrical pattern. The first two couplets are an invocation dwelling on the divine attributes; the central couplet, henceforth called worship section, introduces man's relationship to God and the two concluding couplets constitute the petition of the prayer which centres on man's path to God. Hence the invocation defines the power of the Lord, the petition focuses on the condition of mankind and the central couplet, in accordance with its structural position, defines the relationship between the two. This syntactical symmetry has been remarked upon by the exegetical tradition which quotes a *hadīth* according to which God is said to have informed the prophet that 'I have divided prayer (*salāt*) between me and my servant (*niṣfuhā lī wa-niṣfuhā*

li-'abdī). The *ḥadīth* goes on to state the invocation section of the *Fātiḥa* is ' for God ', the petition ' for His servant ', whereas the central couplet is described as being ' between me and my servant ' (*hādha baynī wa-bayna 'abdī*, al-Khāzin 1910, p.13 f.). The word *niṣf* in the *ḥadīth* can be taken quite literally: the first phrase of the worship section (*iyāka na'budu*) can be said to conclude the invocation—since recitation of it is an act of worship ('*ibāda*)—whereas the second phrase (*iyāka nasta'īn*) introduces the petition by expressing man's plea for help (*isti'āna*). Thus each half of the prayer is composed of five parallel phrases: *niṣfuhā lī wa-niṣfuhā li-'abdī*.

The parallelistic structure provides scope for a more detailed analysis. There is, first of all, a semantic parallelism between *bi-smi llāh* and *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* in that the names of God are in themselves expressions of praise for God. Indeed, all the laudatory phrases of the invocation form part of the *asmā' al-ḥusnā*, the divine names. They are arranged in parallel fashion so as to contrast the might and mercy of the Lord with each one dually defined:

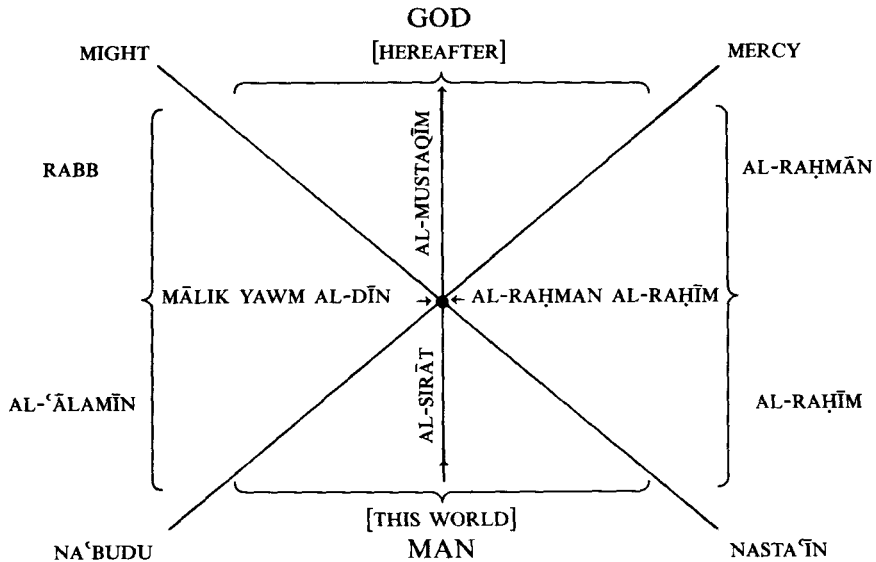|	
mercy	might
1. *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*	2. *rabbi 'l-'ālamīn*
3. *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*	4. *māliki yawmi al-dīn*

The complementary meaning of *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* has been the subject of much exegetical and theological debate. Suffice it to say that the two are generally said to differ in meaning. Al-Ghazālī's views may be cited as a notable example. From the fact that *raḥmān* can only be applied to God whereas *raḥīm* can also be a human attribute, he infers that *raḥmān* must denote a type of mercy (*raḥma*) entirely beyond the scope of His subjects: namely, the mercy of eschatological bliss and beatific vision (*al-in'ām bin-naẓar ilā wajhihi 'l-karīm*, 1987: 61 f.) Thus, in al-Ghazālī's opinion, *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* establish a complementary contrast between mercy in this world as opposed to mercy in the Hereafter. There are other interpretations but all seem to establish a similar balance between *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*, seeing them as complementary aspects of one *raḥma*.

