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THE BLIND SPOT: NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP'S IGNORANCE OF RABBINIC JUDAISM

Lewis J Prockter
Department of Religious Studies
University of the Witwatersrand

ABSTRACT

Despite the older, excellent survey of Judaism by GU Moore (1927 - 1930) and the outstanding labours of EP Sanders (Paul and Palestinian Judaism), standard New Testament works continue to ignore the Jewish origins of Christianity. Hence the quest for written sources, whilst Jewish tradition was taught and transmitted verbally.

The Jews of Jesus' time are alleged to have been bowed down by the burden of 'works righteousness'. Reticence in use of the divine name is taken as evidence that God, the 'our father' of Jewish prayer, had become to the Jews a deus remotus. Matters of ritual purity, such as handwashing, are dismissed as typical tokens of pharisaic legalism.

The cure for all these misconceptions lies in careful attention, not to Strack Billerbeck, still less to Kittel, but to the original sources. As the famous seventeenth century Hebraic Bishop Lightfoot put is: if you would understand the gospels, study rabbinic!

This article attempts through a detailed exegetical study of the Lord's Prayer to demonstrate its essential Jewish nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

'Religious writings disclose their meaning only to those who approach them in a spirit of sympathy. Such has not normally been the case, apropos of Rabbinic literature, among New Testament specialists' (Vermeils: 1980, 6). This tactful understatement of Geza Vermes remains true to this day, with an exegetical study of the Lord's Prayer.

This paper will follow the fourth exegetical principle of R Ishmael, moving from the general (short) to the particular (longer).

My general proposition is that New Testament scholarship has, for dogmatic and methodological reasons, wilfully ignored the rabbinic background to the text. Where note is taken, as in Luz's Commentary on Matthew, all too often, Strack Billerbeck is used, rather than the primary sources.

Sympathy and understanding for the Jewish background of Jesus and the Gospels has, if anything, declined since 1930. Recent proof of this tendency is found in John Meier's book in the anchor series, A Marginal Jew (1991). Its subtitle 'Rethinking the Historical Jesus' makes the conclusions wholly predictable. A few pages only are given to the vast corpus of rabbinic literature, and the author is satisfied that there is nowhere to be found any direct mention of Jesus of Nazareth. Accordingly, Meier pronounces the following verdict:

> The proper context for these documents is first of all the history of Judaism, not the Jesus of history (1991: 94).

Before this date, excellent scholars such as Claude Montefiore, I Abrahams and George Foot Moore provided ample light on this subject. More recently EP Sanders has exploded many myths fondly held by Christian scholars in respect of the Judaism of Jesus' day in his book Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1983).

Nevertheless, the dead hand of form and redaction criticism still stifles New Testament scholarship. Immediately one uses rabbinic texts to interpret the New Testament such critics go on the offensive, objecting that the earliest written rabbinic texts date from AD 200. If the oral nature of Jewish teaching, attested in Biblical Judaism itself (see Dt 6:4 ff and Neh 8: 1-11) is stressed, this makes little impact on a civilisation based on written books, laws, and documents. Further, apparent support comes from Jacob Neusner who has applied form and redaction criticism to the Talmud in the production of interminable books on early Judaism.

The flaw in these objections is simply this: oral literature is collective in nature. Hence, it does not matter who actually pronounced a particular saying. Even if a saying is in the name of R Akiba or R Meir this is no reason to maintain that this teaching may not originate from a source decades or even centuries earlier. It is surely time that New Testament scholars admitted that orality was the norm, and has primacy over literacy in the ancient world. Religion, and this includes Christianity, was liturgically rather than book based. Study of the growth of oral tradition and its teaching methods, whether that of Homer or the rabbis, can only yield profit, since this was the cultural world in which the New Testament came into being.

The obsession with finding everything in the New Testament to be new and different from Jewish practice has a long history, going back to the Epistle of Barnabas, or even to the polemics of the apostle Paul.

This obsession reaches the height of lunacy with the much cherished 'criterion of dissimilarity'. Despite the concise but effective dispatch of this criterion by

Morna Hooker (1970-1:480-487) this idea still flourishes. Meier sums it up neatly, saying that:

> it focuses on words or deeds of Jesus that cannot be derived either from Judaism at the time of Jesus or from the early Church after him' (1991: 171).

This must satisfactorily cancel out nearly everything that Jesus is reported to have said or done, thus reducing him to a wholly heavenly, docetic figure.

