

# The Early History of the Lord's Prayer

## by Bernard Robinson

***What can we discover of the origin, early development and use of Christianity's most famous Prayer?***

***Earliest Versions of the Prayer: Matthew 6:9-13***

Our Father who art in the heavens,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come.  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in the heavens.  
Give [*dos*] us this day our *epiousios* bread,  
and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven/ [hereby] forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil/the evil one.  
[*For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.*]

***Luke 11:2-4***

Father, Hallowed be thy name,  
Thy Kingdom Come.  
Give [*didou*] us each day our *epiousios* bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive every one who is indebted to us;  
and lead us not into temptation.

***Didache 8:2-3***

Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come.  
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give [*dos*] us this day our *epiousios* bread,  
and forgive us our debt  
as we also forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil/the evil one.  
For thine is the power and the glory for ever.

Why are there three differing forms? The simplest explanation is that Jesus taught his disciples this prayer, which was handed down orally and used liturgically. Each liturgical tradition preserved a slightly different wording, giving us these three versions. *Didache* ["The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"] is usually dated AD 80-

120. Its liturgical text may have been edited in the light of Matthew. (In their present forms, they are very similar.)<sup>i</sup>

The brevity of the Lucan text suggests that Matthew's text includes some degree of expansion. Tradition usually expands rather than contracts material. It is hard to credit that a Church community that inherited the likes of Matthew's version would have cut away some of clauses. What motive could it have had for producing such a shortened version as we find in Luke? The extra phrases that we find in Matthew are readily explained as expansions from a shorter prayer.

**Father** [*Abba*]. Matt and Did add "our...who art in heaven", bringing it in line with common Jewish form. The phrase occurs 13 times in Matthew and once in Mark (11:25) but never in Luke. *Didache* may have taken it from Matthew, though it has the singular *heaven*, not *heavens*.

**Thy Kingdom Come.** Matt and Did add, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven": commentary, explaining what the coming of the Kingdom will mean.

**Give** [aorist; single occasion] **us this day.**

Luke has **Give** [present tense: continuous] **every day**: envisages constant use; cf his "Take up his cross daily", 9:23.

**Our *epiousios* bread.**

The meaning here is uncertain, *epiousios* being unique. The meaning and derivation of the word remain, as Davies and Allison say, "one of the great unresolved puzzles of NT lexicography". The Vulgate, in the case of Matthew, has *supersubstantialem* (Douay *supersubstantial*), taking *epi*=on, above, towards, *ousia*=being, substance. (Root *eimi* the verb to be.) This interpretation, based probably on guesswork, has no followers today. (In Luke, the Vulgate has *cotidianum*, daily.)<sup>ii</sup> The Greek phrase [hē] *epiousa* [hēmera] means the coming day, tomorrow. (Root *eîmi* to go, come). Jerome said that the [now lost] *Gospel of the Nazarenes* had "bread of **māhār**, tomorrow". It is tempting to translate **the bread of the day that lies ahead**.<sup>iii</sup> This can be taken either eschatologically or non-eschatologically:

*Non-eschatological.* Give us each morning what we need for the day that lies ahead, and in the evening what we shall need tomorrow.

*Eschatological.* Give us today a share in the coming Messianic banquet. So Jeremias and others. Jesus' many meals with all and sundry (e.g. Mk 1:29-31; 2:15; Lk 5:27-32; 7:31-34; 14:1; 15:1-2; 19:7) may have been intended as foretastes of that future banquet. In Luke 14:15, a guest at dinner exclaims, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God."

Our three versions, with the use of the Greek word *epiousios*, are susceptible of this ambiguity. But Jesus will have spoken, of course, in Aramaic not Greek. In

Aramaic, it seems probable, I think, that he will either have said **The bread of today** or **The bread of tomorrow**.

**And forgive us our debt.** So Did. Matt has “our debts.” Luke has “our sins”, but continues “as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us”, so his tradition has probably changed “debt” to “sins”.

**As we also forgive our debtors.** Matt’s aorist tense perhaps means “hereby forgive” rather than, as the Vulgate [**dimisimus**] takes it, “have forgiven”.

**And lead us not into temptation.** Matt and Did add: “**But deliver us from evil/the evil one**”: commentary again. Matthew is particularly fond of the word **ponēros**, evil [Matt x26, Mk x2, Lk x13]. A number of times he uses **ho ponēros, the evil one**, of Satan (13:19,38; perhaps 5:37 too. Cf Jn 17:15). That is probably his meaning here too. The Greek Fathers for the most part took the phrase to mean The Evil One. If **ho ponēros** means The Evil One, the idea may be that Satan is the cause of temptations.

