

The Urban Food Supply and the Lord's Prayer

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The Lord's Prayer has been seen as a series of eschatological petitions. I here consider the uncertain urban food supply in the contemporaneous Mediterranean as an alternate explanation of the "daily bread" line of the Prayer, and by implication, of the whole of the Prayer.

The Eschatological Interpretation

Johannes Weiss in 1892 considered that the petition "may your kingdom come" set the tone for the following petitions.¹ Rudolf Bultmann considered the eschatological character of the prayer, particularly its first three petitions, a foregone conclusion, and argued that Jesus took for granted that the deity's regime was to benefit the Jewish people.² Others further articulated this eschatological perspective.³ Joachim Jeremias was the foremost proponent of the eschatological perspective after WW2. He looked at the two petitions regarding subsistence and forgiveness, interpreting the first as a reference to bread for tomorrow, in the sense of the Great Tomorrow, and the second as a plea for forgiveness at the final reckoning.⁴ This interpretation of the subsistence petition, in particular, depended on Jeremias' proposal for an underlying Aramaic original; that hypothetical version included the entirety of the Lucan petitions, though with a preference for Matthean terminology in some instances.⁵

The various statements of the eschatological view carried the seeds of their own instability. Weiss, for example, considered the request for the sanctification of the deity's name a reverent liturgical introductory formula.⁶ Bultmann noted the mundane references to physical life and forgiveness in the fourth and fifth petitions.⁷ Jeremias' interpretation of the subsistence petition in light of the Great Tomorrow is inconsistent with the terminology of the three sources in which the Prayer appears.⁸ Finally, the textual history of the prayer suggests that to the compiler of Matthew or his source is due the credit for the eschatological dimensions of the longer version of the Prayer.

¹Weiss **Proclamation** 73.

²Bultmann **Word** 42-43.

³For a summary, see Gibson **Eschatological** 96.

⁴Jeremias **Prayer** 24-25.

⁵For this reconstruction, see Jeremias **Prayer** 15.

⁶Weiss **Proclamation** 73 n29.

⁷Bultmann **Word** 181.

⁸Hultgren **Bread Petition** 47.

The Text of the Lord's Prayer

The history of text transmission is largely one of harmonizing the shorter Lucan version to its longer Matthean counterpart; Matthew's version includes the Lucan petitions in their entirety. The Didache uses the Matthean version, attributing it explicitly to "the Gospel," and adding only a final benediction. In light of this history, it would be more difficult to argue for the Lucan version as an abridgement than to argue for the Matthean/Didache version as an expansion.⁹

More importantly for the question of eschatological vs mundane perspective, the Matthean expansion exhibits a consistent redactional principle. In each case, it adds a reference to metaphysical dualism to interpret a petition from the Lucan version. A translation of the Matthean version with the Lucan petitions (Matthean wording) in standard type and the additions italicized illustrates the application of this principle:

Our Father, the one in Heaven,
May your name be sanctified.
May your regime come.
May your will be done, as in Heaven, so also on earth.
Give us today our subsistence ration,
And forgive our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.
Do not lead us into the test,
But release us from the Evil One.

The petition for the Deity's will to be done interprets the plea for his regime to come by implying a contrast between the Deity's rule in Heaven with conditions on earth. Likewise, the final Matthean petition contrasts the father at the top of the Heavenly bureaucracy with the Evil One, his fiendish counterpart. This secondary, dualistic overlay raises the question of the Prayer's frame of reference apart from the overlay. We next turn to this question.

The Lord's Prayer: A Mundane Perspective

Jeffrey Gibson proposed a non-eschatological focus for the Lord's Prayer. He characterized the Prayer as a plea for "divine provision for guarding the disciples from going over to the side of "this generation."¹⁰ In other words, he considered the Prayer a request for protection against apostasy such as that which characterized the Israelites during the Exodus. This characterization is compatible with Hultgren's understanding of the subsistence petition as a reference to bread such as the manna provided during the Exodus (Ex 16:4, 15; Ps 78:24, 105:40).¹¹

The writings which include the Prayer utilize the Scriptural corpus from which the manna tradition is derived, but this does not exhaust the mundane perspective on the food supply situation. In fact, the unpredictability of the urban food supply throughout classical antiquity provides an additional perspective on a problem which most likely occurred with some regularity for the compilers and audiences of the Gospels.