Paradoxically there is one group of New Testament scholars who must be sincerely congratulated, those who have returned to their Jewish roots, the deconstructionists. The rabbis viewed the written text as consisting of a number of linguistic signs, which prior to being interpreted are just signs. The text being consonantal there is much scope. Interpretations increase rather than decrease. Think, for example, how many possible ways there are of interpreting the very first word of the Bible, Bereshit.

Goldberg (1990: 164) states:

> As a rule the attempt is made to render a canonical text unambiguous through interpretation, i e to create monosemy. Rabbinic exegesis takes the opposite route: while it carefully preserves the graphic signs it steadily acquires more meanings.

Before moving on to the specific proofs for my case, in a study of the Lord's Prayer, let me cite, without attribution, the thought provoking statement of one Jewish Scholar:

> What is good in the New Testament is not new, and what is new, is not good.

2. EXEGESIS

2.1 Specific task

The specific task is to examine the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's version, together with its setting. The section Mt 6: 1-18 is clearly a single unit, with a kelal defining what 'righteousness' is not, together with specific guidance on how to perform almsgiving, prayer and fasting righteously, that is in a way which is well pleasing to God (Van Tilborg, 1986: 81, 2).

2.2 Comparative texts of the Lord's Prayer

The three extant versions of the prayer are found in Matthew, Luke, and the Didache (see appendix attached). The question which has so exercised commentators, as to which is the original version has led scholars onto some tortuous paths. The majority favour the Lukan version on the following grounds:

- It is shorter, and allegedly axiomatic, that liturgy lengthens rather than shortens over the years.

- It enables stress to be put on the opening invocation, which, being translated into Aramaic becomes Abba, supposedly a unique use of the term for God himself, and thus proof of the special relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

- The harmony of the Matthean version with contemporary Jewish liturgy, as in the doxology, also found in the Didache, and attested in many witnesses to the text of Matthew is regarded simply as liturgical adaptation by Matthew and his community.

Having proved to their satisfaction that the Lukan version is the original one, scholars have led themselves into a difficult trap. Jeremias (1976: 92) for example argues that the use of 'debts' in the wording of the fifth petition rather than 'sins' shows that Matthew is closer to the original tradition here, notwithstanding the priority of the Lukan text!

The reasoning in favour of Lukan priority is refuted as follows:

- In Jewish tradition a shorter form of the 'Eighteen Benedictions' was later approved for daily use. m Ber 4:3 cites R. Joshua's approval of the use of an 'abbreviated eighteen'. This is specified as 'an abbreviated form of each blessing' (b Ber 29a).

- The use of the term 'our Father in heaven' is standard in Jewish liturgy. See for example the fine antiphonal passage in, Sot 9:15, where the following refrain recurs after the listing of various tragic events:

  On whom shall we depend?

  על מי לנו להשען

  On our Father in heaven

  על אבינו שבשמים

  Is it not inherently more likely that Luke has abbreviated the opening address in deference to his more predominantly Gentile audience?

- The Lord's Prayer, in its form in Mt, fulfils all the requirements of Jewish tradition, as does the Kaddish, the perfect prayer, namely:

(a) glorification of God
שבח
(b) individual petition
תפילה/בקשה
(c) closing doxology
חודיה (See b Ber 31a)

3. Prologue to the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 5-8)

These verses contain two prohibitions and one positive command.

(6:5) The 'hypocrites', who are they? Not surprisingly Luz (1989: 357) suggests 'the evangelist Matthew most likely is thinking of the Pharisees and Scribes'. The rabbis condemned hypocrisy no less vehemently than Jesus:

> The hypocrites are supposed to know Bible and Midrash but they do not: they are covered with their praying shawls and wear the tefillin God says of them, I must punish them, for it is said: 'Cursed be he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully' (Eccl R. on 4:11). Still stricter is the dictum cited by Montefiore (1970: 119) that what is forbidden for the sake of appearances must be done even in the strictest privacy.

(6:6) Retiring to a storeroom to pray privately, with no possibility of public adulation is remarkable Hasidic advice, comparable to the practice of Hanina b. Dosa (see Safrai 1989). As Schweizer rightly observes this counsel is not intended to rule out communal prayer (1976: 145). Luz (1989: 359), being carried away with eschatological interpretation of the text, writes:

> It is not a question of the promise of answering prayers in the quiet little room but of the reward for such praying in the last judgement.

