

Some of the fundamental differences between the Orthodox position on the traditional prayer-book and those who advocate changes in it are here presented by a former vice-president of the Rabbinical Council of America. Rabbi Rackman, spiritual leader of Cong. Shaaray Tefila in Far Rockaway, N.Y., and associate professor of political science at Yeshiva University, has written extensively on all phases of Jewish life.

## ARROGANCE OR HUMILITY IN PRAYER

### I.

There was a time when the most striking difference between the Orthodox Jew and the "reformer" was that the traditionalist prayed with covered head. According to one Chassidic interpretation, this time-honored practice reminded the Jew of his intellectual limitations. As the wearing of clothes was symbolic of man's modesty with respect to his procreative capacity, so the covering of the cranium symbolized his modesty with respect to his mental faculties, for the brazenness of man's mind can be as immoral as his physical nudity. Unfortunately, too many of our co-religionists, even among those who have not discarded the millennial practice, approach Judaism with an arrogance that is unworthy of them who would walk in the way of religion.

It is with regard to the traditional prayer-book of Israel that one discovers the greatest contrast between the attitude of the traditionalist and that of the Reformer and Reconstructionist. The Orthodox Jew is simply too modest to tamper with the "Siddur." He knows that it was compiled by saints and sages whose religious fervor he wishes he could match. The secular humanist is equally modest. He will not tamper with that which was composed by believers, for he respects the sincerity of their commitment.

Reformers and Reconstructionists, on the other hand, approach the prayer-book with their characteristic worship of man and try to make it fit their new religion in which, as has already been said,<sup>1</sup> God is an "It" instead of a "Thou." And the "It" is usually "I" — a man.

II.

The traditional prayer-book, for example, often refers to the animal sacrifices that were brought in the Temple at Jerusalem. Orthodox Jews do not presume that they understand the significance of these sacrifices. The many rationalizations of Maimonides, Nachmanides, Karo, and Hoffmann leave much unexplained. But because they do not comprehend they do not feel that they are privileged to reject. They do not know, but they believe. They believe not only in God but also in the wisdom of their forebears. Reformers and Reconstructionists, however, are certain that they know better than their ancestors. They are so certain of their rationalization of the Biblical ordinances on animal offerings, that in reliance upon it they feel entitled to disdain those who preceded them. Professor M. M. Kaplan has even been said to resort to the ugly quip, "Would we convert our synagogues into slaughter-houses?" However, Orthodox Jews are too modest to feel that their religious yearnings are superior aesthetically or philosophically to those of prophets, who approved of the sacrificial cult. And on close examination, Orthodox Jews discover how ill-considered are some of the blithe assumptions of their adversaries.

These adversaries assume that prayer was ordained by progressive prophets as a substitute for sacrifices, and the synagogue as a substitute for the Temple. They ignore the overwhelming evidence in talmudic and midrashic sources that prayers were recited at the same time that the sacrifices were being offered, and that even in Temple times, when animal offerings were the rule, there were not only hundreds of synagogues in Jerusalem, but there was a synagogue in the Temple itself.<sup>2</sup> True, the prophets criticized the hypocrisy of those who brought offerings and thereby

1. A. J. Heschel, "The Spirit of Prayer," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America*, XVII (1953), 162.

2. See Eliezer Levi, *Yesodot Ha-tefillah* (2nd ed.; Tel Aviv: Betan Hasefer, 1952), 74.

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hoped to propitiate their Maker for crimes which they were committing against the widow and the orphan. But the prophets were equally critical of those hypocrites who indulged in prayer, not sacrifices — those who spread out their hands in adoration of God when their hands had been instruments for theft and bloodshed.<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that the prophets were opposed to prayer?

