

The Social and Religious Settings of The Lord's Prayer: Part 1

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When I was a schoolgirl in the 1950s we used to say the Lord's Prayer every day before we started class. At that time, most, if not all, public schools in my school system recited the Lord's Prayer as a matter of daily practice. Canadian society has changed since then, and now, a public school in Canada would not be allowed to ask students to recite prayers as part of a general school activity.

There are many English versions of the Lord's Prayer depending on the Bible that one uses or the Christian tradition to which one adheres. The version that I was taught reads as follows.

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 us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory
forever and ever
Amen.

In those days, we addressed God in the Lord's Prayer, using 'thou', 'thy', and 'thine'. These forms of 'you' were once used to express an intimate or familial relationship – the form of address a child might use towards her father. Now, these familiar forms seldom appear in dialects of modern English. And because they are archaic, some people think the familiar forms hearken back to formal English usage, even though the opposite is true. The New Revised

Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible has replaced the second person singular forms with 'you'. To someone living in an era when it was common to use the familiar form 'thou' with family and friends, this seemingly slight change in pronoun would create a significant difference in the meaning of the prayer. In the case of the NRSV, the linguistic change signals a social and cultural change. With such changes in mind I would like to look at the social and religious settings of the Lord's Prayer in the first century of the Common Era (CE).

In this paper I will give an overview of the religious milieu of the Roman Empire during the first century of the CE. Since the Lord's Prayer is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, I will discuss the general thrust of those gospels. In a subsequent paper I will discuss the immediate context within each gospel where the Lord's Prayer is found, as well as the hypothetical 'Q' document to which the Lord's Prayer is believed to have originally belonged.

The four gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the first four books of the Christian writings. They are called 'gospels' which means 'good news' and the four writers of the gospels concern themselves with the 'good news' of Jesus' coming and promised return. Although the gospels are attributed to certain men, we do not really know who wrote them since in ancient times, stories, histories and other writings were often attributed to a well-known and important person in a particular community. This attribution gave the writing credibility. We can guess at some features of the writers of the gospels and their communities by considering the concerns they address, but we cannot know specifically who they really were.

Because all four evangelists write for different audiences and at different times, their understanding and teaching of the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection differ. Despite their different theological perspectives, three of the gospels share a lot of the same material and a similar time line. These are the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke which are called the synoptic gospels because of their similarities. There are differences among the synoptic gospels, but the differences are not as striking as the differences between the synoptic gospels and the gospel of John. Some of the differences show us the concerns that preoccupied each gospel writer and his audience. These concerns also give an indication of the date when each gospel was written.

Perrin and Duling date the writing of the four gospels between 70 CE to 100 CE. Although Matthew is the first gospel in the biblical sequence, scholars believe that Mark was the first written gospel because the writer of Mark expects the second coming of Jesus to happen

in his lifetime. They date the writing of Mark as shortly after the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. Mark's audience is clearly shaken by the destruction of the temple and see its destruction as a sign of the end times and the imminence of the second coming. Unlike Mark, a major concern of Matthew and Luke is the prolonged delay of the second coming, and so scholars deduce that they were written later than Mark's gospel. In addition, Matthew and Luke seem to have borrowed a substantial amount of material from Mark which is another reason for positing a later date. Although Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are separated sequentially in the Bible, it is believed that they were written by the same person because of the content and stylistic similarities. Perrin and Duling suggest that Luke-Acts was written between 80 CE to 90 CE and that Matthew was written around 90 CE. The theology and concerns addressed in the gospel of John indicate that that gospel was written at a date later than the others, perhaps between 90 to 100 CE. All of these dates set the writers of the gospels in the Greco-Roman world of the latter part of the first century CE.

The Roman Empire in the first century CE

The Roman empire in the first century CE was a vast territory which included all of the lands and cities along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea as well as the country inland. The empire stretched from North Africa and Spain in the west to Syria, Palestine and modern-day Turkey in the east. North of Italy, Rome controlled the lands of northern Europe to the Danube and the Rhine.

It was a region of diverse cultures, religions and languages that were brought together under the political and military control of Rome. Amidst this great linguistic and cultural diversity the people of the cities shared a common language and culture that had grown out of the Greek empire built by Alexander the Great (356 to 323 BCE). In the Hellenistic culture, educated and semi-educated people conducted their daily business using *koine* Greek as a common language. Large cities in the east, such as Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem had buildings and institutions that reflected the Greek influence. In Rome, Greek was a common second language of the educated classes.

Religion was an integral part of life for people in the Hellenistic world. They believed that they were surrounded by invisible forces, both beneficial and malign. They worshipped a variety of goddesses and gods in the hopes that these deities would help them deal with these invisible, uncontrollable powers. Often, the myths and deities of one religion merged with the myths and deities of another. In fact, the state religion of the Roman empire was

a syncretic mix of Greek and Roman goddesses, gods and myths.