The description of God's might exhibits a similar type of duality between God's status as supreme ruler over creation (*rabb al-'ālamīn*) and His power as supreme judge on the Day of Reckoning (*mālik yawm al-dīn*). Grammatically, the plural *'ālamīn* contrasts with the singular *yawm*, establishing an antithesis between singularity and multiplicity, time and space, as a single day determines the fate of creation in its entirety.

The phrases of the invocation thus establish the outlines of a cosmology the structure of which mirrors that of the *Fātiḥa* itself. Just as this world and the Hereafter converge on the Day of Judgement and are thus crucially linked by the concept of *yawm al-dīn*, so the invocation and petition of the *Fātiḥa* juxtapose world of God and world of man with their linkage at the centre: the act of worship directed at His might and the plea for help directed at His mercy. The focal subject of the petition, the straight path which leads to God provides the central axis of the graphic image below.

The cosmology established by the recitation of the divine names is introduced and indeed altogether framed by the very first parallel axiom: *ism* equals *ḥamd*, name and praise are one. Thus in the utterance of the divine names resides both His praise and the cosmological image of His creation.

The parallelistic structure of the petition resumes the antithesis between mercy and might by contrasting those who have found God's favour (phrases 7 and 8) with those who incur anger and go astray (phrases 9 and 10). The

GOD

MIGHT   [HEREAFTER]   MERCY

RABB   AL-MUSTAQĪM   AL-RAḤMĀN

◄ MĀLIK YAWM AL-DĪN →●← AL-RAḤMAN AL-RAḤĪM ►

AL-ʿĀLAMĪN   AL-SIRĀṬ   AL-RAḤĪM

[THIS WORLD]

NAʿBUDU   MAN   NASTAʿĪN

resumption of this antithesis has been remarked upon by the exegetical tradition. Ibn Kathīr expresses it in terms of *targhīb* (incitement) with respect to God's mercy and guidance as opposed to *tarhīb* (intimidation) with respect to God's might and the threat of perdition (Ibn Kathīr, 1973: 22,25).

When viewing the overall structure of the prayer as it has emerged so far we notice that its progression is tantamount to a gradual descent within the cosmological orb: from the glory of God on high via man's worship and plea to those who go astray and face perdition; or, in Goethe's words 'vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle' (Faust, I, v. 242).

Lexicon

The exegetical tradition has gone to some length to explain the conspicuous word repetitions in the *Fātiḥa* by reference to theological or grammatical argument. The repetition of *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, for instance, has been explained as occasioned by the overriding importance of mercy (*al-ʿināyatu bir-raḥmati aktharu min ghayrihā min al-umūr*; al-Khazin, 1910: 17).

However, from a structural point of view it can be shown that the word repetitions are aligned in such a way as to stress key elements in the *overall* thematic progression of the *sūra*. The words repeated are: *allāh, al-raḥmān, al-raḥīm; iyāka; ṣirāṭ, ʿalayhim*. Clearly they go to emphasize the basic thrust of the prayer. Man's subordinate status is made manifest in the repetition of *ʿalayhim*: he is but subject to divine favour and anger. All he can hope for is to find the right path (*ṣirāṭ*) through supplication and worship directed towards God (*iyāka*). The repetition of *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* in the context of the prayer is therefore auspicious in that the focus upon mercy engenders hope for a favourable response to the prayer. In the words of al-Ghazālī, *al-raḥmatu tastadʿī marḥūman*, mercy presupposes one to whom mercy is granted (1987: 61). It will be noticed that there is an inverse movement between the textual progression which leads from God to man and the orientation of the praying subject which leads from man to God.

A closer look at the text shows that these word repetitions are but the most evident manifestations of a series of other, subtler repetitions which link the

parallel phrases in such a way that each one appears to emanate out of elements that have gone before. The linkages are as follows:

1-2: repetition of *allāh*
1-3: repetition of *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*; rhyme
2-4: repetition of *iḍāfa* pattern; rhyme
4-5: assonance between *mālik* and *iyāka*
5-6: repetition of *iyāka*
6-7: assonance between *nastaʿīn* and *mustaqīm*
7-8: repetition of *ṣirāṭ*
8-9: repetition of *ʿalayhim*
9-10: parallelism between *ghayr* and *wa-lā*

There are some points of note in this pattern concerning beginning, middle and end of the prayer. The worship section (5,6) is linked to invocation and petition through assonance between the *first* words of 5 and 6 and the *last* words of 6 and 7. The choice of words is not fortuitous: the link between *iyāka* and *mālik* emphasizes the orientation of worship which is directed towards God in His might and power; *nastaʿīn* is echoed in *mustaqīm*, the straightness of the path being the crucial criterion which makes it lead to salvation and hence fulfilment of the plea for help. The link between beginning and end resides in the repetition of *allāh* as linkage between 1 and 2 and the function of *wa-lā* in the linkage between 9 and 10. The assonance between *allāh* and *wa-lā*, echoed by the doubled *lām* of *ḍāllīn* (10) stresses the contrast between salvation and damnation, absolute positive and absolute negative which marks the outer limits of the prayer.

