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A Yeminite Prayer

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A YEMENITE PRAYER

O LORD, MY GOD,

Thou art the Master and I the servant.

Who should have mercy on the servant if not the Master?

Thou art the Creator and I the creature.

Who should have mercy on the creature if not the Creator?

Thou art the Strong and I the weak.

Who should have mercy on the weak if not the Strong?

Thou art the Judge and I the judged.

Who should have mercy on the judged if not the Judge?

Thou art God and I man.

Who should have mercy on man if not God?

Thou art the Sovereign and I the subject.

Who should have mercy on the subject if not the Sovereign?

Thou art the Innocent and I the guilty.

Who should have mercy on the guilty if not the Innocent?

Thou art the Living and I the dying.

Who should have mercy on the dying if not the Living?

Thou art the Pure and I the impure.

Who should have mercy on the impure if not the Pure?

Thou art the Potter and I the clay.

Who should have mercy on the clay if not the Potter?

Thou art the Mighty and I nothing.

Who should have mercy on the nothing if not the Mighty?

Thou art the Flame and I the straw.

Who should have mercy on the straw if not the Flame?

Thou art the Ruler and I the ruled.

Who should have mercy on the ruled if not the Ruler?

Thou art the Faithful and I the faithless.

Who should have mercy on the faithless if not the Faithful?

Thou art the Sustainer and I the one who falls.

Who should have mercy on the fallen if not the One who sustains?

Thou art the Rich and I the poor.

Who should have mercy on the poor if not the Rich?

Thou art the Deliverer and I the bound.

Who should have mercy on the bound if not the Deliverer?

Thou art the Just and I the wicked.

Who should have mercy on the wicked if not the Just?

Thou art the Holy and I the profane.

Who should have mercy on the profane if not the Holy?

Thou art the Shepherd and I the sheep.

Who should have mercy on the sheep if not the Shepherd?

Thou art the Listener and I the one who pleads.

Who should have mercy on the pleading if not the One who listens?

Thou art the Beginning and I the end.

Who should have mercy on the end if not the Beginning?

PRAYER follows faith, and faith prayer. Hence the ancient saying: *Lex credendi lex supplicandi*, "The rule of prayer sets the rule of faith." To measure the immeasurable; to sense the length, height, breadth, and depth of Christ's love (Eph 3:18-19), one has to listen to His prayer at the Supper Table and on the Cross. To learn the mind of the Church, one has to attend to her liturgy. Indeed, to know how close any man is to God, one has to know how he speaks to Him. Without knowledge of Jewish prayer, then, there can be no awareness of the beauty and truth there is in Jewish life. Nowhere does its color glow as it does in the *Siddur*, the prayer book of the Synagogue.

A little treasure of devotion, this litany is taken from a handwritten prayer book of Yemenite Jews, which in addition to the traditional Jewish services contains a number of personal prayers. Invoking God and pleading with Him in ever-new terms, the prayer bespeaks a spirituality of complete trust in His grace. For He, the Beginning and Fountain of all things, will not abandon man, the "end," the final fruit, of His creation and love. An inscription on the inside cover of the book, written most likely in the hand of its first owner, conveys the same frame of mind: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; when my strength faileth, forsake me not" (Ps 70:9).

It was probably in the second century A.D. that Jews first settled in

Yemen in the southwestern part of the Arabian peninsula. Their history there was a succession of prosperity, trials, and poverty. Earning their meager bread as carpenters, masons, smiths, and particularly as potters, Yemenite Jews of the last century were, in order to be kept in submission, forbidden to wear good or new clothes, even to ride on a mule or an ass. Though in the twelfth century there arose among them a man who preached a merger of Judaism and Islam, Yemenite Jews remained devoted to their traditions. They were acquainted, in part at least, with talmudic literature, with the work of Maimonides, Saadia, Rashi, and that of other Jewish sages; the mainspring of their religious life, however, seems to have been the Bible, which they liked to call "The Crown."

After the foundation of the state of Israel, the Jews of Yemen were permitted to leave the country if they paid a head tax of three silver dollars and left behind the little they owned. They were evacuated by air, in an effort that has become known as "Operation Magic Carpet." No doubt, this airlift also helped the prayer book to find its way to a Jerusalem bookshop, where it was discovered by Rabbi Herbert Weiner of Temple Israel, South Orange, New Jersey. It is to his graciousness that we owe the knowledge and the translation of this prayer.

THE EDITOR