(6:7) Babbling prayer amongst the pagans clearly refers to the texts found in the magical papyri, where eclectic use of as many divine names as possible and magical formulae are employed to gain the object the petitioner seeks. Such prayer, apart from being against the third commandment, is rebuked by the rabbis as being 'calculated prayer'. Answer to prayer depends on the mercy of God: man has no due claim he may lodge with the Most High. 'If one prays long and looks for the fulfillment of his prayer, in the end he will have vexations of the heart' (b Ber 32B).

4. The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 9-13)

(6:9) Jeremias takes over fifty pages to establish the uniqueness of Jesus addressing God as Abba. It is indeed a pity that no one has wanted to teach New Testament scholars - if not the world - to sing!

> The Lukan version, unlike the Avinu malkenu, is totally unsingable and unrhythmical, even if translated back into Hebrew or Aramaic.

Our Father in heaven

This phrase is so characteristic of Jewish prayer that it fully identifies Jesus with his Jewish milieu. The finest example of the impassioned use of this phrase is in m Sot 9:15.

The use of 'our' and not 'my' Father demonstrates the communal, covenantal nature of prayer. At b Ber 29b, R. Jacob in the name of R Hisda gives a prayer on setting forth on a journey:

> May it be Thy will, O Lord our God, to lead us forth in peace ...

This is immediately corrected (30a): Abaye said:

> A man should always associate himself with the congregation. How should be say? May it be Thy will, O Lord our God, to lead us forth in peace ...

By contrast Jeremias (1976: 97) writes 'in the Lord's Prayer Jesus authorizes his disciples to repeat the word abba after him. He gives them a share in his sonship and empowers them as his disciples, to speak with their heavenly father in just such a familiar, trusting way as a child would with his father!'

The opinion of Jeremias that the use of abba by Jesus towards God reflects the intimate language of a child addressing his father as Daddy has been effectively rebutted by James Barr in an article entitled Abba isn't Daddy (1988). Jeremias has simply read into the evidence that he wishes to prove, a not unknown habit among scholars.

The Aramaic targums routinely use Abba to mean father as in Gen 27:31. In the Greek text of the New Testament πατήρ is always used to translate what may have been Abba, even if, which is by no means certain, there was a written Aramaic original behind the Greek texts. This is fatal to Jeremias' arguments, since the word παππάς for 'Daddy' is well attested in the Koine.

'Hallowed be Thy name'

Raymond Brown (1965: 231) points out that the above petition precedes mention of the kingdom, despite the greater emphasis on the kingdom of God than on the divine name within the synoptic tradition. Yet this should in no way be puzzling. The archetypal prayer, the Kaddish has precisely the same sequence:

1. Magnified and sanctified be his great name ...
2. May he establish his kingdom during your life ...

(6:10) Thy kingdom come

The connection of God's fatherhood and His kingdom is well attested. Anyone who has ever attended a synagogue service must be struck by the frequency of the phrase which opens the singing of many prayers

אבינו מלכנו

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Both Brown (1965: 237) and Jeremias perceive this petition as eschatological. Why is this necessary? To accept the yoke of the kingdom is to carry out God's commands here and now. The immediacy of this appeal and its application to life on earth is as strong as the request for daily bread which follows.

(6.11) Give us today our daily bread

Much ink has been poured out, and with scant profit, on the word

The down to earth nature of this petition is confirmed by the use of this word in the papyri; it means the daily ration, as granted to a soldier. As Schweitzer comments (1976: 153):

The prayer is not over concerned with spirituality.

This practical request is in line with Prov 30:8c:

Feed me with the food that I need -

הטריפני לחם חקי

The same sentiment is well expressed in b Ber 29b as an example of a short tefillah:

May it be Thy will, O Lord our God, to give each one his sustenance and to each body what it lacks

This petition is also similar to Ps 136:25, the psalm called הלל הגדול in Jewish tradition. This verse, which is still used to this day in the Grace after meals, reads as follows:

Who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever -

נתן לחם לכל בשר כי לעולם חסדו

Mercifully, Sjef van Tilborg is one New Testament scholar who has taken this verse within its context. He delineates one of the codes necessary to interpret the Sermon on the Mount as 'the code of fatherhood: God in heaven who is responsible that his children will stay alive' (1986: 123). Whence such realism? As his stimulating work shows he has a very thorough grasp of the social background and of the Jewish literature.

The eschatological interpretation 'bread for tomorrow, the bread of life' is defended by Jeremias in a most curious way (1976: 100). Via Jerome and the lost Aramaic Gospel of the Nazarenes he attempts to establish that the bread of life is referred to here, signifying the consummation of the age. He also asserts (also via Jerome?) that 'bread for tomorrow', mahar, refers to the great Tomorrow, in ancient Judaism, although he does not cite any primary source to substantiate his statement.