⁹Jeremias **Prayer** 12-14.

¹⁰Gibson **Matthew** 104.

¹¹Hultgren **Bread Petition** 48-50.

In most parts of the Mediterranean basin, the success of a harvest was dependent on favorable weather conditions, which might or might not obtain in a given year in a particular location. Aristotle noted the variability in rainfall throughout the region: “sometimes drought or rain is widespread and covers a large area of country; sometimes it is only local.”¹² This suggests that food abundance and food shortage were localized, with the situation in a given area varying from one harvest to the next.

Peter Guernsey calculated the probability of crop failure in Attica. By his estimate, the wheat crop might be expected to fail in 28%, barley in 5.5%, and dry legumes in 71% of the harvests.¹³ Other parts of the Mediterranean give evidence of comparably high failure rates. Guernsey concluded that food shortage, defined as “a short-term reduction in the amount of available foodstuffs, indicated by rising prices, popular discontent, hunger . . . was common.”¹⁴ The Apocalypse illustrates the familiarity of John’s urban audiences with food shortages and with the differing failure rates for wheat and barley. The inflation of grain prices to a denarius (about a day’s wage) for one measure of wheat or three measures of barley (Rev 6:6) is one of the curses delivered by the Four Riders. In this scenario, subsistence for an individual or a small family required a worker’s entire wage, and left nothing for other expenses.

When food shortages occur frequently, the ability to manage the resulting crises is an asset. The Lord’s Prayer sits within a tradition that recognized the necessity of managing the food supply. The Pentateuch included a tradition regarding Joseph’s prediction of and preparation for a seven-year regional famine (Gen 41). In that account, Joseph established a policy of storing excess grain from abundant years; during lean years, he alleviated the effects of famine by selling the excess grain.

Similar arrangements prevailed throughout the Greco-Roman world. A monument memorializing Augustus’ accomplishments praises his grain supply management:

I did not decline at a time of the greatest scarcity of grain the charge of the grain supply, which I so administered that, within a few days, I freed the entire people, at my own expense, from the fear and danger in which they were . . .

When consul for the thirteenth time, I gave sixty denarii apiece to the plebs who were then receiving public grain; these were a little more than two hundred thousand persons.¹⁵

Augustus was one of many notables to receive the title *pater patriae*. He had managed the grain supply so as to minimize unrest among the lower classes. His grain supply management is unusual only for its scale: he had used existing political structures to implement his subsistence measures. The patronage system, which was pervasive in the Mediterranean, let the well-to-do enhance their prestige by being benefactors to economically vulnerable dependents. The clients, in turn, could rely on handouts from their patron for subsistence.¹⁶

¹²Aristotle *Meteorologica* 2:4.

¹³Guernsey *Famine* 10.

¹⁴Guernsey *Famine* 6.

¹⁵Res Gestae Divi Augusti 1:5, 3:15, tr Shipley 353, 369-371.

¹⁶Webber *Analysis* 143-148.

The Urban Environment of the Lord's Prayer

Roman society took the shape of a steep social pyramid. A few rulers sat atop the pyramid, followed by indigenous elite and then by retainers who served their interests. The other 95% of the population included rural peasants, artisans, and the urban poor. Of these groups, the urban poor were more vulnerable economically than were the peasants, who had direct recourse to the land.¹⁷ This gave the cities high densities of impoverished populations and thus ample potential for unrest.

Food shortages affected persons at all levels of society. With crop failure rates such as those Guernsey calculated, the urban poor might often be unable to afford sufficient food to feed their families. Wealthy civic benefactors could spend large sums to provide grain in order to minimize the unrest that widespread hunger might create. Alternatively, they might make themselves the objects of unrest by hoarding grain to sell at a high price during periods of shortage. Peasants, who worked small plots of land and paid most of their produce to the landowners, were slightly better off than the urban poor, but still remained insecure.