It may be that sacrifices were offered by some primitive peoples to propitiate their gods, but an Orthodox Jew cannot ever forget chapter nineteen of Leviticus — that immortal chapter which contains the mandate “And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” That same chapter contains the fundamental rules with regard to the validity and invalidity of animal offerings. Now, if the chapter is God’s mandate, who would dare presume to edit it and delete any part of it! But if it was written by a man, who would presume to say that the religious genius who conceived of the magnificent ethical prescriptions contained therein was at the same time such a barbarian as not to appreciate, at least to the extent that Dr. Kaplan does, how offensive animal offerings are to genuine religious experience! The Orthodox Jew is willing to give either God or His gifted servant the benefit of the doubt, and while the Orthodox Jew does not presume that he knows the over-all significance of animal offerings, he also does not presume to reject them as hallmarks of barbarism. Indeed it must never be forgotten that Jews retain in their religious calendar until today one souvenir of the sacrificial cult of old — the Seder service — and that is, by far, Judaism’s most widely observed and beloved ritual.

Reformers and Reconstructionists are wont to cite one passage in Maimonides as justification, by inference, for their elimination of all references to sacrifices in the prayer-book. But how honest are they when they ignore Maimonides’ explicit statements that when the Messiah will come, the entire sacrificial cult will be reinstated! Moreover, they cite the fact that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai in the year 70 prohibited the bringing of animal offerings, but ignore his expressed rationale — to prolong the mourning for the destruction of the temple. He decreed many similar prohibitions, such as the prohibition against festive weddings,<sup>2</sup>

1. Isa. 1:15.

2. *Sotah*, 49a; *B.B.*, 60b.

which was later suspended with the substitution of the breaking of the glass at the end of the ceremony as the reminder of national grief.

III.

The arrogance of Reformers and Reconstructionists with respect to forebears in their attitude toward animal sacrifices is matched only by their feelings of superiority in the realm of chivalry. The Orthodox Jew again does not presume that he is more chivalrous than his ancestors; and if in Judaism in general, and in the prayer-book in particular, there are factors that offend women, he does not reject — he simply wishes that he knew more. As in the case of animal sacrifices, so with respect to women, the Orthodox Jew does not blithely dismiss the tradition as unfair, but probes the sources for more light. Instead of emending the prayer-book, he turns to talmudic folios to study more and more about the subject. He assumes that he knows too little, and that he is not as saintly as the creators of our great ancestral heritage were, for modesty is the hallmark of Orthodoxy.

True, there are many texts that one can cite from Talmud and Midrash which illustrate in what low esteem some rabbis held the intelligence of women. One can cite an equally effective number to prove the reverse. The rabbis also differed as to who were more chaste — men or women.<sup>1</sup> But generally speaking the Law was markedly progressive with regard to women's rights, in and out of marriage, even if equality was never the rule, then or now. (Few courts anywhere have yet undertaken to award husbands alimony.) In Judaism, however, the status of woman from the point of view of religious observance, prayer, and synagogue or Temple functions, warrants more philosophical analysis than it has ever received from those who in haste seek to proclaim themselves as her emancipator. With regard to the overwhelming majority of commandments, women were as much subject to the Law as men. And their capacity was hardly different. Any ten women could conduct services as men did. And women could be called to the Torah. They themselves preferred to be inconspicuous — unlike their present day counterparts who may clamor for equality with respect to the conspicuous role of ascending a pulpit

1. See, for instance, *Kiddushin*, 80a.

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for an honor but have not yet been heard to request equality with respect to the inconspicuous duty of donning phylacteries and prayer-shawl in private meditation, which the Law might permit them to do.

From the point of view of rituals, women were not obligated to perform many commandments. They were permitted to perform them, if they so chose. But whenever the commandment (and there were exceptions here too) involved a limitation in time, they were exempt. It was for this reason that they were relieved of the obligation to don phylacteries and prayer-shawl, because even men need only don them by day and not by night. And the exemption was not at all related to woman's so-called "uncleanness." One authority did suggest that this regard for time was prompted by the fact that women's household duties could not yield to the exacting time requirements of these *Mitzvot*. However, many moderns concluded that this was the only rationale, and since it was no longer applicable they assumed that the rule could be changed. A more modest — and scientific — approach would have made them less impulsive with conclusions. For women are never busier with household chores than on Passover and the Passover they must observe precisely as men do. They must eat *Matzoh* and, needless to say, avoid the ownership or even possession of any *Chametz*.

