

An Exegetical Approach to the Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6: 9-13

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ABSTRACT: The Lord's Prayer as the most known prayer among Christians generates many questions and even debates. In these days, prayer and especially the Lord's Prayer, has a strong tendency to navigate from rational activity to stereotypy. Many people use to pray without having a good understanding of what the Lord intended by those words included in his example of prayer. The custom of praying is vitally important for any believer but even more important is a good understanding of the principles of prayer inserted in the Lord's Prayer. In order to help the reader to be conscious of the importance of the words used in prayer, the author makes an exegetical exercise on Mathew 6:9-13 trying to find an answer to the most common issues related to the understanding, usage and meaning of the proposed prayer: how to hollow the name of the Lord, how to understand the coming the Kingdom, what is the meaning of our daily bread, who are one's debtors` or what is the meaning of the leading into temptation.

KEYWORDS: Prayer, Father, Kingdom of Heaven, Forgiveness, Debts, Sin, Temptation

Introduction

The Lord's Prayer, as the most known prayer among Christians, generates many times question marks and even debates. Is it meant to be memorized and said by heart or represents only a guide for Christians to learn how to pray? The content is sometimes overlooked by many Christians who reduced prayer just to a daily duty to fulfill but there are some others who discuss it with great interest. What exactly refers to phrases like: `your name be hollowed`, `Your kingdom come`, `our daily bread` or `our debtors` or `do not lead us into temptation`. The author of this article, dears to take an exegetical approach, to find answers to the above-raised questions, and finally, to offers a possible translation to the proposed passage.

Authorship, date, readers

The authorship of Matthew, surnamed as well as Levi (19:9-35), which before his conversion was a tax-collector (10:3) under the Romans at Capernaum, and later became one of the Jesus's apostles (9:9), has been a very debated subject especially because the author's name is not mentioned in the gospel. Traditionally the author of the first gospel is Matthew, the apostle of Jesus. There are many arguments for and against Matthew's authorship but even though he was or not the author "the matter of authorship has nothing to do with canon or with interpretation of the original" (Green, Joel, McKnight, Scot, Marshall 1998, CD Rom).

Regarding the date of writing, the main problem in deciding it was the source theory in correlation to the well-known date of the temple's that took place in 70 AD. Therefore those who sustain that Matthew used Mark and Q plead almost inevitably for a date after 70 AD. This view implies also another place of writing outside of Judea. Those who saw Matthew as an independent writing pleaded for an early date around 60 AD, and of course for Judea as place of writing. Taking this view the language and the readers should have been also Jews. A later date as 80-90 AD, implies that the Gospel of Matthew was destined mainly for the Jewish Greek-speaking readers spread in the Roman Empire after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. This last option seems to have stronger points than the first (Meier 1992, 624-625). The central thesis of the book is the "kingdom of heaven", which was presented and proclaimed by Jesus, identified from the beginning as Son of David, and of Abraham (1:1) a very important name for a Jewish audience awaiting for Messiah, the greatest and final king

who had to come from the tribe of Judah to rule over Israel by David's descendants. (Ps.132: 11). The book contains many references to the Jewish customs (9:14, 10:5), places (2:1; 8:5; 11:23) and prophecies (1:23; 2:6; 8:17) usually without explanations. All these, lead to the logical conclusion that the readers were used to all those details.

The way the literary type of the book affects the passage

The literary type of the book of Matthew was called Gospel, which came to be a new type of literature started by Christians (Wilson 1987, 1124). There was no record of such style before, but there have been "many attempts of writing gospels afterwards" (Wilson 1987, 1124). Even though it was a new style of literature it was not this one which surprised the public, but the content of the writing which presented Jesus *kēryssōn to euangelion tēs basileias* (Mat. 4:23). There have been also some people who have seen Matthew as a bibliography of Jesus. The problem with this view is that such people judged the gospel style by the 19th-century standard (Meier 1992, 623). Gospels are constituted from pericopes. Matthew's book structure is of alternation of discourse and narrative materials.

