

## Metaliterary Character of Exemplary Prayer in Ancient Poetry: Rhetoric and Intertextuality

In the polytheistic world of the Greeks and Romans, prayer—as a means of direct communication with the divine—was an integral part of both religious rituals and everyday life. The prayers they used on various occasions were typically brief and followed a set structure, usually limited to a traditional invocation and a specific request directed to the deity. Literary prayers, however, were often more elaborate. In addition to the invocation and request, they typically included a middle section—the so-called “argument”—which offered justification for why the god should grant the prayer.

One common type of argument in these prayers is based on the idea that if a god has already helped the supplicant in the past, they should do so again. This form of reasoning resembles the use of historical examples (*exempla*) in rhetoric, and prayers that follow this pattern—often summarized by the Latin formula *da quia dedisti* (“grant because you have granted”)—are commonly referred to as “exemplary prayers” (German: *Paradigmengebete*).

While such prayers are well-known in the Judeo-Christian tradition—especially in the books of the Old and New Testaments—they also appear frequently in Greco-Roman poetry. Notable examples include Sappho’s famous prayer to Aphrodite and Oedipus’s harrowing appeal to the gods of the underworld at the beginning of Statius’s *Thebaid*.

This project aims to provide a detailed analysis of all known uses of exemplary prayer in ancient poetry and to address the following questions:

- Did ancient supplicants use rhetorical strategies similar to those of orators who cited historical examples, and was this form of persuasion effective?
- What guided individual poets in choosing to use this literary device?
- What was the intertextual potential of exemplary prayer?
- How did the traditional form of the prayer evolve in response to changing cultural and religious contexts, particularly among Christian authors?

In recent decades, scholarly interest in ancient prayer has grown considerably, yet the narrowly defined *exemplary prayer* has never been the subject of a focused, comprehensive study. Though not uncommon—there are around 40 known examples—this number of texts makes it still possible to conduct a thorough philological and literary analysis. The topic is particularly promising because of its multifaceted nature: exemplary prayer not only points backward to past events but also forward to anticipated outcomes. As such, it could serve many literary functions—deepening character development, placing the narrative within a broader context, foreshadowing future events, or offering the poet an opportunity to allude to earlier parts of the same work or to other literary texts.

Accordingly, this project will examine not just the rhetorical features of these prayers, but also their narrative role and metapoetic significance. Since the source material spans multiple poetic genres (epic: 16 examples; lyric: 16; drama: 8) and cultural backgrounds (15 examples from Greek poets, 14 from Roman poets, and 11 from Christian authors), the project will also include a comparative analysis. This will help determine how literary conventions and cultural contexts shaped the form and function of prayer as a literary device.

The main outcome of the project will be a scholarly monograph addressing the questions outlined above, along with others that emerge during the research. This and other publications resulting from the project will be of interest not only to scholars of literature, but also to researchers in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, and the history of ideas.