A careful examination of talmudic sources reveals that the Law's differentiation between men and women was based on nature and natural function, and not on social or economic considerations. Now, nature has not endowed males with any "built-in" apparatus for measuring time. In order that man learn to sanctify time, the Law ordains for him many commandments which are governed by a calendar and a clock. Women, on the other hand, by the very nature of their physical constitution and the requirements of the Law with regard to their menstrual periods, needed little more to make them aware of the sanctity of time. Their natural periodicity has been geared to holiness by the Halakhah. A modern novelist sought to explain why man "is forever trying to escape his instability through conquest" while woman is "reconciled" to her "earthbound fate." For woman "the pattern is in time with the seasons of the earth." In her own body she reproduces "the pattern of the evolving earth." Perhaps it was some such insight that the tradition had captured in the Law.

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All the prayer-book indicated, however, was that man should be grateful that he was subject to the whole Law. That is why he thanked God for having made him first a Jew, and then a man. It is interesting that the author of these blessings was Rabbi Meir, whose wife was not only his beloved, but also his peer — a woman who was so scholarly that her view in opposition to the majority of rabbis is cited by the Talmud in connection with a very difficult Halakhic problem (and her view prevailed!). She was one of the many to be credited with the literature of the Mishnah.

And when an Orthodox Jew recites the blessing Rabbi Meir composed, he hesitates to emend it and make himself appear more chivalrous than the great sage, and more appreciative of his own wife than Rabbi Meir was of his.

IV.

However, it is with respect to God — more than with respect to either women or sacrifices — that the Orthodox Jew finds himself in a mood more modest than that of Reformers or Reconstructionists. The Orthodox Jew does not fix the scope of God's omnipotence. He does not know how or when God will resurrect the dead, but he does not therefore place the possibility beyond God's power. In fact, God *must* resurrect the dead if He is to exercise His omnipotence in the fulfillment of His attribute of charity. For as Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik argues,<sup>1</sup> the highest rung on the ladder of charity involves the giving of help to those in greatest need, to those who are *most* helpless. And who are more incapable of self-help than the dead! Therefore, if God's attributes of Power and Charity have any significance whatever, they must spell the ultimate resurrection of the dead. The dogma is not easily embraced, but the dogma is no more super-natural than most of the teachings of the prophets that nature will become perfect, that death will disappear, that the moral order and natural order will both reflect at one and the same time the ultimate design of their Maker. Only with the leap of faith can one make any of these basic prophetic teachings meaningful.

Agnostics are consistent. They do not claim that progress is real or that there is such a thing as perfection. But Reformers and

1. Unpublished lecture at Yeshiva University, N.Y., during the summer of 1953.

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Reconstructionists still reverberate the prophetic ideas — despite their super-natural character — but deny God the power to bring an actual Messiah or to do justice to those who through no fault of their own were born before the age when death is no more.

Reconstructionists especially have sought to read all the norms of modern naturalism into Judaism. The traditional prayer-book has many references to natural law. “He established (the planets) forever; He fixed their law which none shall transgress.”<sup>1</sup> But with the Psalmist, the Orthodox Jew regards the natural as miraculous and to this mood the prayer-book gives expression. No natural scientist ever presumes to give the complete explanation of any phenomenon. Even if he did, the explanation would still be a mystery, for the phenomenon explained may yet be more awe-inspiring than the unknown. It is even as the explicable is comprehended that man confronts a miracle in nature. However, to take away from the Creator His power to interfere with natural law is not only to deny God His omnipotence, but also to deny that element of chance in nature which scientists have established by sense experience and philosophers of pragmatism have been rationalizing since the days of Peirce.

What is fundamental in Traditional Judaism is the worship of God as Creator, and the companion dogma that no created thing is ever to be worshipped. To conceive of God in human terms is virtually to substitute a creature as the object of worship instead of the Creator. For that reason the tampering of Reformers and Reconstructionists with one blessing of the traditional prayerbook — the first blessing before the *Shema* — was most unfortunate, for in its original form it had a special message for them. That prayer, a paraphrase of Isaiah 45:7, was introduced originally as a protest against Zoroastrianism, which subscribed to the belief that good and evil, light and darkness, were represented by separate deities. To affirm the unrelenting opposition of Judaism to this view, Jews were called upon each day to hail God as “The Creator of light and darkness, the Creator of everything,” Who everywhere is regarded as holy by created things — even by the heavenly hosts. This is the essential meaning of the first blessing before the *Shema*. Later, this blessing was expanded.<sup>1</sup> On Sabbaths and festivals, and especially on High Holy Days, it is the one blessing