Morphology and syntax
As Arkoun has observed, the lexicon of the *sura* contains a large number of first form nouns (*allāh, ḥamd, rabb, yawm, mālik, dīn, ṣirāṭ*, also *rahman* and *rahim*). Derived forms occur only in the second half of the prayer, beginning with *nastaʿīn* in (6). This is part of a general grammatical contrast between invocation and petition: the former has a simple structure composed of a sequence of nominal phrases while the latter is syntactically far more complex. *Ṣirāṭ* is twice defined, by a Xth form adjective (*mustaqīm*), and by a relative clause (*alladhīna anʿamta ʿalayhim*); the *verbal* structure of that clause is countered by the following *nominal* clause (*ghayr al-maghḍūb ʿalayhim*) and the *passive* participle in that clause (*maghḍūb*) is countered by the *active* participle of the last parallel phrase. The resulting effect is the gradual fading out of God as acting subject, indeed as a presence altogether: in the case of those who are favoured, God is the agent (*anʿamta*); in the case of those who incur anger he is implied but not named as agent, whereas in the case of *al-ḍāllīn* man is himself the one to act; but when he takes the helm alone he goes astray (compare *al-ḍāllīn* with the one other active participle of the prayer, *mālik*!) The gradual disappearance of God as active subject has engendered frequent comment (see e.g. Arkoun, 1982: 56, Ibn Kathir, 1973: 25). It eloquently concludes the downward movement of the prayer, from the Heavens above to the gates of perdition where God is no longer found.

Between the contrasting grammatical pattern of invocation and petition lies the worship section, its pattern simple like the former, but its verbal structure anticipating the latter. The two verbs in the imperfect express the sustained, forever incomplete act of human prayer.

Phonology

Arkoun points out that a satisfactory analysis of prosody and phonology of the *Fātiḥa* requires reference to manuals of classical prosody as well as recourse to the codified techniques of Qur'ānic recitation (*tajwīd*) (1982: 58–9). While the aural impact of the prayer is of great liturgical importance it need not detain us for the purpose of this paper. Suffice it to say that the phonological pattern of the prayer further strengthens the contrast already discerned between invocation and petition. The former exhibits a very high degree of euphony brought about by the phonemes *lām*, *mīm* and *nūn* and the long vowels *a* and *i*. This euphony begins with the *basmalla* which thus also phonologically constitutes the source from which the entire prayer appears to emanate. The petition on the other hand, has a far more varied sound structure and, towards the end, develops a phonological counterpoint to the euphony of the invocation. It is brought about by the phonemes *ghayn* and *ḍāl* and the *u* vowel which occur nowhere else in the text. Not surprisingly, the words in question are *ghayr al-maghḍūb* and *al-ḍāllīn*. In the circumstances, the doubled *ḍāḍ* of *wa-lā ḍ-ḍāllīn*, encompassed between the two *lām's* which echo the prayer's euphony by association with *allāh*, appears like a phonological embodiment of those blindly lost and gone astray.

Conclusion

The analysis has shown to what a remarkable extent all linguistic levels of the prayer text converge around the central axis symbolized by the *ṣirāṭ*, the path linking God and mankind. The path is also the focus of the prayer's petition, the objective of the worshipper's plea. It is all the more remarkable to realize that the recitation of the prayer itself is the means by which that hoped-for goal may be attained; it is a linguistic image of its own fulfilment.

II. *The Lord's Prayer*

According to Ṭabarī the *Fātiḥa* is unique: 'the like of it is not found in the Torah, the Gospel or the Psalms' (Nöldeke, 1909: p.110, n.1). Considering its crystalline structure and compactness such a claim is understandable. However, as has been pointed out, the liturgical formulae and thematic sequence of the *Fātiḥa* do have antecedents in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Winkler for one tried to show that the *Fātiḥa* as a whole was modelled upon the Lord's Prayer (1928). Although Paret (1965) considers Winkler's attempt to have failed I believe it is worth retracing his steps in order to define more clearly the differences and similarities between the two texts.