The subsistence petition of the Lord's Prayer fits well within a context in which urban food insecurity is the normal condition. This petition is simply a supplication to the divine benefactor to provide an adequate food supply. The Amidah echoes this sentiment in its ninth petition. Some Roman plebeians apparently considered Augustus their benefactor, for his measures to stabilize their food supply. The communities that recited the Lord's Prayer a few generations later, and those that used the Amidah, considered their deity their ultimate benefactor.

The Lord's Prayer takes the form of a series of requests from a dependent (client) to a benefactor (patron). The form of the address ("father") is not necessarily a familiar, juvenile term. The simple Lucan form could be viewed in such a light. However, the opposite perspective is more likely. The father was seen as a patriarch and head of household, in accordance with a tradition cited both by Plato (*Laws* 680B) and by his student Aristotle *Pol* 1/1:7.¹⁸ The Matthean version actually points in this direction by formalizing the address to the deity. Thus the Lord's Prayer conceptualizes the deity not only as a public benefactor but also as a provincial counterpart of a Roman *paterfamilias*.

The last two Lucan petitions also fit within the context of urban food insecurity. Forgiveness, the renunciation of vengeance in dealings with a social inferior, requires a benefactor to behave with restraint when his responsibility for the food supply places him in control of a dependent's life and health. This petition has an inexact counterpart in the sixth petition of the Amidah. In the Lucan version (11:4ab), the Prayer requests forgiveness from the deity on the grounds that the Christian community already has adopted that principle. Likewise, the petition that the deity not lead the communities into the test (11:4c) functions quite logically as a plea to be spared the tests of food shortage, privation, and the ensuing unrest.

¹⁷Lenski **Power** 266-279.

¹⁸*Contra Jeremias Prayer* 19-20.

Comment

E Bruce Brooks

The above proposal can be further supported at several points.

First, in the propagation of the Christian message, there does seem to have been a shift from rural to urban. Jesus, for sufficient reason, had shunned the cities. His veiled Parables of the Kingdom (especially Mk 4:3-9) envision contact propagation, some converts being notably more successful at this than others (whence the “sixtyfold” and “hundredfold,” which are inexplicable in terms of more organized preaching). The instructions to the Apostles (Mk 6:10-11, from the 30’s) envision a town-to-town model of first visits. Jacob (from the 40’s) addresses economically mixed, and thus probably more urban, communities. Paul in the 50’s (his early letters, if any, are lost) communicates exclusively with urban centers. Doubtless there was always a mixture, but it is reasonable to infer that by the time Luke came along (late 60’s and early 70’s) the Christians were predominantly urban.

Second, that the Lukan Prayer is prior to the Matthean has the support of many.¹⁹ Both may have Aramaic originals. If so, the same relationship apparently obtains: retrotranslation into Aramaic suggests that Luke’s version is in a standard Aramaic meter, attested from the 05c to the hymns of the Syrian church father Ephraem, while the Matthean form, with its liturgical additions, is more individual.²⁰ Like another early prayer, the Aramaic ejaculation Maranatha (“Come, Lord”),²¹ the Lord’s Prayer seems to look toward a soon return of Jesus at the Last Days.²² The Prayer fits into this context as a request for day-to-day maintenance in the short meantime, and a hope that the speaker’s acts of forgiveness will move God to a like forgiveness at the end.

We may thus put the Matthean adaptation behind us. I would then ask: If Luke’s version is earlier, what is its origin? Luke himself (Lk 11:1, “Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples”) credits the influence of the fixed prayers of the Baptist movement, whose fixed prayers are numerous,²³ though there is no Mandaean parallel to the Lukan Prayer. There were also the fixed prayers already in use. Perhaps, noting all this, someone went to the Gospel of Mark and asked, What prayers of Jesus. pr what advice about prayer can we follow, to make a real prayer out of this?

¹⁹eg Kilpatrick **Sources** 21, Montefiore **Synoptic** 2/472, Gundry **Matthew** 104-110. That some credit the existence of a “Q” does not affect their sense of the directionality.

²⁰Lohmeyer **Prayer** 27-29, compare the reconstruction in Fitzmyer **Luke** 2/901. Lohmeyer himself declines to infer directionality between the two Aramaic forms.

