

THE LORD'S PRAYER IN THE FIRST CENTURY

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Because the Lord's prayer is so much used and so well known, we tend to forget its place, setting and significance in the early Christian Church. Admittedly the evidence relating to the Lord's prayer in the first centuries of the Christian era is sparse. Yet valuable background information may be gleaned from sources including Qumran, Judaism, and even Scripture itself.

Source material from the early Church is very limited. Besides the evidence in the *Didache* and references in the writings of the apostolic fathers, virtually no information is available. Also, these sources "give us no clear description of the way in which the church of that period used the Lord's Prayer."¹

The Christian Church, as is evident from the book of Acts, has its roots in the Jewish synagogue. It is therefore not surprising that the early Christians adopted much of the liturgy of the synagogue worship service. By way of the NT and the apostolic fathers we learn that the early Christians used the word "synagogue" rather indiscriminately. James speaks of a rich man and a poor man entering the "synagogue" of the early Christians (Jas 2:2). And Ignatius, in his letter to Polycarp written on the way to Rome in A.D. 108, exhorts the readers to have frequent meetings in the synagogues (Ign. *Pol.* 4:2).

The apostles proclaimed the gospel first in the local Jewish synagogues. Paul reasoned with Jew and Gentile in the synagogues, for example, of Thessalonica and Corinth (Acts 17:2; 18:4). In this setting the apostles taught the Lord's prayer. They placed it within the framework of the rich liturgical tradition of the Jews, and they used a form already sanctioned by long devotional use.²

I. JEWISH PRAYERS

The fact that Matthew addressed his gospel to the Jews and that Luke wrote for the hellenists is demonstrated in their respective versions of the Lord's prayer. Matthew's version is liturgically rich, while Luke's is brief and liturgically poor.

Matt 6:9-13

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is
in heaven.

Luke 11:2-4

Father,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come.

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¹G. J. Bahr, "The Use of the Lord's Prayer in the Primitive Church," *JBL* 84 (1965) 153.

²Cf. F. H. Chase, *The Lord's Prayer* (Cambridge: University Press, 1891) 14.

Give us today our
daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven
our debtors.
And lead us not
into temptation,
but deliver us
from the evil one.

Give us each day our
daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive
everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not
into temptation.

In Matthew's prayer the address includes the possessive pronoun "our" as well as the phrase "in heaven." Luke merely has "Father." Also Luke does not have the petition "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and he omits the second half of the last petition ("but deliver us from the evil one"). Lesser differences such as "debts" in Matthew and "sins" in Luke may also be noted.

Matthew's address is full: "Our Father in heaven." The Jew would avoid using the name of God. Therefore the divinity of the Father is circumscribed, much the same as the phrase "kingdom of God" is expressed as "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew. Moreover, the Greek uses the plural *ouranois* for "heaven," which is a literal translation of the Hebrew plural (dual) *šamayim*.

The Jew of Jesus' day faithfully prayed the prayer known as the Eighteen Benedictions. In that prayer the address "our Father" is used repeatedly.³

Another Hebraic peculiarity may be seen in the petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." In the last part of this petition Matthew has the aorist tense *aphēkamen* ("we have forgiven"), Luke has the present tense *aphiomen* ("we forgive"), and the *Didache*, which is akin to Matthew's version, also has the present tense *aphiemen*.

It is interesting to see the translation of Matt 6:12b in the various Bible versions. The *KJV* translates it in the present tense, "as we forgive our debtors." All the modern translations show the past tense, "as we also have forgiven our debtors." The Latin Vg has the present tense *dimittimus*. The *NAB* of the Roman Catholic Church also gives the present tense. And the Syriac Vg (the Peshitta) has the perfect tense.

In Syriac, as in other Semitic languages, the perfect tense expresses a finished action. The perfect tense does not refer to time but to the quality of an action. Semitic languages do not have a present tense form; the perfect tense is used to bring out a present perfect idea. "In actuality, however, there lies behind Matthew's past tense form what is called in Semitic grammar a *perfectum praesens*, a 'present perfect,' which refers to an action occurring here and now. The correct translation of the Matthean form would therefore run, 'as we also herewith forgive our debtors.'"⁴

An interesting parallel to this petition is found in the apocryphal book of Sirach. In 28:2 the writer exhorts his readers as follows: "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray."

³Str-B, 1. 394.

⁴J. Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 14. Also see J. M. Ford, "The Forgiveness Clause in the Matthean Form of the Our Father," *ZNW* 59 (1968) 127-131.