The Lord's Prayer faces us with rather more textual problems than the *Fātiḥa*. Not only have two different versions come down to us in the Gospels but both of them are held to be translations of lost Aramaic originals. The relationship between the two versions, Matt. 6 and Luke 11, has been extensively studied (for references see Finkel, 1981). They appear to have derived from diverse liturgical origins and to have undergone a period of evolution and change before entering the gospel. A reconstruction of the Aramaic originals as attempted among others by Lohmeyer (1946) is, therefore problematic, but 'so far as this is possible the results for each gospel indicate that . . . the prayer was cast in rhythmic form, reminiscent of poetry with stresses, assonances and a strophic structure' (Smith, 1962: 155). As observed by Jeremia (1960: 142 f.), Matthew's longer version contains all the elements of Luke while expanding the prayer in certain places to amplify the parallelistic elements and create the symmetrical patterns of phrase frequently found in liturgical texts.

Matthew's version is therefore likely to be later, and I have chosen it for comparison with the *Fātiha* on account of its higher liturgical status.

The study and subdivision of the Lord's Prayer has habitually focused on its seven petitions (or five in the case of Luke). Winkler attempted to establish a link between these and the seven verses of the *Fātiha* since he felt the incidence of this number to be a significant point of correlation between the two (1928: 244). However, this approach fails to give us any insight into the literary structure of either text; moreover, as stated above, there is no unanimity about the canonical subdivision of the Qur'ānic prayer.

I therefore propose to proceed as I have done with the *Fātiha* by disregarding the number seven altogether and structuring the text on the basis of its parallelistic phraseology with the following results:

1. Our Father who art in heaven,
   Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς
2. may thy name be hallowed;
   ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομα σου
3. may thy kingdom come;
   ἐλθάτω ἡ βασιλεία σου
4. may thy will come to pass
   γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου
5. as in heaven so also on earth.
   ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς
6. Our bread for the morrow give us to-day;
   τὸν ἄρτον ημῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον
7. and forgive us our debts
   καὶ ἄφες ημῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν
8. as we have also forgiven our debtors;
   ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν
9. and do not lead us into temptation,
   καὶ μὴ εισενέγκης ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν
10. but deliver us from evil.
    ἀλλὰ ρῦσαι ημᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ.
    (Tr. Smith, 1962: 154)

Comparison

Matthew's version of the Lord's prayer can be divided into ten lines, five dealing with the world of God and five with the world of man. The words of the *hadīth* quoted above 'half for Me and half for my servant' thus apply quite literally to both prayers. Both also exhibit a similar thematic progression leading from Heaven to perdition, with man suspended in between. The invocation of both prayers establishes an 'eschatological cosmology' designed to praise and to describe the deity. The sanctity of God's name, the enunciation of which affirms His presence, is a universal element of worship: both prayers begin by invoking the divine name and then proceed to qualify the status of God as sole and supreme ruler and to describe His power over mankind in this world and the next.

Contrasting syntactic and morphological patterns are used to juxtapose divine and human sphere in both prayers. In the Lord's Prayer the opposition centres upon the use of the imperative: three *third* person imperatives in the invocation are countered by four *second* person imperatives in the petition. Their sequence is also contrasting: the three divine imperatives form the centre of the prayer's invocation whereas the four human imperatives form the

periphery of the petition with the phrase 'as we have also forgiven our debtors' occupying the centre. In postulating an analogy between the human and divine sphere this phrase resumes the final phrase of the invocation ('as in heaven so also on earth') and thereby also echoes the beginning of the prayer ('Our Father who art in heaven'). In their relationship, the three non-imperative phrases of the prayer thus convey both the descent from the divine to the human sphere and the hoped for analogy between the two, an analogy which points the way to salvation. This structural procedure, while revolving around similar concepts, is quite distinct from the *Fātiḥa* which links divine and human sphere through evocation of the act of worship and the image of the straight path.

It is interesting to note that man's undertaking to show forgiveness, a key concept of Christian morality, is, as we have seen, structurally highlighted by appearing in the very centre of the prayer's second half while in the *Fātiḥa* forgiveness and mercy become exclusive—but equally highlighted—epithets of God as expressed by the twice repeated *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*. The forces of perdition, twice evoked in both texts, provide a further point of contrast: in the Lord's Prayer, abstract concepts only appear (temptation/evil) whereas in the *Fātiḥa* perdition becomes tangible in the fate of 'those who incur anger and those who go astray'. The personalization of evil and wrongdoing would seem to be a corollary of forgiveness and mercy as primarily divine rather than human epithets.

There are two further differences to which we shall have reason to revert: the worship section of the *Fātiḥa* has no counterpart in the Lord's prayer; and the latter has *four* earthly petitions (give/forgive/do not lead/deliver) as opposed to only *one* in the *Fātiḥa* (*ihdinā*, lead us).