(6:12) Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors

The Golden rule is in view here. There is a very close parallel in Sir 28:2:

> *ἄφες ἀδίκημα τῷ πλησίον σου*
> *καὶ τότε δεηθέντος σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου λυθήσονται*
>
> Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.

Most commentaries quote the sixth benediction, which begins 'Forgive us, O our father, for we have sinned...' Abrahams (1930: 96) says 'the idea is Jewish, but not its liturgical adaptation'. Nevertheless m. Yoma 8:9 makes it clear that for offenses (debts) between a man and his brother even Yom Kippur is of no avail:

> For offenses between man and his fellow man
>
> Yom Kippur does not effect atonement
>
> Until he has made restitution to his fellow man.

Jesus underlines this same principle very strongly in his own teaching, both in the Gemara to the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:14, 15) and in the Parable of the unforgiving slave (Mt 18: 21-35).

In line with m. Yoma 8:9 Jesus teaches that divine forgiveness in only granted provided that we have first forgiven those who have sinned against us.

6.13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Both Brown and Jeremias advocate the eschatological interpretation. The text deals with the final battle between God and Satan (Brown, 1965: 250), while Jeremias is still more enthusiastic.

'This word (*πειρασμός* in Greek) does not mean the little temptations or testings of everyday life, but the final great Testing which stands at the door and will extend over the whole earth' (1976:105).

These fantastic viewpoints are ably rebutted in Luz's commentary (1989: 84-5). He points out that is not an apocalyptic term, and that the Jewish parallels simply refer to the temptations occurring in everyday life.

A strikingly similar petition is found near the start of the daily morning liturgy (Singer: 1950:7).

ואל תביאנו לא לידי חטא ולא לידי עברה ועון ולא לידי נסיון
ולא לידי בזיון ואל תשלט-בנו יצר הרע והרחיקנו מאדם
רע ומחבר רע.

> O Lead us not into sin, or transgression, iniquity, temptation, or shame: let not the evil inclination have sway over us: keep us far from a bad man and a bad companion:

Does God lead men into temptation? Desire to defend God's honour is apparent in the teaching in James (1:12-15). James argues that a man must not say 'this temptation comes from God', but that man succumbs to temptation when he gives in to his own evil inclination. This interpretation echoes that found in Sir 15:11:20. Ben Sira says

> Don't blame the Lord for your sin; the Lord does not cause what he hates (15:11).

On the face of it, it might look as if the interpretation given in Ben Sira and James presupposes a dual power, one for good and one for evil. However, both writers are strictly monotheistic and monistic in their approach. The motive behind their thinking may be aptly summed up (almost in Calvinistic terms!]) that God is sovereign, and man sins by his own fault.

Deliverance from Evil:

The neuter case for *πειρασμός* is preferred, although the possibility of the accuser, the Satan, being included as one of the evils which can befall man is not ruled out. However, the Satan is, as in Job 1 & 2, fully under the sovereign power of God. In Jewish prayer especially, any suggestion of their being two powers in heaven is swiftly rejected.

That his last petition is wholly in line with Jewish tradition is shown in the prayer on going to bed (b Ber 60b):

> And bring me not into sin, or into iniquity, or into temptation, or into contempt.
>
> And may the good inclination have sway over me, and let not the evil inclination have sway over me.
>
> And deliver me from evil happenings and sore diseases and let not evil dreams and evil thoughts disturb me.

The absolute power of God, which must be presupposed in prayer in any case is affirmed in a saying attributed to R. Akiba:

> A man should always accustom himself to say:
> 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good'.
>
> (b Ber 60B)

5. Doxology

Did 8:2. For thine is the power and the glory for ever.

That this doxology is rightly a part of the Lord's Prayer is supported both by many textual witnesses to the Matthean version, and to its inclusion in the Didache. It is the proper way of closing a prayer; this is why a doxology closes each of the five books of the Psalter. Such doxologies also require a response - Amen.

The form of the doxology here is clearly patterned on 1 Chron 29: 11:

> *σοί κύριε, ἡ μεγαλωσύνη καὶ ἡ δύναμις καὶ τὸ καύχημα*
> *καὶ ἡ νίκη καὶ ἡ ἰσχύς, ὅτι σὺ πάντων τῶν ἐν τῷ*
> *οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπι τῆς γῆς δεσπόζεις, ἀπο προσώπου*
> *σου ταράσσεται πᾶς βασιλεὺς καὶ ἔθνος.*
>
> Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine, O Lord, is the Kingdom, and the supremacy as head over all.