*Didache* probably took over the whole clause from Matthew. Matt and Did also add variant forms of the doxology.

### ***A Possible Conjectural Original***

**Father [Abba], Hallowed Be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom Come.**

**Give us this day our bread of today/tomorrow, and forgive us our debt(s) as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation.**

### ***Jesus’ Meaning***

**Father, Abba.** Early Christians continued to use the Aramaic word ‘*abbā*’ (Mk14:36; Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). The Talmud says that this is the first word that a baby learns to say. J.J.Jeremias, the German Lutheran theologian, argued that Jesus is calling God “Daddy”. This is unlikely: *Abba* was used to speak of God in the third person. R. Hunan, 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD, distinguished between himself and the other *abba*, the one who alone can give rain, and it is likely, though no examples have survived, that it was also used in second-person address to God. But there remains in Jesus’ usage an unusual directness: “Father” not (*pace* Matthew and *Didache*) “our heavenly Father”.

The Jews used many titles for God – Lord, King, etc – but it was Father that Jesus favoured, suggesting as it does, a bond of trust, care and compassion. (Today, alas the usage seems to some to smack of sexism, which clearly was not the intention.) Jesus saw himself as God’s son; he shared his discipleship with his disciples. His whole outlook is in tune with this.

Raymond Brown, the American biblical scholar, noting that talk of God’s Fatherhood in the Gospels often has a future reference,<sup>iv</sup> suspects an eschatological significance in the use of Father:

*If...Christians can address God as Father, it is because they are anticipating the close of the age.* Since, however, in Jewish usage the term was commonly used for the

present age, it is not clear that the evangelists, still less Jesus himself, intended this eschatological orientation.

### **Hallowed be thy name.**

A traditional sentiment, this: cf the synagogue Kaddish, perhaps already in use in Jesus' day<sup>v</sup>: *Exalted and hallowed be his great name, in the world which he created according to his will. May he let his kingdom rule in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.*

God's name is hallowed when his people reflect credit on it. Jesus thus prays that those who serve God will reflect the glory of God. Also perhaps (Brown; Davies & Allison) that God himself will, once for all, vindicate his holy name (cf Ezek 36:22), will glorify his name (cf Jn 12:28) in a decisive eschatological act.

### **Thy Kingdom come.**

*The life-blood of Jesus' mission was...eschatological urgency.* (G.Vermes). **Thy Kingdom Come** is not a pious hope that eventually God's writ will run in the world; it is an urgent, insistent demand for God to intervene to bring it about (Brown).

### **Give us today our bread of today/tomorrow.**

If he said **today**, the sense will be *give us our daily needs*; if he said **tomorrow**, he will probably have meant *give us today a foretaste of the heavenly banquet*. The second is perhaps more probable; if he meant the former, he would not have needed to say Give us **today**. As we have seen, the Gospel of the Nazarenes read **the bread of tomorrow**.

### **Forgive us our debts(s), as we forgive our debtors.**

"Debt" is here used, as often in post-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic [ḥôbāh, ḥôbā'], for sin. The idea is not that we earn the right to be forgiven by ourselves being magnanimous; rather, that, acknowledging our need for forgiveness, we recognize that we too should be generous.

Again, it is uncertain how strongly this petition is eschatological. Is Jesus speaking of praying for the coming of the Messianic era of forgiveness (Jeremias)? Or only of praying for constant forgiveness in the here and now? It is unclear.

Where does the word *trespasses* in the common English form of the prayer come from? Wm Tyndale (1526) has *And forgeve vs oure treaspases, even as we forgeve them which treaspas vs, in Matthew, and Forgeve vs oure synnes: For even we forgeve every man that treaspaseth vs, in Luke*. The word then got into the Book of Common Prayer. Later Bible translations, however, KJV, RV, etc, and Douay, for Catholics, did not use the term. *Trespasses* gives the sense of infringements of the law.<sup>vi</sup> It is strange that Catholics followed the BCP in this matter.

### **And lead us not into temptation.**

Jeremias again offers an eschatological reading: deliver us in the great trial which will precede the Day of the Lord (cf Rev 3:10: "I shall preserve you from the hour of trial that is coming for the whole habited world, to try those who dwell on the earth."). The word "temptation", however, in the New Testament commonly refers to everyday temptations. It has also been suggested that if the great assize were intended we should have "*the* temptation", with the article. Again, the evidence is unclear.

The implication of **lead us not** is not that God ever himself tempts people; rather, that temptations are bound to come, and we are to ask the Father that we should not be overwhelmed by them. Pope Francis has recently deplored translating this clause literally; it is Satan, not God that tempts, he has said (following James 13), and a literal translation gives the wrong sense. There have been mixed reactions to his comments, which he has said were not intended to *direct* that the words should be rendered differently.