Despite these differences, the formulae and thematic sequence which the prayers share clearly show that they form part of one liturgical tradition. Its origins have usually been ascribed to Jewish sources, and parallels between the Lord's Prayer and Jewish texts indeed abound and have been extensively studied. Several scholars have argued that the prayer in fact constitutes an abbreviated version of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* or Eighteen Benedictions, the cardinal Jewish prayer and as such the liturgical counterpart of the other two texts (for a detailed study see Finkel, 1981).

The *Shemoneh 'Esreh* are structured according to a Praise–Petition–Thanks scheme described as follows in the Berakhot: 'In the first three (benedictions) man is like a slave chanting the praise of his master, in the middle sections he is a servant petitioning for his compensation from his employer, in the last three he is the servant who, having received his wages, takes leave from his master' (Hirsch, 1925: 270).

While the praise–petition sequence of the *Shemoneh 'Esre* may anticipate the Lord's Prayer, it differs from the *Fātiḥa* which follows a distinct tripartite pattern by focusing upon the act of worship itself before stating the worshippers' petition. According to A. Baumstark this particular structure is not attested anywhere in Jewish liturgy. (Baumstark, 1927: 244). Certainly, none of the psalms is construed in this manner, though frequent parallels may be found with respect to individual phrases (see e.g. the image of the straight way or path in Ps. 5: 8).

Baumstark did, however, identify a counterpart to the *Fātiḥa* structure in a Christian liturgical text, the greater doxology or *gloria* of the Roman mass which dates back to the fourth century A.D. (see Jungmann, 1959: 231 f.). It has a tripartite structure similar to the Qur'ānic prayer: between invocation (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*) and petition (*miserere nobis*) we find a 'worship section'

(*laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te*). The structure of the doxology is more complex, however, because the theme of praise is resumed after the worship section so as to shift the focus from God onto Jesus Christ to whom the petition is then addressed. None the less the compositional similarity between the two texts would seem to suggest that the invocation–worship–petition sequence was more widespread in Near Eastern liturgies. The earliest parallel to it is, however, not found in Jewish liturgy but in the widely attested Babylonian prayer type known as *shu-ila* or prayer of the 'raised hand'.

A detailed account of this form and its variants is given in W. Mayer's extensive *Studien zur Formensprache der babylonischen Gebetsbeschwörungen* (1975). *Shu-ila* texts, dating mostly from 800 to 600 B.C., are prayers which individuals in times of need addressed to a variety of deities of the Babylonian pantheon. They are always linked to specific ritual acts and consist of standardized formulae the sequence of which, as described by Mayer (1975: 35), follows closely the invocation–worship–petition structure found in the *Fātiḥa*:

Invocation
1. Address: invocation of the divinity's name and epithets
2. Description of his majesty

Worship section
3. Introduction of the worshipper
4. Lament or expression of the worshipper's need

Petition
5. Petition
6. Concluding formulae

This apparent similarity invites closer scrutiny in order to see whether the study of a *shu-ila* text can help our understanding of the literary and liturgical qualities of the monotheist prayers.

III. *Prayer to the Moon God Sin*
    The following text cited from J. B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern texts relating to the Old Testament* is a characteristic example of the *shu-ila* form. It comes from tablets found in the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, 668–33 B.C. (Pritchard, 1969: 386):

I. *Praise*

 1. Sin, O Nannar, glorified one. . . ,
 2. Sin, unique one, who makes bright. . . ,
 3. Who furnishes light for the people. . . ,
 4. To guide the dark-headed people aright. . . ,
 5. Bright is thy light in heaven. . . ,
 6. Brilliant is thy torch like fire. . . ,
 7. Thy brightness has filled the broad land.
 8. The people are radiant: they take courage at seeing thee.
 9. O Anu of heaven whose designs no one can conceive,
10. Surpassing is thy light like Shamash thy first-born.
11. Bowed down in thy presence are the great Gods;
    the decisions of the land are laid before thee;
12. When the great Gods inquire of thee thou dost give counsel.
13. They sit (in) their assembly (and) debate under thee;
14. O Sin, shining one of Ekur, when they ask thee
    thou dost give the oracle of the gods.