²¹Didache 10:6 [on the Eucharist], “May **grace** come, and may **this world pass away! Maranatha! Amen!** 1 Cor 11:26 [describing the Eucharist], For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye proclaim the Lord’s death **till he come**. 1 Cor 16:22-23 [the end of the Epistle], “If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema. **Maranatha!** Rev 22:20-21 (the end of the text), “He who testifieth to these things saith, Yea, **I come quickly. Amen; Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord be with the saints. Amen!**”

²²The delay of this Return is the subject of some of the most agonized passages in the NT.

²³See Drower **Prayerbook**, which includes hundreds of fixed prayers. That Luke knew the Baptists is suggested by the parallels between his respectful treatment of the Announcement to Zacharias (Lk 1:14-17) and the Mandaean Book of John 18.

The answer might have looked like the following:

Mark	Luke
14:36. Abba, Father,	11:2b. Father,
	11:2c. Hallowed be thy name.
Maranatha ("Come, Lord") ²⁴	11:2d. Thy Kingdom come.
	11:3. Give us day by day our daily bread.
11:25. And whensoever ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any one, that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses.	11:4a. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive every one that is indebted to us.
14:38. Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.	11:4b. And bring us not into temptation.

That leaves just two elements in the Lukan Prayer unaccounted for: 11:2b and 11:3.

One of them (Lk 11:2b) is standard Jewish reverence for God, common in the OT. It might also be supplied from the Amidah or daily synagogue prayers, in this way:

Amidah	Luke
3. Thou art holy, and thy name is holy. ²⁵	11:2c. Hallowed be thy name.

The other, the "daily bread," is much discussed in the literature. In back of any such idea must lie the manna in the wilderness, the miraculous provision by God which was only good for one day:

Exod 16:15b. It is the bread which Jehovah hath given you to eat. [16] This is the thing which Jehovah hath commanded: Gather ye of it every man according to his eating, an omer a head, according to the number of your persons, shall ye take it, every man for them that are in his tent. [17] And the children of Israel did so, and gathered some more, some less. [18] And when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating. [19] And Moses said unto them, Let no man leave of it till the morning . . . [21a] And. And they gathered it morning by morning, every man according to his eating.

What changed this central cultural memory to a present necessity may have been the economic situation of the early Christians. They had been told to divest themselves of everything, in expectation of greater rewards in the imminent End, when Jesus would come again. Thus Mark's Jesus, speaking to the rich young man:

Mk 10:21. And Jesus looking on him, loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven, and come, follow me.

This is emphasized by the interpolated Mk 10:23-31, but the policy of total divestment is clear enough from this passage alone. As is separation from family in Mk 3:31-35, another early practice which led to mutual dependence in the early churches.

²⁴Already established in frequent use, and certainly to be included.

²⁵Lohmeyer 302, translated from the modern version reflected in Singer.

The communities addressed by the Epistle of Jacob reached a point when the rich left the group, incurring violent enmity from the writer, and leaving the group without wealthy members for its support.²⁶ Such a situation was envisioned by Luke as stable at first (Ac 2:44-47), but later involving curses and death for the rich who withheld their contributions (Ac 4:32-5:11), and complaints about unequal sharing (Ac 6:1-3).

Luke in his Sermon on the Plain rationalized this situation as a theology of poverty, in which *possessions now* imply *rewards now*, but preclude any rewards in future:

Lk 6:20b. Blessed are ye poor, for yours in the Kingdom of Heaven. [21]
Blessed are ye that hunger now, for ye shall be filled . . .

Lk 6:24. But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation.
[25] Woe unto you, ye that are full now, for ye shall hunger.

Of relevance for Luke's assembling of the Lord's Prayer, his Sermon also says:

Lk 6:36. Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful (cf Lk 1:4a).

The community was living in a state of holiness, but also of poverty. Staying alive from day to day was a concern. It may have been this situation that led to the prayer for daily, if temporary, sustenance. Poverty in Luke is not a disability to be relieved, but a qualification to be prized. On this reading, nothing in Luke's Prayer seems to contradict the eschatological perception of the early Jesus groups.

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²⁶Brooks **Jacob** 58-60.