

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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Abstract

The Lord's Prayer has been a major component of Christian worship since the time of the primitive church. Matthew 6: 9-13 and Luke 11: 2-4 record two versions of this prayer in a Sitz im Leben Jesu, while Didache 8:2 advocates use of the Matthean version in private devotions. All three of these works may be dated around the end of the first or beginning of the second century. Since then the Lord's Prayer has been an integral part of the liturgies and private devotions of virtually all Christians regardless of denomination, education, or language group. The great popularity of the Lord's Prayer may have devalued the prayer. The Lord's Supper, for example, retains its symbolism. The Lord's Prayer, in contrast to the Lord's Supper, is used in worship almost every Sunday and in various meditations throughout the week. It is so familiar that it requires no explanation. As a result, the Lord's Prayer may have become a mere formula which any Christian may repeat without giving it any thought. Do the worshippers realize whom they are talking with and what they are asking for when they pray the Lord's Prayer? This essay will be an attempt to answer these two questions. The first part will be an examination of the authors' points of view. To what kind of God did they think they were talking? The second part will be a petition-by-petition exposition to determine what the petitioners were asking for. This elucidation may give a new appreciation of the prayer which has been spoken so many times.

1. Authors' points of view

In order to understand the authors' points of view it is necessary to investigate several issues raised by the Lord's Prayer. In this section the forms of the prayer, the contexts into which it is placed, its original language, and the function of the father in ancient Palestinian culture will be analysed.

2. Original Forms

When one examines the Lord's Prayer in a modern critical text like Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, he / she will notice striking differences between the Matthean and the Lukan versions:

*Our Father, the one in heaven,
Let your name be sanctified
Let your kingdom come,
Let your will be done
as in heaven, so also on earth.
Give us today our bread for the day,
And remit for us our debts,
as we have also forgiven our debtors.
Do not lead us into the test,*

but deliver us from the evil one.
(Matt. 6: 9-13)

*Father,
Let your name be sanctified.
Let your kingdom come.
Give us daily our bread for the day.
And forgive us our sins,
for we have also forgiven all our debtors.
And do not lead us into the test.*
(Luke 11: 2-4)

Matthew contains the familiar form though without the doxology while Luke preserves a shorter form. The Byzantine text, on the other hand, has the Matthean form and the doxology in both locations.

Until recently the hypothesis that the two authors preserved different versions of the Lord's Prayer was a generally accepted conclusion of New Testament scholarship. Of late, however, some have argued that this conclusion was based on inadequate Greek and overvalued Latin manuscript evidence and urged acceptance of the Byzantine text for both the Matthean and the Lukan versions. Others have refuted the argument by calling attention to the variety and geographical distribution of the Greek manuscripts which support the accepted readings, and hence one may accept the versions given in Nestle-Aland as original with Matthew and Luke.

Why did the two authors preserve different forms of the same prayer? E Lohmeyer has translated both versions back into Aramaic and come up with a rhythmic, poetic structure for each. His findings are: (1) the Matthean version flourished in or near Galilee and the Lukan probably in southern Palestine, and (2) 'it would be presumptuous and unjustified to argue from these peculiarities, say to the greater originality of one or the other form, or to transfer it from Jesus' authorship to that of the community' J Jeremias, on the other hand, claims that 'the Lukan version has preserved the oldest form with respect to length, but the Matthean text is more original with regard to wording' and then translates the prayer into a single Aramaic version on this basis. He explains the survival of two versions by positing that the Gentile church preserved the Lukan version with some assimilation to the Greek language, while the Jewish church expanded the prayer into the Matthean version but did not have to make adjustments for those familiar only with Greek.

Whatever the differences, there is the agreed notion that the Lord's Prayer was a somewhat formal and rhythmic composition in both Aramaic and Greek. The importance of this conception will become apparent later in the study.

3. Contexts

In the Matthean context Christians are exhorted to practise habits of personal piety which contrast with those of some Jews. Almsgiving (6: 2-4), fasting (6: 16-18), and prayer (6: 5-15) should all be conducted in ways which will set the Christians apart from the hypocrites.