II. *Lament and worship*

15. On account of the evil of the eclipse of the moon. . . ,
16. On account of the evil of bad and unfavourable portents
    and signs which have happened in my palace and my country,
17. In the dark of the moon, the time of thy oracle, . . . ,
18. On the thirtieth day, thy festival,
    the day of delight of thy divinity,
19. O Namrasit, unequalled in power whose designs
    no one can conceive,
20. I have spread out for thee a pure incense offering of
    the night; I have poured out for thee the best sweet drink.
21. I am kneeling; I tarry (thus); I seek after thee.

III. *Petition*

22. Bring upon me wishes for well-being and justice.
23. May my god and my goddess, who for many days
    have been angry with me,
24. In truth and justice be favourable to me;
    may my road be propitious; may my path be straight.
25. After he has sent Zakar, the god of dreams,
26. During the night may I hear the undoing of my sins;
    let my guilt be poured out;
27. And forever let me devotedly serve thee.

Invocation

The monotheist prayers begin by invoking the name, status and power of God. These concepts acquire particular significance in a polytheist creed where the deity to be addressed must be defined not only with respect to mankind but also with respect to the other gods of the pantheon. Accordingly, the lengthy invocation of this prayer is divided into two sections, one dwelling on Sin's benefit to man, the other on Sin's status among the gods; both are introduced by a mention of the divine names.

The first section (1–8) praises Sin as a source of light which helps and guides mankind aright. Divine guidance is here not only a spiritual concept but corresponds to physical reality as the light provided by the Moon God brightens up the night and enables man to find his way. The second section (9–14) gives Sin an equally supreme position among the Gods: he is no less powerful than the Sun God Shamash and much superior to the other deities who are ' bowed down ' in his presence. Thus while the two monotheist prayers begin with an ' eschatological cosmology' focused on the one God and orientated towards the end of Time, the invocation of the Babylonian prayer conjures up a timeless hierarchy which for ever defines the position of the individual deity with respect to mankind and his peers.

Worship section

The worship sections of the *shu-ila* prayers contain two key statements:
— that a rite of worship is to be performed by someone
— that the worshipper requires help in the face of a threat or calamity

It is interesting to note that the worship section of the *Fātiḥa* contains, in most condensed form, the same message:
— 'thee we worship
— thee we seek for help'

However, while the Qur'ānic prayer expresses this on a general and universal level, the *shu-ila* prayers always place both worship and need (or lament) in a specific context which may be described in some detail. In the case of the prayer to Sin the threat consists in 'bad and unfavourable portents' brought about by the eclipse of the moon (15–16; on this formula see Mayer, 1976: 100–1) while the act of worship consists in a specified ritual offering to be celebrated at a particular time (17–20). The concluding phrases in line 21, however, recall the Qur'ānic wording:

> I am kneeling / I seek after thee
> *na'budu / nasta'īn*

The Babylonian example brings to the fore an important function of the worship section: its purpose is not only the introduction of the worshipper and his need but also the affirmation that the act of worship is being undertaken in the correct and proper manner. This is shown by the detailed emphasis on the timing and circumstances of the sacrifice being performed in honour of Sin: 'I have poured out for thee the best sweet drink . . .'

In the *Fātiḥa*, the normative element resides in the one, twice repeated word *iyāka* which emphasizes the central condition for correct prayer in Islam: that it be addressed to the One God.

Upon recognizing the normative function of the worship section it becomes clear that the absence of such a passage in the Lord's Prayer is amply compensated for by the context in which the prayer appears in the gospels. In Luke, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray in response to their express request for instruction; in Matthew the normative element is emphasized even more when Jesus says to them: 'but when ye pray use not vain repetitions as the heathens do ... after this manner therefore pray ye' (6: 7–9). Hence Jesus himself assumes the role of the worshipper and sets the correct example for his followers.

Petition

The petition of the Babylonian prayer faces us once more with a pantheon of interacting deities: Sin is requested to intervene with the worshipper's personal gods so that the dream God Zakar might relieve his distress with an auspicious dream. However the worshipper's supplications are, aside from the polytheist superstructure, most familiar, for they combine key elements in the petitions of the Qur'ānic and the Christian prayers. There is fear of God's anger (23) and hope for God's favour (24) which parallels the same polarity in the *Fātiḥa* (*ghaḍab* vs. *in'ām*). The 'straight path' (24) appears to anticipate *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* while the plea for the 'undoing of sins' and the 'pouring out of guilt' is no different from 'forgive us our debts'.