A few minuscule witnesses to Mt make mention of *ἡ βασιλεία* but it would seem Christian tradition omitted kingdom terminology. The earlier petition 'Thy kingdom come' means that the Lord's Prayer as a whole does not contravene the dictum 'any benediction which does not mention kingship is no proper blessing' (b Ber 49a).

6. Conclusion

'In prayer, man acknowledges his dependence on God ... Other men have often been tempted to direct God's grace in prayer, but the Jew has always been shocked at the idea of handling God in this way, and has always declared himself fundamentally dependent on Yahweh' (Gatzweiler, 1984: 146).

The Lord's Prayer, as has been shown, is wholly in line with the principle just cited. Prayer indeed reflects our relationship with and understanding of God. 'Magical' prayer means manipulation, based on the formula: If I do/say

x, then God must say y! If such pagan forms of prayer are forbidden, how much more reprehensible are those Christians who seek to manipulate God by claiming magical power to automatically heal, deliver and save through uttering the name of Jesus. Such a practice is contrary to Jewish tradition and the teaching of the Lord's prayer.

To what shall we liken the Lord's prayer? To a short tefillah, as said by R. Eliezer:

> Do Thy will in heaven above
> and grant relief to them that fear Thee below
> and do that which good in Thine eyes
> Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hearest prayer
>
> b Ber 29b

** Note: I am indebted to R Avraham Feder of MAOR, Jerusalem for his very helpful comments.*

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APPENDIX 1 The blind spot: New Testament scholarship's ignorance

of Rabbinic Judaism

Lewis J Prockter

	MATTHEW 6:9–13	LUKE 11:2–4	DIDACHE 8:2
Title	πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς	πατερ	πατερ ημων ο εν τῷ οὐρανῷ
Petition 1	ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου	αγιασθητω το ονομα σου	αγιασθητω το ονομα σου
Petition 2	ἐλθάτω ἡ βασιλεία σου	ελθατω η βασιλεια σου	ἐλθέτω η βασιλεια σου
Petition 3	γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς		γενηθητω το θελημα σου ως εν ουρανῳ και επι γης
Petition 4	τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον	τον αρτον ημων τον επιουσιον δίδου ἡμῖν τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν	τον αρτον ημων τον επιουσιον δος ημιν σημερον
Petition 5	καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν	και αφες ημιν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ημων καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν	και αφες ημιν την ὀφειλὴν ημων ως και ημεις ἀφιεμεν τοις οφειλεταις ημων
Petition 6	καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ	και μη εισενεγκῃς ημας εις πειρασμον	και μη εισενεγκῃς ημας εις πειρασμον αλλα ρυσαι ημας απο του πονηρου
Doxology			ὅτι σοῦ ἐστιν ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας

NOTE: In the versions of Luke and the Didache, the accents are supplied only where the words differ from the version of Matthew, omitted where they agree with Matthew.

Source: Brown, 1965:219

Kaddish

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא בְּעָלְמָא דִּי־בְרָא כִרְעוּתֵהּ ׃

וְיַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתֵהּ בְּחַיֵּיכוֹן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי

דִּי־כָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּעֲגָלָא וּבִזְמַן קָרִיב ׃

וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן ׃

Singer : Authorized Daily
Prayer Book, 77

APPENDIX 2

Lord's Prayer

9 אָבִינוּ שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם, יִתְקַדֵּשׁ שִׁמְךָ,
10 תָּבוֹא מַלְכוּתְךָ, יֵעָשֶׂה רְצוֹנְךָ
כְּבַשָּׁמַיִם כֵּן בָּאָרֶץ.
11 אֶת לֶחֶם חֻקֵּנוּ תֵּן לָנוּ הַיּוֹם,
12 וּסְלַח לָנוּ עַל חַטָּאֵינוּ כְּמוֹ שֶׁסּוֹלְחִים
גַּם אֲנַחְנוּ לַחוֹטְאִים לָנוּ.
13 וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנוּ לִידֵי נִסָּיוֹן, כִּי אִם חַלְּצֵנוּ מִן הָרָע.'
[כִּי לְךָ הַמַּמְלָכָה וְהַגְּבוּרָה וְהַתִּפְאֶרֶת לְעוֹלְמֵי
עוֹלָמִים. אָמֵן.]

הברית החדשה

Jerusalem : U B S, 1976