The Lukan context emphasizes subsistence rather than personal piety. God will give his people the necessities of life as did the friend approached at midnight (11: 5-8) and the human father whose son asked him for food (11: 11-12). The Lord's Prayer, which precedes these examples, is itself an example of how a Christian should ask for the necessities of life.

4. Original Language

Few exegetes have translated the Lord's Prayer back into Aramaic. J Carmignac, conversely, considers a Hebrew background more likely. Though Aramaic was the common language of the area, prayers were usually recited in Hebrew from the time of Qumran to the period of the Amoraim. It is impossible to determine with any degree of certainty the original language of the Lord's Prayer, but whichever the case may be (poetic Aramaic or Hebrew), it is clear that the Lord's Prayer was originally composed in a special prayer language.

The Father in Palestinian Culture

The apparent key to the understanding of the Lord's Prayer is the postulation that the address *pater* is a translation of *abba*, 'daddy' or 'dear father,' rather than of the more formal *ab*, 'father'. This postulation is based on several Old Testament references to God as father. One reference is Malachi 1:6

*A son honours his father,
and a servant his master.
If then I am a father,
where is my honour?
And if I am a master,
where is my fear?
says the LORD of hosts.*

In this passage the father is made parallel with the master and expects deference from his children as a master would from his slaves. But, such an attitude is not what one would expect from a father cooing over his young children. To that effect, the idea of 'daddy' is reading the position of the father in contemporary western culture back into early Palestinian culture. The approach makes possible a slanted interpretation of the nature of God, the father addressed in the Lord's Prayer. The obvious correction of this eisegesis is an investigation of the concept 'father' in ancient Palestinian culture.

KE Bailey has studied the Lukan parables by examining the culture and presuppositions of modern peasants in the Near East. He assumes that peasant culture has changed little or none during the past two millennia: thus, the *Sitz im Leben* of his sources is likely to be the same as that of Jesus' audiences. Bailey's methodological controls are as follows: (1) the resource person must have grown up in a conservative, illiterate, isolated Near Eastern peasant community, (2) information gathering must take place orally and in the resource person's native language, (3) the resource person must be a friend for at least the past five years, (4) the resource person must know the biblical witness well enough to understand the questions. One parable, that of the father and the two lost sons (Luke 15: 11-32), has required Bailey to investigate the significance of the father in Palestinian peasant culture.

According to Bailey's resource persons the father owned and had the right of disposition over his entire estate during his lifetime. This status gave this father quite a bit of power over his sons. He could regulate their behaviour by threats, promises, and gifts. Even corporal punishment of adult sons was acceptable. When the father grew old, he could require his sons to support him with the estate if he signed it over before death or he could maintain control himself. Obviously, a father would do well to spend as little as possible so he could survive in old age and then leave an inheritance to his sons.

Other evidence from the Mediterranean world of antiquity corroborates, and even heightens, that obtained from Bailey's resource persons. G Schrenk portrays the father in old Israelite family laws as an authority figure. DC Verner and JH Elliot reach similar conclusions in their works on Hellenistic Christianity.

Therefore, in ancient Jewish culture the father was *patria potestas*, not 'daddy'. He had complete control over his estate and thus over his sons. God, the father addressed in the Lord's Prayer, was the *patria potestas per excellence*. His estate was the entire world, and he had absolute power over his sons, the Christians. Because of his power, the Christians were careful to address him in an appropriate manner, that is, in a formal, poetic prayer language. One group expanded the prayer with liturgical additions to intensify the realization of God's power and holiness; another group considered such additions unnecessary.

Further, the attitude reflected in the Lord's Prayer is thorough Jewish. The *Mishnah* (Berakoth) preserves detailed instructions for recitation of the *Shema* and other prayers. These instructions are intended to build a wall around the prayers, thereby preserving them as addresses to God the *patria potestas per excellence*. The Lord's Prayer achieves the same goal by imputing to God the cultural connotations associated with the term 'father'.

