

The Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Luke

M o i r a I z a t t

Scholars cannot give a definite date as to when the canonical gospels were written, but it is believed that Mark was written first, around 70 CE. Matthew, Luke and John were written in the late part of the first century, perhaps between 80 and 90 CE. Although John is also placed in the 80s or 90s, it is thought that his was the last of the canonical gospels to be written.

The gospels are made up of layers of traditions and collections of stories, sayings, and passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that are stitched together to tell about the first communities' experiences of Jesus. The writers of the gospels also made additions of their own depending on the situation and specific needs of their communities. Scholars use a variety of text critical tools to analyse the layers of tradition in the Bible in order to make educated guesses about the communities in which the writings were read and used.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because much of the material found in them is similar. It is generally agreed that Luke and Matthew used Mark as a primary source. As well, Luke and Matthew used their own independent sources so that there is material in Luke that is found only in Luke, and material in Matthew that is found only in Matthew.

Luke and Matthew also used another source called the Q document as one of their primary sources. The Q document is a hypothetical written document. Although there are no extant copies of this document, biblical scholars have reconstructed it by analyzing the material that is common to Luke and Matthew, but not found in Mark. Because much of this material is the same word for word in both gospels, scholars believe that the original Q was a written document. About 30 percent of Luke and about 25 percent of Matthew come from the Q source.

Q is also referred to as the 'Sayings Source' because it is mostly made up of sayings with very little narrative. These sayings reflect the sentiments of a 1st century apocalyptic Jewish Palestinian community. That is, a poor community that was under duress, a people who were hoping for a prophet, priest or king who would deliver them from lives of hunger and poverty. The Beatitudes, which are found in Luke and Matthew, are considered to be part of the Q document. They give hope to poor people who long for the end of a world filled with injustice.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Luke 6.20-21

They also portray a people who rail against this injustice.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Luke 6.24-25

Scholars who accept the existence of the Q document believe that some of the sayings originated with the historical Jesus. The Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes are said to be among these. The prayer appears in a simple version in Luke 11.2-4 and a more elaborate version in Matthew 6.9-13.

Primarily, the Lord's Prayer has existed and still exists in a sacred context for Christians, clerical, lay and academic; it is difficult not to be overshadowed by this influence when analyzing it.

The Lord's Prayer also exists in several social contexts. There is the context of the unknown Q community, a Jewish community somewhere in early 1st century rural Palestine. There are the contexts of the somewhat more known and more urban communities outside of Palestine to whom Luke or Matthew addressed their gospels. There are Jewish Christian contexts and there are gentile Christian contexts. We also have the larger world of the Greco-Roman empire within which these smaller communities existed.

Similarly, the prayer exists in several literary contexts. We have the ambiguous context of a hypothetical group of sayings with little revealing narrative reference. We also have the multi-layered literary contexts within the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. This paper largely focuses on the Gospel of Luke with some reference to the Acts of the Apostles.

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles

Scholars believe that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person, the putative Luke, even though they are separated by the Gospel of John. The first clue appears in the introduction to each book. The Gospel of Luke is dedicated to Theophilus. The writer of Luke explains to Theophilus that he plans to give an ordered account of the life of Jesus. The writer of Acts also addresses Theophilus in his introduction and refers to the 'first book' that tells about 'all that Jesus did'. Both books are commonly referred to as Luke-Acts.

The Gospel of Luke describes the life and mission of Jesus from before his birth to his death, resurrection and appearances in Jerusalem. The Acts of the Apostles describes the

expansion of the mission to the gentiles and ends in Rome with Paul's teachings being easily accepted by gentile audiences. From the letters of Paul, which predate Luke-Acts, we know that this transition was not as seamless as Luke makes it appear. Luke's editorial additions and intentions suggest that the mostly gentile Lucan community had separated from Judaism, the mother religion. As a result, they lost the protection of the special status that Judaism held in the Roman empire. The growing gentile Christian community is becoming a distinct religious cult in the Greco-Roman world, but without the protection of Judaism's special privilege, the Christian communities have to survive on their own merit in the Roman empire. They have to develop and maintain good relations with Roman authorities and at the same time preserve the integrity of their beliefs.

Related to this is the delay of the parousia. No one knows when Christ will come again, so the Lucan communities have to find a way to live and proselytize for an unknown length of time. One of the techniques that Luke uses to make the Christian cult acceptable to Roman authorities is to show that gentiles of high social standing often understand and accept Jesus's authority more readily than Jews (7.6).