### ***An Eschatological or a Non-Eschatological Prayer?***

Jeremias and Brown have put strong arguments for an eschatological reading, and Davies and Allison are convinced of the case: "The eschatological interpretation gives the text a pleasing thematic unity" (p.594). It may well be the case that Jesus himself intended that the Prayer should be understood pretty eschatologically, but that it was not generally taken eschatologically fifty or more years later when Matthew, Luke and the *Didache* were written.

It seems to me odd that the Lord's Prayer appears not to contain an element of Thanksgiving, an important element of prayer. Jesus in the Gospels several times thanks God (e.g. Matt 11:25; 15:36; 26:27; Jn 11:41), and Paul in his letters often does so (e.g. Rom 1:8; 7:25; 1 Cor 1:4,14).

Doxologies were common with Jewish prayers (originally extempore); they were called the *seal* of the prayer. (Did 9:4 and 10:5 have similar doxologies to be used when the Eucharist is celebrated; oddly, none mentions *kingdom*.) The one in Matthew is not part of the original text of that Gospel. It is not in the best and earliest manuscripts.

### ***The Meaning of The Lord's Prayer for the Evangelists and for the Author(s) of the Didache***

The literary contexts indicate the emphasis given by the evangelists and by the author(s) of the *Didache*.

*Matthew*: Here the Prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray: not with public display like the Jews (6:5); not with rambling,

empty prayers like the gentiles (6:7). For Matthew, this is a prayer to be used in *private* (6:6); it shows that one should be *direct* in one's dealings with the heavenly father; and that one needs to pray in a spirit of forgiveness towards others. Note the postscript: *If you forgive...if you do not forgive*, 6:14-15.

*Luke*: The Prayer arises out of Jesus' own praying. It may be associated with *the one thing necessary* of 10:42 (Brown). The disciples are to join in Jesus' praying. They are to be *persistent* (11:5-10: the parable of the persistent neighbour) and *trusting* (11:11-13; even a human father gives good things not bad to his son).

*The Didache*: The context here is that of Church order, and the Prayer is mentioned between the treatment of Baptism and of the Eucharist. Perhaps the Prayer was to be taught to the baptized before their first communion (as it certainly was later). The bread may well here be taken to be the Eucharist, seen as a pledge of the heavenly Banquet. The *Didache* says that the prayer is to be said *thrice daily*, which implies the early emergence of a routine of Christian prayer similar to the Jewish.

### **Conclusion**

The three early versions probably derive from a shorter Aramaic original, going back to Jesus himself. It will probably have been meant, in whole or in part, eschatologically. It confidently hailed God as Father (*Abba*) and prayed for a world order in which his writ would run, his name be vindicated and honoured. It prayed for bread in the present time, probably as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, for forgiveness of sins (debts) and preservation from temptation.

The prayer was preserved in variant forms in different Church communities. In Matthew's Church, it was celebrated as a prayer for private use. In the Church of the *Didache*, it was used liturgically. Luke's Church saw it as a way of associating believers with Jesus' own prayer life; it should be prayed persistently and trustingly.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Goulder has a very different explanation for the differences between Matthew and Luke. Matthew created the Prayer from phrases in Mark, and Luke abbreviated it (and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount!). It is hard to believe that Luke would have jettisoned so much excellent material.

<sup>ii</sup> The Old Latin had *cotidianum* in both Gospels.

<sup>iii</sup> The manna of Exod 16 was both bread for the present day and [on Friday] bread for the morrow; some suspect a reference here to the manna. Davies and Allison suggest that *epiousios* translates an Aramaic *pitgām yôm*, a day’s portion, based on the Hebrew phrase *d<sup>e</sup>bar yôm* used of the manna in Exod 16:4. Very speculative.

<sup>iv</sup> Matt 5:9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*; 13:37-43 ...*the good seed are the children of the Kingdom...the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father*; Lk 6:35 *Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High*, 20:36 *The dead...are children of God, being children of the resurrection*.

<sup>v</sup> Parts are found in the Peshitta (Syriac) version, 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, of 1 Chron 2:19. <sup>vii</sup>(M.Weitzmann).

<sup>vi</sup> The word trespasses occurs immediately after the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:14-15, “For if you forgive human beings their trespasses [*paraptōmata*] then your heavenly Father will forgive you; if however you do not forgive human beings, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses”. This echoes Mark 11:25: “When you stand in prayer, if you have anything against anyone, forgive it, so that *your heavenly Father may forgive you your trespasses*”.