1. Ps. 148: 6.

2. Levi, *op.cit.*, p. 144.

to which there were additions of major importance (also eliminated from non-Orthodox prayer-books). The net effect sought is the death of every kind of idolatry — not its survival. Nothing created was the measure of God. And few who understood the prayers were misled to conceive of God in human terms, even if anthropomorphic figures of speech were used. But Reformers and Reconstructionists, in their zeal to banish every anthropomorphism, substituted — anthropocentrism. Instead of anthropomorphic figures of speech, they presented a God created in the image of the crown of His creation — man. What man could not conceive God to do, was *ipso facto* assumed to be beyond God's power to do. That is why God was presumed not to have revealed Himself at any time anywhere. That is also why God could not have chosen anyone or any people to be His special kingdom of priests.

V.

And here too they sat in judgment on forebears and not only accused them of being anthropomorphic, when the critics themselves were doing worse, but also of being egocentric, by believing in their chosenness by God. A modicum of modesty should have prompted Reconstructionists to understand that the truly endowed religious spirits of the past, those who composed the traditional prayers, were in many cases the very people whose miserable lot in life must have made them question whether they were really the Chosen People. Needless to say, to thank God "for having brought us near to Him," as the Reconstructionists pray, can be just as offensive as thanks to Him "for having chosen us." If the latter implies that He chose us by rejecting others, then the former by the same logic implies that if we are near, others are far. Nearness can have no meaning other than a relative one. And if the other nations can also elect to come near Him, so can they elect to be chosen. That is precisely what Jews felt. They also chose to be chosen. God had indicated<sup>1</sup> that He is sanctified by those nearest Him — from the nearest He expects maximum fulfillment and exacts maximum obedience. And Jews were to be commandos in the struggle for the realization of God's Will in the universe. In this struggle Jews learned from many non-Jews

1. Lev. 10: 3.

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— from a non-Jew we even took the opening verse of the daily service. But a religious personality with the basic virtue of modesty would hardly aggrandize himself by making it appear that he is a true universalist while his forebears were guilty of xenophobia. On the other hand, he would seek the better to fathom the mood of those who as commandos for God's Will were ever prepared to make the supreme sacrifice.

That the non-Jewish world reacts negatively to the concept of "Chosen People" hardly justifies our seeking their goodwill at the expense of the integrity of the reputation of many who can no longer defend themselves. Indeed, if we are to worry excessively about the misunderstanding of non-Jews, then the Reconstructionists ought most certainly abandon Zionism, and even the Seder service which the non-Jew cannot possibly fathom — a service, plus a sumptuous meal, plus children's pranks, plus humor, plus much that is so unbecoming the mood of a "religious" observance.

## VI.

Most Liberals and Reconstructionists would not now eliminate Zion from their prayers, but they concur that to pray for a "return" there is hypocritical. Since they do not believe in a personal Messiah who will gather the "exiles" from the widely scattered scenes of their "punishment," and since they are sufficiently enamored especially of life in America, they would alter the traditional prayer-book to suit their present-day "at-homeness" in western civilization.

One should not argue with those who feel that the millenium has come. It might even be cruel to dispel the bliss of their ignorance. But most Jews are still realistic enough to appreciate that if the doctrine of Isaiah with regard to Israel's role among the nations as a suffering servant ever had validity, the measure of that validity has only been increased in our day. Jews have been the litmus paper of civilization in every capacity imaginable — as individuals, as a people, as a religious community, and now finally with the emergence of the State of Israel, as a sovereign state. Nothing has changed very much. It is only that now world-wide Jewry has created a new instrument — a state — with which to try the morality of the United Nations, the Soviet Empire, the

democratic West, and even the oriental traditions of India and China. Alas, that vis-a-vis Israel all have demonstrated an almost congenital inability to render that justice of which the prophets dreamed. And Jews continue to serve as the prophets said they would and they continue to pray for the day when the return to Zion will represent the triumph of absolute justice on earth. As Zion was the place whence that prophecy once came forth, so it continues for Orthodox Jews to be the place on whose mountains God's anointed will administer the Law for men and nations that are free under God.