"The most important feature of the book's structure is its arrangement on a principle of alternating sections of narrative and discourse, with the two loosely related in each unit, as follows: narrative of Jesus' early years (Mt 1–4) and his inaugural demands for those who wish to live in the kingdom of God (the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5–7); the miracles of Jesus as he travels about (Mt 8–9) and the discourse about how his disciples are to conduct themselves on their travels (Mt 10); Jesus' conflicts with the Jews (Mt 11–12) and his parables about entering the kingdom (Mt 13); experiences with the disciples as the core of the new community (Mt 14–17) and a discourse about the duties of discipleship within the new community (Mt 18); events surrounding Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem (Mt 19–23) and eschatological instruction (the Olivet Discourse in Mt 24–25); the events of Passion Week, ending with the resurrection (Mt 26–28)." (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman 2000, CD Rom).

The Kingdom Prayer (6:9-13) is a part of the teaching about prayer (6: 5-15) which is preceded by the topic of almsgiving and succeeded by the one of fasting. As a transition from the almsgiving pericope to that of prayer and then to that of fasting the author points out to God who sees and rewards "in secret" (6:4; 6:6). The pericope "On Prayer" is from 6:5–17 is a part of Jesus' "first discourse on discipleship" (France 1994, CD Rom), known also as the Sermon on the Mount" (5:1-7: 7:29), which is a part of Jesus' public ministry in and around Galilee (4:17–16:20).

What does the original text teach?

The Kingdom Prayer in Mathew 6:9-13 has become so common among Christian today so that not too many of them think about the meaning of the words. Comparing it to Luke's, Mathew's structure of prayer is much clear. However, there are some different opinions regarding the division of the text and to its meaning.

Unlike Luke where the Kingdom Prayer is presented as a response to the request of the disciple (Luke 11:1-4), in Matthew, the prayer is presented as a part of a systematic teaching out of its original context. Mathew's use of *oun* (Mat 6:9) links the prayer with the preceding material. Jesus taught the people to whom they should pray, specifically to God their father *Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois* (Mat 6:9) but also how to do it.

With respect to the remaining text (v. 9c-13), there are different opinions regarding the small parts included there. Some sustain that there are two equal sets of petition containing

three petitions each. The first three could be called “You-petition” addressing God’s honor, and the last three might be called “we-petition” addressing the suppliant’s needs (Keener 1999, 89).

Other people divided the section in seven petitions, viewing verse 13 as including two petitions linked by conjunction *alla* (Gundry 1994, 105). In this paper, the author decided to study this portion as including six petitions.

Following the vocative “*Pater*” (Mat 6:9) there are three parallel “You-petitions” which end in *sou* (Mat 6:9) referring to the agency of God (v. 9-10).

9 ...*Pater...hagiasthētō to onoma sou...*

¹⁰ *elthētō hē Basileia sou*

genēthētō to thelēma sou,

hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs

The following three, the “we-petitions” are also parallel being linked by the conjunction *kai*. There are some other significant elements that will be discussed in more details below.

In verse 9, *houtōs oun proseuchesthe hymeis* we have the emphatic use of *hymeis* distinguishing the believers as a certain category, not one with the world (Hagner 1993, 147). The use of *houtōs* “in this way/manner,” sets the prayer as a model to be followed. The word *proseuchesthe* used 15 times in Matthew was very significant for the designed audience. Prayer was a vital part of the Jewish people’s life, which accompanied them each day in their relationship with God. The term means to speak or to talk to God and is used here as a reminder for Christian that they need to communicate with God (Dunn 1998, CD Rom).

In the starting phrase *Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois* “Our father who is in heaven,” the use of the vocative *Pater* and that of the genitive *hēmōn* points to the intimate relationship that exists between God and his children. The article *ho* is functioning as a relative pronoun and the following words point to the Father as the one who is able to provide for his children.

The first petition, *hagiasthētō to onoma sou* (Mat 6:9), by using the imperative of request *hagiasthētō*, calls on God to honor himself. Prayer has as a primary goal God’s glory not the solicitor’s own needs.