The Roman state religion

Within this *mélange* of religion and religious beliefs there were three main religious currents. The first was the state religion of Rome whose goddesses and gods everyone had to worship. Honouring the goddesses and gods of Rome as well as worshipping the emperor was easy for people to do, especially for those in the eastern Mediterranean, where emperor worship followed the natural order of things since they understood Roman power to be a manifestation of the power of the gods. Public honouring of the gods and the emperor was mandatory because adherence to the state religion signaled acceptance of the social order. The exception to this was the Jews whose religion forbade them to worship any god other than their own. Rome was tolerant of people's religious beliefs as long as they did not disrupt the social order. The Jews did not have to worship the emperor and the Roman gods because they had a historical agreement with Rome that allowed this exception.

Worship of the gods consisted largely of the performance of ceremonies and rites to seek the help of or propitiate the gods. The performance of rites belonged to the exclusive domain of the male head of the household or powerful civic leaders. The rituals and the wording of invocations and prayers were very precise, and focus on this precision eventually led to worship becoming formulaic and empty.

Enthusiastic religions

The myths surrounding the Greco-Roman gods had to do with the fate of heroes and emperors or the fate of nations. Because the practice of the state religion was largely a social formality performed by the wealthy and powerful, it was not particularly accessible to the lower classes. Common people found solace and expression in local and ethnic religions which offered them a sense of belonging and practices in which they could participate. Among these local religions were the mystery religions which emerged from an agrarian society which was close to and dependent on the cycles of the earth; birth, growth, death and renewal. A common and widespread myth had the deity dying and being reborn. Through the beliefs and practices of the cult, the initiate was able to experience union with the divine and so share in the experience of overcoming death. The mystery cults appealed to the emotional needs of people in a way that the state religion could not. They offered hope during difficult times, salvation after death and allowed the spontaneous release of emotions.

In general people believed in the possibility of miracles. Some miracle workers could cause the heavens to open and bring down the rain. Others could heal the sick. Miraculous healing was an accepted part of the non-rational religious milieu of the ancient world. Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, was a popular god. People stayed overnight in his temple in anticipation of having a dream that would heal them or show them the route to healing. Other accepted sources of healing included magicians, wandering healers and exorcists.

Greek philosophy

Philosophy was another route that people chose to exert control over their lives. In Acts, Luke mentions Stoicism and Epicureanism. Both of these philosophies advocated the use of logic, analysis and self-examination as tools for achieving equilibrium in the face of life's vicissitudes. Philosophy tended to be the purview of the wealthy and educated classes for they were the ones who had the time and discipline to pursue the ascetic and moral life.

Although philosophy and the enthusiastic religions seem to have little in common, both of them offered refuge from a life ruled by uncontrollable forces and malign powers.

Judaism

Judaism was also influenced by the cultural and religious currents in the ancient world. At times Jews adopted religious beliefs from Persia and later Greek ideas. Wealthier Jews also adopted customs from the Hellenistic culture. For example, in the second century BCE, some Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent their children to Greek-style schools and allowed them to participate in Greek-style athletic events, a practice which was strictly forbidden in traditional Judaism. Not all Jews accepted the relaxed observance of Torah, the Jewish sacred Law, though, and in Palestine there was tension among several Judaic groups due to differences in interpreting and following the Law. Among those who favoured strict adherence to the Law were the Pharisees, a group of lay religious leaders whose joy it was to study, interpret and follow the Law. The Pharisees were popular among the common people because of their integrity and desire to preserve traditional Judaism.

Diaspora Jews, Jews who lived outside of Palestine, were also influenced by the values and beliefs of Greek culture. Many Diaspora Jews had lived away from Jerusalem and Palestine for generations and had lost some parts of their cultural identity. For example, synagogues in the Diaspora used the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, because Diaspora Jews could no longer read Hebrew.

Whether in Palestine or the Diaspora, it was usually wealthier Jews who took aspects of the Greco-Roman lifestyle on board; they had more contact with the larger Hellenistic culture and often profited from their relationships within the Hellenistic world. However, most Jews maintained strong ties with their Jewish roots and in the Diaspora they formed distinct communities within large cities such as Antioch and Alexandria. They had to make themselves separate in order to follow the Law, but sometimes their exclusivity caused resentment in the larger community.

Observant Jews stood out from the rest of pagan society because of three main reasons. First, Judaism was a monotheistic religion in a world that was overwhelmingly polytheistic. Adherents of other religions worshipped a variety of goddesses and gods and built temples to them all over the Greco-Roman world. Jews worshipped one God, and no other. Jews had one temple in Jerusalem. A second obvious difference was the practice of resting on the Sabbath. Every seventh day was a day of rest, and Jews could not work or participate in activities that might be perceived as work according to their interpretation of the Law. Because of this they could not participate in what might be deemed normal activities in the larger society. A third distinguishing aspect of Judaism was circumcision. All male children were circumcised, a practice that seemed distasteful to some pagans.

