

"The Theology of Thanksgiving"

In Gagé's 1933 article on the imperial "theology of victory," the influential scholar also referred to what could be called a republican "theology of the triumph." This suggestion points both to victory as divine gift and to the triumph as the most striking republican paradigm of that theological construct and one that highlights its focus on the commander. In this paper I argue for a more comprehensive view of the religio-political ritual, to embrace not only the familiar triumph but also less familiar gratulatory supplications. I propose to refer to this expanded concept as a theology of thanksgiving.

By employing this term I hope to broaden our gaze from the triumphant commander in his gilded chariot, beyond the senators walking before him, to the often neglected citizens, who were also an essential part of this scene. Similarly, we should notice that the setting included not only the Capitoline temple of Jupiter, but temples throughout the city that opened their doors to invite citizens to prayer and sacrifice. Some months before, these same temples had welcomed citizens to offer wine, incense and flowers in gratitude for answered prayers. These thanksgiving rituals were the culmination of a liturgical order beginning with petitionary prayers for a successful outcome of the battles ahead. On those occasions too the entire citizenry – men, women and children -- might be asked to visit temples in all districts of the city.

A broader focus on rituals of thanksgiving can redress the analytical balance in studies of Roman religion, which have emphasized the roles and aspirations of the elite. The only extended treatments of gratulatory supplications (Halkin, Freyburger), pay considerably more attention to the activities of elite commanders and senators than to the citizens who made up the vast majority of participants. Yet supplications stand out among Roman rituals as the rare occasion when citizens participated actively in public religion. Citizens were explicitly asked to break their normal ritual silence, offering up their personal prayers.

It was this active and inclusive participation that made gratulatory supplications an ideal medium for thanksgiving ritual under the Augustan principate. Since the Princeps wisely chose not to multiply his triumphs beyond the stunning triple triumph, he had to look elsewhere for a ritual that could focus attention on the victories granted to the Roman people through his divinely sanctioned auspices. He found that in gratulatory supplications. As he wrote in his *Res Gestae* "On account of the deeds performed well by me or through my lieutenants under my auspices on land and sea, the senate voted fifty five times that supplications be made to the immortal gods." He could not have found a more effective ritual to reunite a people torn apart by civil wars and haunted by the selfsame omen of *ira deum*. Here was a ritual in which the people could enact solidarity with one another and acceptance of a new social order as they joined Augustus in giving thanks to the gods for the gift of victory (Kertzer, Rappaport).