The Holy Spirit and prayer

Prayer and the Holy Spirit are vital to the survival of the community. These themes are intertwined and run like a thick golden thread throughout Luke-Acts. In the Gospel of Luke, prayer, praise and blessing are often linked to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The first two chapters of the gospel abound with people praying and praising God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the very beginning, (1.8) the whole assembly is praying in the Temple when John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, has his vision about John's miraculous birth. The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

Mary's song of praise (1.46-55) is a prayer of rejoicing, the tone and theme reminiscent of Hannah's song of praise in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary honours God with her soul and calls His name holy.

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah begins his prophecy about the salvation of Israel by blessing God (1.68-79). In Luke 2.14, a multitude of angels praise God after their announcement of the birth of Jesus. Likewise, the shepherds glorify God after they see the baby Jesus (2.20). At Jesus's circumcision, Simeon, 'guided by the Spirit', praises God (2.28-32). Anna, another prophet who spent her life in fasting and prayer also praises God (2.37-38).

Luke tells us that Jesus often goes to a deserted place to pray (5.16). The image of

Jesus praying alone invokes a sense of the sacred in the hearer or reader, especially because we know his story, what he did during his lifetime, how he died and what happened after his death.

In Luke 3.21-22, Jesus is praying just after his baptism when the Holy Spirit descends on him and God speaks to him. 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Although we can assume that John the Baptist (and possibly other disciples) were around at Jesus's baptism, addressing Jesus as 'you' suggests that hearing the voice of God is a private experience which is in keeping with Luke's portrayal of Jesus praying alone. After this experience, Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, goes into the wilderness and wrestles with the temptations of the devil.

Prayer often comes before an important decision. In Luke 6.12 Jesus spends the whole night in the mountains in prayer and the following day, he chooses the twelve apostles from among his disciples. We don't know how many candidates Jesus had in mind for the twelve apostles, but further on, Luke writes that 'crowds' of disciples wait for him on the plain after his decision (6.17). Telling us that Jesus spends the night in prayer and that he has so many followers underlines the complexity of his decision. It points to the significance of the role of prayer in Jesus's life. In this part of the story, the power of prayer is further exemplified in teaching and in healing. In the Sermon on the Plain (6.17-49), Jesus teaches large numbers of people from Judea, from Jerusalem, from Tyre and from Sidon. In terms of geography, these listeners and broken people came from far and wide. Jesus heals every single person in those throngs. 'Power came out from him and healed all of them.' (6.19b)

In Luke 9.18-27 Jesus is praying with his disciples close by when he asks them, 'Who do people say that I am?' The disciples reply variously, and when Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, Peter answers, 'The Messiah of God'. Jesus does not disagree, and goes on to predict his suffering. He explains that discipleship will require similar suffering. In this story prayer is connected to public perception, self-identity and life purpose.

In Luke 9.28-36, Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, John and James. As he prays he is transformed in front of the disciples' eyes. They witness a different reality where Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah. God identifies Jesus as his son again and tells the apostles to listen to him. After the voice, that reality disappears and Jesus is alone.

Jesus's main teaching on prayer runs from Luke 11.1-13 which includes the Lord's Prayer, a parable, sayings about persistence in prayer and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The need to be persistent in prayer is reiterated in Luke 18.1-7. Further on Jesus points out that humility is the correct attitude to take before God in prayer (18.9-14).

In Luke 19.46, Jesus makes a powerful statement about prayer and the Temple. He cleanses the Temple, the centre of Judaism, while quoting Isaiah who designated the Temple as a

house of prayer.

When Jesus cleanses the Temple, we are near the end of Luke's gospel. This story recalls the beginning of the gospel when the Temple was filled with devout people at prayer. The angel predicted the coming of John the Baptist whose mission it was to cleanse the people of Israel.

In Luke 20.47, Jesus criticizes Temple functionaries who substitute long prayers for a genuine understanding of what God wants. They say long prayers while at the same time show no mercy to vulnerable people in need.

After his prediction of the coming of the Son of Man (21.36), Jesus tells the disciples to pray that they have the strength to escape the turmoil that will take place at the coming of the Son of Man.

The prayer at the Last Supper (22.17-20) is a prayer of thanksgiving and dedication. At Luke 22.32, Jesus prays for Peter hoping that his faith will not fail him in the face of danger. At the same time Jesus asks Peter to strengthen his brothers. In Luke 22.40-46, Jesus refers to or says several prayers. He prays that the disciples not come into the time of trial. He prays alone and asks to be relieved of his mission. He rededicates himself to God's will. The strength of his prayer makes his sweat turn to blood. He admonishes his sleepy disciples and tells them to pray for themselves, that they not come into the time of trial.