However, for traditionalist Jews the prayer for a return to Zion is also a prayer for a more comprehensive return to God. This more comprehensive return they can fulfill now only in a limited sense. It cannot possibly be fulfilled *in toto* until both the State of Israel and the nations of the earth are on the threshold of the Messianic era. Until that day there is much work to be done everywhere — if what the prophets taught is still valid. Some may choose to do it in Israel and others in America. All are keenly aware of Judaism's and Jewry's roles in the advancement of social justice. But to the traditionalist Jew, Zion stands for more than a geographic location. It is the Holy Land. As the world must be made right for the right, Israel must be made right for Judaism. And as in earlier periods of Jewish history, both functions must be performed by Jews at home and in exile. That some of us, by choice or force of circumstances, serve in one place or another, is consequential, but does not detract from the significance of prayers for a complete return, when all the world will know the just, and the Jew will come home to enjoy greater communion with God and to experience more of His Holiness as he observes the whole of Torah — all of its 613 commandments.

Again it may require a leap of faith not only to believe that this will come to pass but also that total communion with God is the ultimate desideratum. But that alone is the religious ideal. The professed ideal of the so-called religious humanist — and Liberals and Reconstructionists think no differently — is to achieve social justice, freedom, equality and plenty, so that man can develop himself. The ultimate goal is man, beyond whom there is nothing else. And when the Messianic era will have come, man will be able to do the maximum for and with himself. For what? — one is tempted to ask. The secular humanist is candid

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enough to say that he does not know for what. He presumes to know little of life, and he lives it as he finds it. But those who would lend to their doctrine the adjective "religious" and end the quest with man's maximum potentialities, owe us an explanation — when man has improved to the maximum, what then? At least the traditionalist affirms that the end is fulfillment of God's maximum will — the Torah. Man is the crown of creation but he is nonetheless a created thing, and it is to the Creator and His will that we crave "return."

### VII.

The traditionalist not only directs his prayers to the future. His prayers also give him a sense of history, and he links himself with his past. Just as his prayers for rain and dew in Israel link him with the economic needs of his co-religionists there in every age, so his retention and recitation of prayers that now appear to be anachronistic, link him with his forebears. He does not hesitate to pray for the schools of Babylon which no longer exist. Nor does he hesitate, in his prayers, to take note of the fifteenth day of Ab to which he gives a festive character only because it makes him mindful of the ruling promulgated long ago that the twelve tribes might intermarry with each other — a revolutionary step towards national unity out of our distant past.

Liberals and Reconstructionists would eliminate the anachronistic. They would rewrite the prayer-book to spell out more recent or current historical situations. But why? In literature they are not impelled to destroy imagination. Must prayer be altogether without it? To appreciate Shakespeare's "Hamlet" no one suggests the need for substituting a president for a king. Cannot one also pray for schools in Babylon, and thereby bring the impact of their historic roles to bear upon the present, having in mind the schools of today? Must the sins of the atomic bomb and Nazi and Communist cruelty be spelled out? Who but fools would not think of Hitler and Stalin as they read the verse in the Haggadah, "Pour forth Thy wrath upon the nations that knew Thee not!"

VIII.

Indeed, as the traditionalist does not want imagination in prayer to atrophy, so he does not want to ignore the aesthetic element. But aesthetic considerations, which have prompted Liberals and Reconstructionists to make of synagogue worship a soothing experience, must not become the primary values. If the principal purpose of religion is to induce peace of mind, then perhaps a violin may be more suitable for the synagogue than a shofar whose irritating sounds are to serve as goads to more spiritual living. To shorten the reading of the Law because the modern Jew is bored by it is to challenge a basic Jewish conception that the study of Torah is a more important channel to God than prayer. A proper regard for authentic Jewish values ought prompt us to spend more time on the Torah readings each Sabbath. If the rabbis do not want to interpolate comments, at least the congregants ought to be provided with the necessary materials and stimulated to spend the hour in study. Indeed, nothing represents a graver Christianization of the Jewish service than yielding to the suggestion that the time spent on Torah readings be reduced to a minimum.