The last petition of the Lord's prayer shows some affinity to the prayers known from documents discovered in the Qumran area and to prayers recorded in the Talmud. In the Qumran Psalm scroll, a poem entitled "A Plea for Deliverance" has this petition: "Let Satan not rule over me, nor an unclean spirit."⁵ This petition is the same as that in the Aramaic *T. Levi*, fragments of which were discovered at Qumran. Moreover, except for the wording "Satan . . . unclean spirit," the text is derived from Ps 119:133b: "And let no iniquity get dominion over me" (*RSV*). This text is also part of three Jewish prayers known from the Talmud. For example, Rabbi Judah the Prince, editor of the Mishna, prays a private prayer at the end of a public worship service: "May it be thy will, O Lord our God . . . , to deliver us from the destructive Accuser."⁶ And last but not least, in an apocryphal psalm recorded in a Qumran scroll the following petition is found: "Remember me and forget me not and lead me not into situations too hard for me."⁷

Not just the last petition of the Lord's prayer is similar to Jewish prayers of the first century. Also the beginning of the Lord's prayer resembles an ancient Aramaic prayer used at the conclusion of a synagogue worship service. The prayer is known as the *Qaddish* ("Holy"), familiar undoubtedly to Jesus and the disciples.

Exalted and hallowed
be his great name
in the world which he created
according to his will.

May he rule his kingdom
in your lifetime
and in your days
and in the lifetime
of the whole house of Israel,
speedily and soon.

And to this, say: Amen.⁸

II. BIBLICAL SETTING

Jesus taught the Lord's prayer in the context of the liturgy of his day. Moreover, some of the petitions of this prayer have parallels in the other prayers of Jesus. In the Lucan account of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer we read, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Obviously, the last part of the prayer is parallel to "your will be done" (Matt 6:10). In the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, recorded in the fourth gospel, Jesus prayed for his disciples and said, "Protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Except for the verb, the petition is the same as "deliver us from the evil

⁵J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1967) 121. Cf. D. Flusser, "Qumran and Jewish 'Apotropaic' Prayers," *IEJ* 16 (1966) 195.

⁶I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud, Zer. Ber.* 16b (London: Soncino, 1948) 99.

⁷J. A. Sanders, *Dead Sea*, p. 111.

⁸J. Jeremias, *Lord's Prayer*, p. 21.

one" (Matt 6:13). These prayers are addressed to God the Father and are offered in the presence of Jesus' disciples.⁹

In the broader context of the Gethsemane scene the word *peirasmos*, "temptation," stands out. After the institution of the Lord's supper, Jesus said to his disciples, "You are those who stood by me in my trials" (*en tois peirasmois mou*). Trials would also be the disciples' lot. Jesus prayed for Peter because Satan had asked to sift the disciples as wheat (Luke 22:31, 32). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus told the disciples, "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (22:46). Jesus asked Peter to watch and pray. Shortly afterwards, Peter succumbed to temptation when he denied Jesus three times.¹⁰

The last petition of the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt 6:13), has parallels in the book of Sirach. "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation" (Sir 2:1). "No evil will befall the man who fears the Lord, but in trial (*peirasmos*) he will deliver him again and again" (33:1).

In the NT the word *peirasmos* occurs 21 times. It is James, in his general epistle, who clarifies the meaning of the word: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (Jas 1:13).

Further clarification is given in the Babylonian Talmud in a Jewish evening prayer that may go back to the times of Jesus: "And bring me not into sin, or into iniquity, or into temptation, or into contempt."¹¹ Obviously the lines of this prayer stand in apposition to each other. "This evening prayer thus prays for preservation from succumbing in temptation. This is also the sense of the concluding petition of the Lord's Prayer."¹² The consequence of falling into temptation is a turning away from God, which leads to apostasy. Therefore the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews sums up his teaching on temptation in 3:12: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."

III. EARLY CHURCH

Throughout the Mediterranean world Jews had established synagogues and had gained proselytes. Jews and proselytes were schooled in the OT Scriptures. When they accepted the Messiah as Lord and Savior, they knew how to pray because of their rich liturgical background. In these Jewish Christian circles the Matthean version of the Lord's prayer became the accepted prayer.

From excavations at the ancient city of Pompeii, we have learned that the Lord's prayer was in common use by A.D. 79 when the city was destroyed because of an eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The Rotas-Sator square discovered at Pompeii is eloquent testimony to the use of the Lord's prayer at that time.¹³

⁹Cf. G. Smith, "The Matthean 'Additions' to the Lord's Prayer," *ExpTim* 82 (1970) 55.