With all of these stories about and references to prayer Luke shows his hearers and readers the triumphal power of prayer. Prayer invites divine presence, a vision, a messenger of God, the Holy Spirit, God's voice, or God's prophets. It is like a bridge between two worlds. It offers unassailable protection. It determines the purpose of one's life. It endows one with supernatural power. It gives one a powerful identity. It gives courage. It is visibly transforming. It heals.

The placement of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Luke

Luke places the Lord's Prayer about half way through his gospel at Luke 11.2-4. At this point Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem where he knows he will have to suffer before his mission can be accomplished. He has predicted his death two times. He has told his disciples that if they want to follow him, they will have to suffer too. At this crucial point, an unidentified disciple asks Jesus to teach his disciples how to pray (11.1).

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

This request raises several questions. Why do John's and Jesus's disciples need to be taught to pray? Adult Jewish males were expected to pray morning and evening in the direction of Jerusalem three times a day, and before and after meals. Like the Pharisees and scribes, John's disciples fasted and prayed. Jesus's disciples didn't fast or pray and Jesus was criticized for it. (5.33).

The gospel suggests that John, and presumably his followers, lived an ascetic life. He was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born. He was destined to live a life of purity (1.15-17). He taught a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3.3). He advocated social justice (3.11-14). John was put in prison for criticizing Herod (3.20) and beheaded (9.9). He and his disciples fasted and prayed (5.33). According to Luke, John taught his followers how to pray. Why?

Let us consider that this unknown disciple was a follower of Jesus during his lifetime. In 1st century Palestine, different Jewish sects recited prayers that were specific to their sect. John's community would say prayers that only they prayed. One of the functions of having distinctive prayers was to create and maintain a sense of identity and community for members of the sect. At a certain point in the gospel, Jesus's disciples didn't have to fast and pray because Jesus was still among them (5.33). His presence created the centre of their community. But now, we are half way through the story, and Jesus will not be among his people much longer. The community needs sustenance for the future, so one of them asks Jesus to teach the group how to pray. This communal prayer will help hold the community together.

It may be that this disciple represents a gentile member of Luke's community and because of this does not know how to pray. In the Greco-Roman state religion the male head of powerful households offered prayers to the gods. These prayers were not accessible to the majority of people who lived under Roman rule. Prayers to the Greco-Roman gods tended to be long and formulaic. According to Matthew, gentiles had a tendency to 'heap up empty phrases' in prayer (Matthew 6.7).

It is also possible that a gentile initiate in Luke's community was not privy to the prayers that distinguished the Christian cult. The Lord's Prayer would be among these prayers that identified and nurtured the community.

The Lord's Prayer, Luke 11.2-4

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer appears to be simple because it is shorter than Matthew's version and it is shorter than the version that most people are familiar with. In general, prayer is not simple and Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is not simple either. It is

rhythmic, intimate, reverential, practical and thought-provoking.

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our sins
for we ourselves forgive
everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the
time of trial.

Father. In a way that is reminiscent of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus starts with the relationship, 'father'. Although God is addressed most often as 'Lord' or 'King' in the Hebrew Scriptures, He is also addressed as 'father'. The earliest version of the Lord's Prayer that we have is in Greek, but biblical scholars see the Aramaic *abba* behind the Greek word for 'father'. In Aramaic, Jesus's mother tongue, *abba* expresses the intimate relationship between parent and child. Jeremias suggests that to an Aramaic ear, *abba* would evoke the sense of closeness and trust that western people feel when they hear 'mother'. Other exegetes point out that the address of child to parent combines the sense of familial intimacy with the sense of respect that a child owes its parent. By teaching his disciples to address God as *abba*, Jesus invites his disciples and all the people in the later church into a close familial relationship.

The intimate is followed by the reverential '*hallowed be your name*'. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's name *is* God. Acknowledging God's singularity and holiness lies at the heart of Judaism. The Ten Commandments begin with the adjuration to keep God's name holy. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary, Zechariah, the angels, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna magnify, bless, praise, or glorify God in their address. The use of the passive voice also serves to establish a reverential tone.