Although Judaism was different from other religions, Hellenistic Judaism was not monolithic in its beliefs and it absorbed some religious ideas from the surrounding culture. Similar to the people around them Jews believed in saviour gods, angels and demons.

Some Jews also believed that a cataclysmic end time was approaching, after which God would come to judge and rule the world. The way that this new world order would arise and who would bring it about was a matter of controversy within Judaism. Some thought God would intervene in history directly, and rule the world. Others thought that God would use an agent, a messiah, to overturn the world. Christians often refer to Jesus as the messiah and they understand this to mean that Jesus is the saviour of humankind. In Hebrew ‘messiah’ means ‘anointed’. In Jewish history, God anointed three kinds of people – priests, prophets and kings. God chose these people to perform a special task. Judaic hopes for a messiah were not homogeneous. The hope for a particular messiah depended on religious understanding as well as the political circumstances at any given period of time. In the first century, some Jewish groups hoped for a ‘righteous teacher’ who would make Israel repent and become strict observers of the Law. Others hoped for a military victory over the Romans led by a messiah descended from the ancient, heroic king, David. Some saw the messiah as a figure of humility reminiscent of the ‘suffering servant’ spoken of in Isaiah. All of these conceptions were congruent with the Jewish belief that God had a special relationship with

Israel and would always protect and lift her up.

The Hebrew Scriptures attest that God has a plan and Israel is at the centre of it. The Hebrew Scriptures teach us that God has a liking for breaking into history and lifting up the humble. He lifted up Abraham, who had no children and no land, and made him Israel's great Patriarch. He lifted up Moses, who mumbled when he spoke, and made him Israel's liberator and great Lawgiver. He lifted up David, who was a shepherd boy, and made him Israel's saviour and great King. According to the covenant between God and Israel, God will redeem his people, and Israel will obey his Law. In the Hebrew Scriptures, many of the tribulations of the Jewish people have been attributed to Israel's turning away from God and not seeking redemption through repentance. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew who was a part of Jewish salvation history. Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and that Israel should repent and turn back to God.

The creation of the Christian writings

The letters of Paul and the gospels attest that during his lifetime, Jesus had twelve disciples as well as many followers and supporters. After his death and resurrection, the Jesus community expected Jesus to come again soon. While they waited they talked about him among themselves. Their community may have grown as they talked about him to other Jews. They may have repeated things that Jesus said to show what kind of a person he was, and what his life and death meant to them. The Hebrew Scriptures promised the salvation of Israel, and through Israel, the world. The Jesus community may have referred to this tradition to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of the scriptures, the messiah. Gradually, these sayings and interpretive stories became part of a worship and teaching tradition. Since they were originally oral traditions, it might have been easier to organize them according to themes in order to remember them. Later, the stories and sayings were written down for ease of teaching. Biblical scholarship shows that as the communities expanded from Palestine to the gentile world, the contexts of Jesus' actions or sayings were changed to meet the needs of particular communities. Eventually, these teachings, letters and gospels came into the form that Christians call the New Testament today. The Lord's Prayer as taught by Jesus is preserved in two of the gospels, in Matthew 6:9-13 and in Luke 11:2-4.

The Gospel of Matthew

The Romans razed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. This event shook the Jewish

people in Palestine and in the Diaspora. The temple had been the centre of their religion for centuries; God was believed to dwell in the temple. Without the temple, the balance of power within Judaism was upset. Out of the chaos arose the Pharisaic party, religious leaders whose religious focus had always been on the interpretation of the sacred Law (Torah) and other religious practices not dependent on the temple. With the temple gone, the Pharisaic party began to rebuild Judaism by maintaining their focus on the study of and strict obedience to the Law.

Although we do not know where the gospel of Matthew was written, some of his concerns and arguments with a Jewish community point to Antioch in Syria. Antioch was a gentile city with a large Jewish community so the people who Matthew addresses may have been a group of Jewish Christians and gentiles interested in Judaism.

Scholars lean towards describing Matthew as a Hellenistic Jewish Christian because he uses literary forms, ways of argumentation and ideas that are distinctly Jewish, but he also reveals the influences of the Hellenistic world.