¹⁰Cf. C. B. Houk, "Peirasmos, Lord's Prayer and Massah," *SJT* 19 (1966) 221. Cf. F. H. Chase, *Lord's Prayer*, p. 109. And cf. M. H. Sykes, "And Do Not Bring Us to the Test," *ExpTim* 73 (1962) 189.

¹¹I. Epstein, *Talmud, Ber.* 60b, p. 378.

¹²J. Jeremias, *Lord's Prayer*, p. 30.

¹³Cf. F. J. Botha, "Recent Research on the Lord's Prayer," *Neot* 1 (1967) 42-50.

From tomb inscriptions archaeologists have learned that there were numerous synagogues in the city of Rome. The synagogue, serving as the house of prayer and instruction, drew countless Gentiles. When the gospel was preached in subsequent times by apostles and apostolic helpers, Gentiles who had been proselytized were most receptive to the Christian faith. They had been instructed in the use of prayers in the synagogue, and upon membership in the Christian Church they readily prayed the Lord's prayer in the Jewish setting known to us from Matthew's gospel.

We cannot overestimate the influence of the Jewish synagogue in regard to religious education of the community. "Programs of study were a prominent feature of the Synagogues, and schools for instruction were from early times attached to it."¹⁴ Both Philo and Josephus indicate that the Scriptures were taught for the spiritual and physical well-being of the people.¹⁵ In the middle of the second half of the first century "the Lord's Prayer was a fixed element in instructions on prayer in all Christendom, in the Jewish-Christian as well as the Gentile-Christian church."¹⁶ Because the Lord's prayer as recorded in Matthew's gospel has a liturgically rich tradition, it soon became part of the liturgy in the entire Church. It is therefore not surprising that the *Didache* has the Matthean form of the Lord's prayer.

The *Didache* reflects Church life that is rather close to apostolic times. The conjecture is that it was written in the last quarter of the first century or the beginning of the second. The book deals largely with worship: baptism, the Lord's supper and the Lord's prayer. In chap. 8 the Matthean Lord's prayer is given, followed by the doxology, "for thine is the power and the glory for ever and ever." A general exhortation concludes chap. 8: "Three times a day thus shall you pray."

The prescribed frequency in the use of the Lord's prayer finds an echo in that of the Eighteen Benedictions. This prayer likewise might be said in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening.

The *Didache* teaches us that the Lord's prayer and the Lord's supper were treasures given to the believer by the Lord. To pray the Lord's prayer must be seen as a privilege. Joachim Jeremias observes that in the so-called Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, still in use today, the introductory part of the Lord's prayer reads as follows: "And make us worthy, O Lord, that we joyously and without presumption may make bold to invoke Thee, the heavenly God, as Father, and to say: our Father."¹⁷

Granted that the believers treasured the words of the Lord's prayer, we also learn that prayer should not be restricted to this one prayer. In fact, leaders such as Origen and Tertullian indicate that the Lord's prayer is a sketch or an outline for prayer. Origen, for example, says concerning this prayer: "And first of all we must note that Matthew and Luke might seem to most people to have recorded

¹⁴R. R. De Ridder, *The Dispersion of the People of God* (Kampen: Kok, 1971) 81.

¹⁵Cf. Philo Judaeus, *The Works of Philo Judaeus* (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1958), 6: *De Vita Moses* 2.167; Flavius Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.18.

¹⁶J. Jeremias, *Lord's Prayer*, p. 10.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5.

the same prayer, providing a pattern of how to pray.”¹⁸

Origen summarizes what an outline on prayer should be: praise, thanksgiving, confession and petition. The prayer should be concluded with a doxology.¹⁹

Likewise, Tertullian indicates that the Lord’s prayer embraces “the characteristic functions of prayer, the honor of God and the petitions of man.”²⁰ Already in the gospels we find the admonition of Jesus that if we pray in faith God will answer such prayer: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). This means that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. And such prayer offered in faith is not limited to the words of the Lord’s prayer.

When Jesus taught the Lord’s prayer, he did not instruct the disciples to neglect the prayers they had learned in the synagogues. To be sure, Peter and John went up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon (Acts 3:1). They continued in the tradition they had received from their elders.

In conclusion, though the Lord’s prayer should be seen against the background of the liturgy of the first century, the prayer itself is unique in spirit, tone, and succession of petitions.²¹ The Lord himself taught his followers to pray the perfect prayer.

¹⁸J. E. L. Oulton, *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 275.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 327 ff.

²⁰Tertullian, *On Prayer* 1, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 3. 681.

²¹A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 1. 536.