The second petition *elthētō hē Basileia sou* (Mat 6:10), reminds the Jewish audience about the long expected eschatological kingdom they were waiting for. The kingdom of heaven which is a central theme in Matthew is included here showing that the real believers long for the coming of God’s kingdom.

The third petition *genēthētō to thelēma sou* is followed by the additional request *hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs* (Mat 6:10), calling for the accomplishment of God’s will on the earth in the present time. The use of *hōs ..kai* alternation may be understood as a petition for his final victory over the power of evil and his eternal sovereignty over the whole universe (Hagner 1993, 148). The three “Thou-petition” preceded the “we-petitions” which points to the importance of putting God on the first place in the believers’ lives.

The fourth petition *ton arton hēmōv ton epiouision dos hēmin sēmeron* (Mat 6:11), has been a much debated subject. The starting point of the problem was the understanding of the nature of the bread but the most difficult problem was related to the meaning of the adjective *epiouision*. The presence of both *epiouision* and *sēmeron* in the same sentence raised many difficulties in finding the real meaning of the request. The word *epiouision* generates at least two problems. Firstly, it occurs only in the Lord’s Prayer, in Matthew 6:11 and Luke 11:13. Secondly, its attestation in the Greek literature is doubtful and its derivations uncertain. The combination of the two words in Matthew makes the request to refer to the actual need “of this day” (Balz, Schneider 1991, 32).

The fifth petition addressed to God is for release from debts *kai aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn, hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn*, (Mat 6:12). This petition should be understood in the context of verse 14, and 15 where the same idea is emphasized again. The problem here was with the use of the words *ta opheilēmata* and *tois opheiletais* which came out from *opheilema* meaning debt or sin. The word *opheilema* used as

an expression for indebtedness to God or to other humans in the rabbinical literature is utilized in Matthew with the sense of “sin” (Balz, Schneider 1991, 550).

The sixth petition, *kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon, alla rysai hēmas apo tou ponērou* (Mat 6:13) has raised also many questions among scholars. Having two parts divided by the conjunction *alla* this last petition has been seen by certain persons as being actually two different petitions. Technically speaking, because *alla* is a coordinate conjunction it is meant to link two parts of the same petition. An important issue in this passage has to do with the use of *peirasmon*, which depending on the context could be translated as “temptation” or “testing.”

The question that needs an answer is whether or not God leads us into temptation. Following what James 1:13 says, it is clear that God does not lead anyone into temptation. However, it does not tell us that God does not allow people to be tested. “To be tempted” is to be enticed to sin; “to be tested” is to be brought into difficult circumstances that try one’s faithfulness (Hagner 1993, 151).

It is important to do make a differentiation between these two terms because even though they seem to be similar somehow, their purpose is very different. God’s goal for us is not to cause us to fall but to edify us in faith through all kinds of circumstances, including trials of our faith. So what should Christians pray for and why? It looks like that the intention of this petition was that “believers should pray for rescue from both temptation and hard trials that could lead someone into apostasy (2 Peter 2:9)” or something that “we will not be able to resist it (1Cor. 10:13)” (M’Neile 1980, 81).

Such kind of prayer reminds us that Christians are dependent on God in their spiritual life’s stability, and he is the only one able to keep them from form failure. One should translate the singular *peirasmon* by using “trial”. The reason is because by using “temptation” somebody could come at a wrong conclusion about God, namely to view him as the one who might tempt somebody.

Another important issue in the passage has to do first with the gender of *tou ponērou* and its meaning. Secondly, the length of verse 13 in certain translations many times leads to puzzling discussions among Christians. Unfortunately, there is no way to find out the gender *tou ponērou*. The only thing that one may say is that the definite article used here can be used in referring either to evil or to the evil one. Those who interpret this prayer from an eschatological point of view see the text as referring to the deliverance from the great tribulation and the evil one. Those who interpret the text as referring to the present time argue for deliverance from the present problems. Within the Gospel of Matthew both are possible (24: 3-28; 5:37, 39; 10:14; 13:19, 38). There is no certain way to decide for one or the other. An important element in deciding in this issue would be one’s position on the tribulation (Gundry 1994, 109).