He opens his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, a form that has a precedent in the Hebrew Bible. Matthew's genealogy directly connects Jesus to Judaism through Abraham and David and suggests that Jesus is the fulfillment of the scriptures. Matthew frequently quotes the Hebrew Scriptures to show that Jesus was the messiah. Matthew also reports Jesus as saying that his mission is to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Another sign of Matthew's Jewish roots is that Matthew's Jesus enters into argument with 'the scribes and the Pharisees' over questions of the Law quite often. Two points have been made of this. One, the community that Matthew is writing for is still in dialogue with a nearby synagogue, but that it is a contentious dialogue. And two, disputes over the Law were normal in Pharisaic Judaism because the Law covered every aspect of daily life. Therefore it would be normal for people to argue about interpretations of the Law. Historically, Christians interpreted Matthew's disputes in a negative way to the detriment of Judaism. There may be tension between the synagogue and the 'church', but it does not have to be seen as a kind of tension that leads to violence against a different religious group. Although Matthew's community may be in conflict with the synagogue, his writing indicates that the 'church' and the synagogue are still interacting with each other and that a complete break with the synagogue has not yet occurred.

Matthew's gospel also shows the influence of ideas that were popular in the Hellenistic gentile world, and suggests the presence of gentiles in his community. The idea that Jesus was a miracle-working hero comes from the Hellenistic world. Matthew's Jesus says, 'Make disciples of all nations.' which shows an interest in the mission of the church to the gentile

world. Matthew adds the story of the virgin birth to his narrative. This kind of supernatural birth echoes the miraculous births of gods in the Greco-Roman myths.

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles

Luke-Acts is written to accommodate the concerns of a growing gentile community that is quickly moving into the larger Greco-Roman world. The message in Luke's gospel is a more universal message which shows a greater concern with the mission to the gentiles. Luke traces Jesus' ancestry through David to Adam, the first human. Jesus becomes the saviour of all humankind. In his gospel, Luke often shows gentiles in a sympathetic light. Luke's gentiles recognize Jesus as the Son of God more often than their Jewish contemporaries. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is a supernatural hero who bestows supernatural powers on his followers, a portrayal that comes from the influence of Hellenistic religions.

The parousia did not come to the generation who suffered the destruction of the temple. It has still not come to Luke's generation, so Luke puts it off to an indeterminate time in the future. In the meantime, the church must play her role in the history of salvation by being a witness to Jesus. Because Luke's community no longer expects Jesus to come soon, they have to deal with living under the authority of Rome. When Christianity was considered a Jewish sect by the Roman authorities, Christians had some protection, but now that it has broken with its mother religion, the Lucan community has to convince Roman authorities that Christianity is a respectable religion with a legitimate place in the gentile world. Luke depicts the Jesus tradition moving from Palestine into the Hellenic world and on to Rome in a non-controversial way. In the passing on of authority from Jesus to Peter to Paul there is no conflict, whereas Paul's letters show that this transition was full of controversy. In Acts, Paul arrives in Rome where his teaching is well received in contrast with other Christian writings where it is suggested that Paul was crucified in Rome.

The 'Q' document

Modern scholars generally agree that Matthew and Luke have made substantial use of the gospel of Mark as a source for their own gospels, and that they did this independently of each other. In addition, the gospels of Matthew and Luke have other material in common but which they don't share with Mark. This other source is commonly called 'Q' after the German word, *Quelle*, for 'source'. There is no extant text or fragments of texts for the Q document, so not all scholars are in agreement that it once existed. However, the wording in Matthew

and Luke is so similar that it has led scholars to believe that Q was a written source. The existence of a Q document is a convenient hypothesis because it allows scholars to look at Matthew and Luke's common material and speculate about the origins and meaning. A hypothetical Q document has been reconstructed from the parts of Matthew and Luke that they have in common with each other but not with Mark. In the Q document there are no stories about Jesus such as the birth or passion narratives. It is largely made up of the sayings of Jesus as a teacher.

The *Beatitudes* are considered to be a part of Q. The content of the *Beatitudes* suggests that the community who listened to and repeated these sayings were a movement of homeless, poor people. In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God". In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:3 expresses a similar sentiment: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's version of this blessing is simpler. It has been suggested that Luke's version of Q is more likely to be closer to the original because he doesn't change the wording to make Jesus' message easier to understand or more palatable. Luke's simplicity is also evident in the Lord's Prayer as we can see below.

Matthew 6:9-13	Luke 11:2-4
Our Father in heaven	Father
hallowed be your name	hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come	Your kingdom come
Your will be done	
on earth as it is in heaven	
Give us this day our daily bread	Give us each day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts	And forgive us our sins
As we also have forgiven	For we ourselves forgive
our debtors	everyone indebted to us
And do not bring us to the time of trial.	And do not bring us to the time of trial
but rescue us from the evil one	

In a subsequent paper, I will examine the Lord's Prayer in its immediate contexts in Matthew and Luke. I will also discuss the Q document and other contemporary writings and use them as tools for interpreting and understanding the prayer.

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