The use of the passive in '*Your kingdom come*' maintains the reverential tone. 'King' is a common designation for God in Judaism. Many 1st century Jews thought and hoped that the kingdom would be brought by God or an agent of God, a prophet, a priest or a king. The coming or presence of the Kingdom of God is central to Jesus's teaching. In the Q document the coming of the Kingdom is expected to happen soon. When God reigns the social order will be turned upside down; the poor will be lifted up and the hungry will be full.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (6.20)

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. (6.21)

In Luke's gentile community, the hope in Christ's imminent return has faded. These communities have the Holy Spirit to sustain them. In the meantime, their task is to spread the gospel throughout the world.

'Give us each day our daily bread.' *'Daily bread'* may also refer to bread for tomorrow. To a Jewish community, the request for daily bread would bring to mind the bread that God provided each day when Israel wandered in the desert. A gentile Christian community would recall Jesus's miraculous feeding of the five thousand with only a few loaves of bread and two fish (9.10b-17). Jesus often assures his followers that God will provide for them (12.22-32).

'And forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.' Matthew asks for forgiveness of debts rather than sins (Matthew 6.12) whereas Luke refers to both sins and debts. The IDB notes that Luke often uses synonyms and suggests that this is the case here. The IDB argues that the use of the present tense in Luke suggests that there is a simultaneous interplay between the expressions of forgiveness. Perhaps the simultaneity of forgiveness returns to the sense of the close familial relationship that is expressed in the address at the beginning, *abba*.

'And do not bring us to the time of trial.' Trial can be interpreted in a number of ways including conflict with spiritual powers and human enemies, temptation or testing. This line of the prayer is difficult to understand because it raises the question about whether God brings us to trial or temptation.

The IDB states 'In view of James 1.13, ("God himself . . . tempts no one.") this request seemed strange, and in some of the ancient versions and ancient liturgies it reads: "Do not let us succumb to temptation." Further on the IDB states 'Similar words occur in the Jewish Prayer Book: "Lead us not into sin or . . . temptation . . .; let not the evil inclination have sway over us.'" The conclusion of the IDB is, "To limit the petition to enticement to sin is to narrow its meaning to the point of distortion."

Jesus was a thought-provoking teacher who did not give easy answers. He often taught using parables which presented disturbing concepts to his listeners and forced them to think about their assumptions. This last line of Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer follows in the same vein. It asks the hearers to think.

The teaching about prayer, Luke 11.5-13

The Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer is followed by a teaching on prayer called the parable of the importunate friend (11.5-8), a teaching which is found only in Luke. A man has an

unexpected guest, but he has no bread. He disturbs another friend at midnight and asks him for three loaves of bread. The friend angrily asks to be left in peace. The importunate friend insists and finally, the angry friend relents and gives him 'whatever he needs.'

The unexpected need for bread is not the same as the need for bread for survival, but the allusion to bread here creates a link between the Lord's Prayer, this parable and the teaching that follows. At first, the resistant and angry friend is not a sympathetic character, but when he gives his importunate friend 'whatever he needs', he is shown to become generous. Is this unsympathetic character intended as a symbol of God? If so, his resistance to his friend's need trips the hearers in Luke's church into thinking more deeply about their experience with prayer.

The last part of Luke's teaching on prayer (11.9-13) also occurs in Matthew 7.7-11 and is attributed to the Q document. In these verses Jesus returns to the theme of the generous father who gives his children all that they ask for right away. The immediacy and generosity of God's response contrasts with the persistence in prayer story which precedes it, and in so doing it highlights two aspects of prayer.

The placement of the Lord's prayer half way through Luke's gospel is a turning point between what has passed and what is to come. Up to this point, Luke has illustrated the triumphal power of prayer. When he introduces the Lord's Prayer, he brings the hearers into the embrace of a loving father who sustains the community. Immediately after, he points out something that the hearers might already know; prayers are not always answered immediately. This teaching about persistence in prayer is linked to a story further on in Luke 18.1-7 where a widow nags an unjust judge for justice. The judge refuses to give justice because he does not respect the widow, his office or God. The widow's stamina, not a *deus ex machina*, finally wins the day when the judge decides to give her justice because he is fed up with listening to her.

Luke teaches about the power of prayer and its strong connection to the Holy Spirit. He combines this teaching with the practical reality of a community which faces an unknown future in which their task is to build up and hold the Christian community together. In the last verse of this section of Jesus's teaching on prayer (11.13), the community is assured that the heavenly Father will generously give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks. Prayer created and sustained community in early 1st century Palestine and it creates and sustains community in the late 1st century gentile world.

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