But this is again a matter of starting with something and not finding the answer in the text. Taking in account that Jesus taught the Jews and one of their expectations was their deliverance from that time slavery and the final reign of Messiah, the translation of the passage might be “do not lead us in too difficult problems in these days and deliver us finally from the evil one.” This should be seen in correlation with the first request, which asked for God’s final reign over the entire universe.

As the last problem in this passage is the difference in length between certain translations. It is well known among scholars that there are some variants of texts for Matthew 6:13 in the existing manuscripts at the time being. The problem with the length of the verse thirteen came out as a result of choosing different texts for translation. The question that one should answer is about which are the best variants that we have to translate.

There are four variants of text known:

1.. *tou ponērou* - Ⲙ B D Z o1 70 f1 205 l 524 it vg cop Diatesaron Origen Cyril-Jerusalem Gregory Nyssa Cyril; Tertullian Cyprian Ambrosiaster Ambrose Chromatius Jerome Augustine

2. *ponērou amēn* - 17 vg Jerome

3. *ponērou hoti sou estin hē Basileia kai hē dynamis kai hē doxa eis tous aiōnas amēn* - L V D TH 0233 *f*(13) numbers from 28 – 1292 (1342 syr omit *kai hē dynamis*),1424, 1505 Byz [EGΣ] Lect (*l* 1016 omit *kai hē doxa*) it (it syr omit *amēn*) syr copt

4. *ponērou,hoti sou estin hē Basileia kai hē dynamis kai hē doxa, tou patros kai tou huiou kai tou hagiou pneumatatos eis tous aiōnas amēn* 157 (1253- omit *kai hē dynamis kai hē doxa*).

Observing the variants of text and the place where there are found, one can decide which variant is better by using the methods of Textual Criticism, namely the oldest, the shorter and the most spread one is the best. Why these rules? Because the oldest closer in time to the original, second because there was a natural tendency for scribes to add to the original and not to cut words, and thirdly the factor of quantity of course is important. Applying these principles to the textual problem in this passage, because the first shorter variation is found in so-called Uncials (300-400 A. D.), in many minuscule (400-500 AD) and many lectionaries, it should be the best one to be chosen.

Final translation of Matthew 6:9-13

<i>9. houtōs oun proseuchesthe hymeis. Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois hagiasthētō to onoma sou.</i>	9 Pray therefore in this way: “Our Father who is in heaven, your name be hollowed,
<i>10. elthētō hē Basileia sou genēthētō to thelēma sou, hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs</i>	10. Your kingdom come, your will be done in heaven and on earth in the same way.
<i>11. ton arton hēmōv ton epiouision dos hēmin sēmeron</i>	11 Give us our bread for this day
<i>12 kai aphen hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn,hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn,</i>	12 and forgive our sin as we also forgive those who sin against us,
<i>13 kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon, alla rysai hēmas apo tou ponērou</i>	13 and do not lead us into a difficult trial, but deliver us finally from the evil one.

Conclusions

God is the beginning and the end, and he deserves all the glory and honor. Christians, as those who have the privilege of a personal relationship with God by talking to him, should call his name in prayer, glorify it and ask for God’s final reign. There are also many daily needs for which they have to pray but the earthly need requests should follow always the glorification of God. God is the beginning, the source, the sustainer and the final goal of all things. Any believer in his or her daily prayer needs to keep in mind a clear understanding of the Holy Father, of the needy and sinful human being, and of the evil and the ferocious Satan, and entrust himself or herself to the loving and caring Father. One of the most important things the Father included in this prayer is the importance of the relationship between the believer and God. The believer, more than his daily needs and protection from the evil, should long for a warm relationship with the Father asking every time for the day when the Father will be raining over the world and the faithful one will rest in his presence.

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