That traditionalists continue to stress the primacy of Torah study over prayer is indicative of the fact that it is the traditionalist, and not his adversary, who stresses the role of intellect in religion. Indeed, nothing induced a critical approach in Jews more than the traditional system of education. Children were taught a verse of Scripture and goaded to ask a question. When first exposed to Rashi's popular commentary they were told that they must always seek to discover first what troubled Rashi that he should bother to comment. The same critical approach marked their instruction in Talmud and Codes. Nothing ever said by the greatest of sages was beyond questioning. There was no blind adoration, although in modesty the traditionalist Jew was certain that if he would read the sources critically, he would after great travail discover the answer to the question he posed. He rarely rejected what a forebear said. That he had a question meant only that he must grope the harder for light. Thus, there was a critical approach to the old; there was a readiness to question from the cradle to the grave. But the critical approach was that of men

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who were modest. Today the non-traditionalist is arrogant,<sup>1</sup> and even believes in his own omniscience. And that is the principal reason for the inadequacy of the prayer-book. It is not that the prayers have no appeal, but that prayer itself has no appeal. Immodest men simply cannot pray. Immodest men have no sense of awe. Immodest men are rarely grateful. And to pray requires both a capacity to stand in awe and to feel thankful. This is the heart of the issue.

1. Perhaps it is this arrogance on the part of Judaism's Reformers that has made Jewish atheists and agnostics regard only Orthodoxy as authentic. The founder of the Reconstructionist movement has wondered why this is so (M.M. Kaplan in *The Reconstructionist* [Jan. 11, 1957] p. 30).

One may further query: why are Orthodox Jews and Jewish secular humanists more respectful of each other than either group is of Jewish Reformers and Reconstructionists? Orthodox rabbis in America have never doubted the propriety of cooperation with secularist Jewish groups while many have placed a ban on cooperation with non-Orthodox synagogue and rabbinic groups. Apparently secularism is less offensive to Orthodoxy than theism with a truncated Torah.

One may explain this attitude in terms of institutional self-interest. Most institutions—or businesses for that matter—prefer to compete with something very much unlike themselves rather than with something which presumes to be equally authentic or valid for the same purpose. But the explanation of self-interest is not the whole story. The Orthodox Jew and secular humanist share a mood of modesty—even a measure of agnosticism, which Jewish Reformers and Reconstructionists, together with religious humanists, do not share. The secular humanist says that he does not know whether there is a God. The Orthodox Jew says, "I believe that there is a God, but I agree that I cannot fully know Him." The religious humanist, on the other hand, *knows* that man is god. The Reconstructionist makes God some kind of objectification of man's desires as a human being. This objectification may even be glorified as a Cosmic Process. Basically, however, man is the sole measure of God. What man can know of Him He is—and no more. It is this immodesty that is so offensive both to the Orthodox Jew and to the secular humanist. Neither presumes to know all, but one believes, while the other is not prepared to accept on faith. In the final analysis, they both resent the arrogance of most Reform and Reconstructionist attitudes.

Moreover, there is ideological justification for Orthodoxy's looking with greater favor upon secular humanism than on non-Orthodox religiosity. Reform and Reconstructionism are virtually forms of *religious* humanism which Orthodoxy regards as the very antithesis of normative Judaism. Insofar as they say that they believe in God but will do what pleases themselves, they make themselves more objectionable to the traditional point of view than those who say that they don't believe but will perform what they deem right, without any theological commitment. At least the latter are not creating substitute deities, and Orthodox Jews can regard them as Jews whose performance as Jews is limited. Perhaps they observe only the ethical prescriptions. However, they do not claim to replace historic norms with new ones.

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On the Day of Atonement, when the Orthodox Jew spends the entire day in prayer, he recites a hymn in which he expresses his thankfulness unto God for even wanting the praise of mortal man. Instead of complaining — as many moderns do — that the tradition requires us to spend so much time glorifying our Maker, the humble, pious supplicant expresses his gratitude that so glorious a God deigns to crave the adoration of His finite creatures. This is the mood of the truly religious person whose appreciative heart reflects his feelings of unworthiness as he confronts God — his feeling of modesty in prayer.