IV. Conclusion

The *Fātiḥa* as its name implies is usually seen to mark the beginning of a new development: the beginning not only of the Qur'ān, but, metaphorically speaking, the beginning and foundation stone of Islam as a whole. However, when it is viewed in the light of its long literary ancestry it may with equal justification be considered to mark the end, perhaps the culmination of a development. Its artistic form represents a supremely condensed summary of prayer themes voiced more than a millennium earlier in the much more verbose petitions addressed to the Babylonian pantheon. Compared to the other prayers the economy of means in the *Fātiḥa* is truly striking:

— Name, *status, power and praise of the divinity are the subject of the*

invocation in all three prayers; in the *Fātiḥa*, *one* device, mention of the divine names, gives expression to *all* of these.
— Two words only, *naʻbudu* and *nastaʻīn* are enough to introduce the worshipper and his need while the correctness of worship is expressed in only one: *iyāka*.
— The petition is voiced as only *one* imperative linked to a only *one* image: that of the straight path, the *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*.

This focus upon singularity, expressed in the carefully proportioned form that we have analysed, appears like a particularly apt expression of the monotheist creed.

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to claim that the Babylonian text is in any way the direct ancestor of the monotheist prayers. The time lag between them is too long to make this even a remote possibility. Moreover, the invocation–worship–petition sequence corresponds to a universal pattern attested also in prayers of other, non-Near Eastern religions. In his discussion of the Vedic *Gayatri Mantra*, for instance, J. Gonda also distinguishes three stages: ' the statement of knowing or recognizing a particular deity [i.e. naming and praising it], next the 'meditation' [or affirmation of worship], then the last stage of soliciting the God's guidance or stimulation' (Gonda, 1963: 294) A more detailed discussion of non-Near Eastern prayers of this tripartite type—such as this *Mantra*[1] or the Quiche Indian prayers found in the Popol Wuh[2] (Saravia, 1980: 109, 164–5)—are outside the scope of this paper. The result would, however, show that the three Near Eastern prayers discussed here share so many elements that they cannot but be considered part of a common prayer tradition which was presumably transmitted over centuries from one language and religion to another.

It is possible, for instance—though no written evidence exists—that after the demise of cuneiform writing, *shu-ila*-type prayers continued to be composed in Aramaic, the language which came to replace Akkadian. They may have formed part of the liturgy of worship in Mesopotamian and other Near Eastern sanctuaries until the spread of monotheist religions in the early centuries of our era. In this context it may be worth recalling that the cult of the Moon

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[1] The text is as follows (Rigveda II, 62: x):

Tat Savitur vareṇyaṃ
bhargo devasya dhīmahi
dhiyo yo naḥ prachodayāt

'The adorable splendour of Savitri (sun)
let us meditate on;
may he arouse our minds'
(tr. Chaudhuri, 1980: 155)

This most sacred of Hindu prayers dates from Vedic times (1500–1200 B.C.?) and was originally 'connected with the worship of the sun' (Chaudhuri, loc. cit.). However, 'already at an early moment it became an object of esoterical speculation and "mystic" explanation, of reinterpretation modification and adaptation to the requirement of post-Vedic religious currents'—including pantheism and monotheism (Gonda, 1975: 52). The exegetical history of this text illustrates the remarkable amalgam of continuity and diversity in Hindu culture. Religious history in Mesopotamia and Egypt proceeded differently: instead of reinterpreting the ancient texts devoted to the worship of polytheist and astral deities in the light of new religious thinking, they—and the languages that went with them—were abandoned altogether with the rise of successive monotheist creeds. Some literary structures and themes, however, did survive, as illustrated *inter alia* by the prayer texts discussed in this article.

[2] 'Oh, Thou, Beauty of the Day! Thou, Hurakan, Thou, Heart of Heaven and of Earth! Thou, Giver of our glory and of our sons and daughters! We pray Thee to multiply Thy sustainers and the ones who invoke Thee on the road, on the rivers, in the ravines, under the trees and vines. Give them sons and daughters. That they do not find disgrace or misfortune, do not let them be deceived, nor let them stumble or fall. Do not allow any court to judge them. Do not let them fall when they walk up and down the road: put them on the good road, that nothing strike them. Do not let them have any misfortune or disgrace' (Saravia, 1980: 164–5).

God Sin was introduced into north-western Arabia by one of his most fervent devotees, the last Babylonian King Nabonidus who mentions Yathrib as one of the locations he visited during his long exile in Taima. In his study of Nabonidus's Harran inscriptions, C. J. Gadd notes the remarkable coincidence that ' two illustrious fugitives, separated by thirteen centuries, . . . both expelled in the cause of their religions, took refuge in the same city and returned thence . . . in partial or complete triumph'; Gadd concludes that ' Medina has twice been the City of a Prophet' (Gadd, 1958: 84). However, there appears to be little evidence that the cult of the Moon God survived in the area for long (see Wellhausen 1887/1961: 210).[3]

While the question of literary influence between the three prayer texts cannot but remain highly speculative, the comparison between them does invite comments on the status assigned by the different religions to these texts as language addressed to God. While all three are formulated in elevated poetic diction, the cultic value assigned to them differs significantly.