Exposition

It has been demonstrated that the Lord's Prayer is addressed to God the *patria potestas*, not to 'daddy'. This answers the question of who is addressed in the prayer. The other question concerning what the petitioners ask for when they pray the Lord's Prayer will now be attempted by means of the following analysis:

Address

Father (Luke)

Our father, the one in heaven (Matt.)

The implications of this address have already been studied. The prayer is addressed to the God of the Apostles' Creed, 'God the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.'

First Petition

Let your name be sanctified.

This petition increases the petitioner's awareness of the God he is addressing. The use of 'father' as an address to God is unique to Christianity; no Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. A Christian could talk to his father, God, directly, but he had to show God the deference a son was expected to show his father in that culture.

Second Petition

Let your kingdom come.

The Petitioner looked forward longingly to the coming of God's reign on earth. That God's reign was in fact coming was the centre of Jesus' message. It may be assumed that those who could pray this petition benefitted little or none from the social, political, and economic system under which they lived. Since God's reign would replace the status quo, the prayer for God's reign to come may have been a prayer for the destruction of the Jewish and Roman overlords.

Third Petition

Let your will be done

as in heaven, so also on earth.

(Matt. only)

The version of the Lord's Prayer preserved by Matthew adds a third petition, parallel in form and content with the second. The assumption behind this third petition is that God's will is not presently being done on earth as it is in heaven. So, the third petition may be taken as corroborating evidence to indicate that the second petition is a prayer for the destruction of those who determined whose will was done in first-century Palestine.

Fourth Petition

Give us daily (Luke) / today (Matt.)

our bread for the day.

Bread was the staple food throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Its importance was similar to that of rice in most of the oriental countries today. Hence the fourth petition is a plan for adequate food to keep the petitioner alive today (Matt.) or day by day (Luke).

B Orchard notes that grain was not always available to those who needed it. God indeed provides always an abundance for all, both men and birds; but with men, owing to man-made restrictions, it is often badly distributed and not available where needed: moreover it is often subject to price restrictions of an arbitrary nature. As a result, the fourth petition may be evidence of the petitioner's resentment of those who controlled the economic system.

Ton epiouision is the interpretive crux in the periscope. It is a translation of an Aramaic word for tomorrow which was frequently used to indicate the Great Tomorrow. In this paper the suggestion of MP John is followed that *eipiouision* be translated as 'bread for the day' with the possible connotation of 'bread for the Day.' The petitioner is asking God to provide for his survival in this age and possibly also in the next.

Fifth Petition

And remit for us our debts

as we have also forgiven our debtors

(Matt.)

And forgive us our sins,

for we have also forgiven all our debtors

(Luke)

Debt was a fact of life, like death and taxes for the lower classes in Palestine. Perhaps the free labourers and tenant farmers were constantly in debt. Selling oneself or being sold into slavery to pay off debts was an ever present possibility. Mercy, nonetheless, was not completely out of the question (Matt. 18: 23-35). The fifth petition was a plea for forgiveness by those who knew they could not repay their debts to God but who had been merciful to their own debtors.

Sixth Petition

Do not lead us into the test,

(Matt. only: but deliver us from the evil one.)

The sixth petition is an exposition of the fifth. As Luke interprets in the fifth, the petitioner's debt to God are his sins. Consequently, the sixth petition is a plea to keep the

petitioner from any sort of ultimate sin and therefore out of the hands of the evil one to whom God would consign his debtors at the beginning of his reign.

5. Conclusion

The Lord's Prayer is a plea to God, the *patria potestas par excellence* to initiate his reign on earth and destroy the status quo. The petitioners, presumably exploited by the Jews and Romans in power, look forward to the new age when their father will assert his mastery of the entire world and eliminate their exploiters. In the meantime, they forgive their exploiters, since they as well as their exploiters are debtors to God, and ask only for subsistence and survival until the dawn of the Day.

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