Unlike the Lord's Prayer or the *Fātiḥa*, the Babylonian text was not deemed to have been revealed as such by a divine source, even though the composition of such prayers appears to have been a priestly prerogative. Moreover, like other *shu-ila* prayers it formed part of an extensive sacrificial ritual without which it would probably have been considered to be of little effect.

The Lord's Prayer as a text is given a much higher status: it is held to have been taught by Jesus Christ himself. However, the two forms we possess have been transmitted indirectly by the evangelists and represent the translation of a lost original. Hence the language in which the prayer is recited is of secondary importance. Like the Babylonian text, the Lord's Prayer forms an integral part of a sacrificial rite, the Christian eucharist; its validity and effectiveness as prayer, however, does not depend on that link.

The *Fātiḥa* has undoubtedly the highest status, both linguistically and ritually. It is held to be the very word of God and as such is always recited in the original Arabic. Moreover, the Muslim act of daily worship focuses *only* upon the recitation of that prayer, to the exclusion of any act of sacrifice, the latter being restricted to the annual pilgrimage only.

Concomitant with the change of status of the prayer text is a change in the concept of divinity underlying the three prayers. It appears to move from the sensual but distant to the abstract but immanent.

The Moon God is manifest as the moon; his light, his presence is visible to the naked eye but as a divinity he is remote and surrounded by other, rival deities. As stated in the prayer, communication with them can take place only through the mediatorship of an extensive pantheon and is conditioned by the observance of complex rituals.

In the Lord's Prayer as revealed in the gospels, the distance between man and God is much reduced; through Jesus Christ, He has become manifest in human form and taught mankind *how* to communicate with Him: ' after this manner therefore pray ye' (Matt. 6: 7). However, an element of mediatorship, and hence remoteness, persists: to share in the experience of Christ's teaching posterity must rely on conflicting reports of holy but fallible disciples—as evidenced by the fact that we have more than one version of the prayer—and the re-enactment of a sacrifice.

The canonical status of the *Fātiḥa*, however, ordains that mediatorship is all but abolished. In it, divinity is held to be manifest as language: abstract,

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[3] I am grateful to my colleague Professor David Hawkins for this reference and for his helpful comments on the text of the *shu-ila* prayer.

no longer a father or a moon, but immutably immanent and permanently present.

The literary qualities of the three prayers, in combination with their linguistic and canonical status, make them appear like stages in an ever-closer dialogue between man and God. What changes is the manner in which divine and human sphere are brought into relation: the mediatorship, the function of ritual, the status of language addressed to the divine. What remains unchanged, however, is intimately linked with the human sphere: divinity is addressed in similar terms through sanctuaries made of words wherein man and God stand face to face, and in solicitations which have not altered, in wording or substance, from Babylonian to Islamic times.

Returning to Arkoun's principles for a contemporary rereading of scripture, we find that we have indeed undertaken a foray (sortie) beyond the clôture of various cultural traditions in seeking a comparative understanding of the devotional quality of these prayers. Our findings can be further interpreted in the light of Arkoun's concluding principle that such a foray

> correspond à la fois au geste spirituel des mystiques qui ne se stabilisent dans aucune étape au cours de leur marche (sulūk) vers Dieu; au refus épistemologique du chercheur-militant qui sait que tout discours scientifique est une approximation provisoire (Arkoun, 1982: 50)

On the one hand, the three prayers can be seen as nothing less than stages, étapes, in a mystic progress;[4] on the other, their interpretation, their exegeses, is no more than a 'provisional approximation' undertaken as part of this unending quest. What our eye should be drawn towards, however, is the quest's universality, which, if fully comprehended, renders absurd the denigration of rival faiths, and imperative the awareness of a joint endeavour.

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[4] Goethe's Wandrers Nachtlied marks another stage. It is worth quoting as a fine example of the tripartite prayer form; the worship section, however, has—in true Babylonian fashion—taken the shape of a lament:

> Der du von dem Himmel bist
> Alles Leid and Schmerzen stillst
> Den, der doppelt elend ist
> Doppelt mit Entzückung füllst,
> Ach, ich bin des Treibens müde!
> Was soll all der Schmerz und Lust?
> Süsser Friede,
> Komm, ach komm in meine Brust!

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