

READING THE LORD'S PRAYER AS GREEK

POETRY

ABSTRACT

This brief essay steps back from complex issues in the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer to read as a poem the Greek text in *Matthew 6*, on which most liturgical uses of the prayer depend. Using techniques that have proved productive in studying other Greek poems, it finds a sharp difference in grammar, tone and style between two "panels", the first (vs. 9-10) consisting of three exclamatory imperatives in carefully balanced rhyming units. The second (vs 11-13) contrasts with this lofty style, presenting three specific petitions in a down-to-

earth manner. Together the two “panels” function like a diptych, each balancing and simultaneously contrasting with the other.

In the best manuscripts the prayer, ends abruptly with requests to be spared the testing of one’s mettle, and to be rescued from “the evil one.” This “open” ending invites, in effect, those who use the prayer to add further petition, or expressions of praise and gratitude.

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Every day, all around the world, Christians of every denomination and every language pray the Lord’s Prayer. It is perhaps the most universally beloved text of Christendom. It has, moreover, a clear biblical source in the Greek of the gospel of Matthew. For many people, then, it came as a shock to learn that the Pope had, according to the [New York Times on December 8, 2017](#), stated that widely used translations of the prayer were misleading. He is allowing Catholics in France and some other countries to replace wordings such as “And lead us not into temptation” with “Do not let us fall into temptation” – a seemingly minor change but one with strong emotional and interpretive consequences. The Pope’s

pronouncement sent me back to the Greek of the sixth chapter of *Matthew*, a fascinating and challenging text. .

It is not certain how closely it approximates words Jesus spoke, nor on how many occasions he prayed such a prayer, nor in which languages. Nor do we know for certain on what sources *Matthew* relied, or precisely how his text relates to a similar version in the early Christian *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (ch. 8), or a shorter version in *Luke* (11. 2-4). We depend instead on what is found in the Greek of *Matthew*. That is the “original” text of this prayer. In returning to this text I found features that I had overlooked in the past, not least concerning the phrase at the center of the current controversy. But I also experienced again the remarkable richness of meaning and abundant interpretive challenges throughout this text. This essay does not attempt to cover all these matters. Its aim is to convey as best I can the experience of reading the prayer in Greek.

The First Panel

Editors of the New Testament have long recognized that the prayer should be printed as poetry, not prose. The typography reminds the reader to put to work all the capacities helpful in reading poetry - alertness to sound, rhythm, grammar, imagery, structure, word choice and context. The context is Jesus’

Sermon on the Mount, where the prayer is surrounded by the Beatitudes and assaults on the showmanship of conventional piety. It is as if Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, disrupting prevailing assumptions, turns to poetry and invites his followers to do the same. Readers need to anticipate that in such a setting the prayer too may disrupt established conventions.

In structure the poem is like a diptych; that is, it consists of two parts juxtaposed to one another. Physical diptychs consisting of two hinged panels were widely used in antiquity for everything from school assignments to official pronouncements. When opened such paired panels could be compared and contrasted. In the prayer each of these parts consists of three items, the last one of which is expanded with an additional phrase of six words. These items are, technically speaking, commands; their verbs are almost all imperatives of one sort or another. The panels are thus neatly balanced, but they are very different in tone and content.

The verbs in the first panel are all in a rather infrequently occurring grammatical form, called the “third person imperative,” for which there is no exact equivalent in English. Putting *Let* at the beginning of a clause is sometimes the best mode of translation in English, as in ““ Let the little children come to me,

and do not stop them” (*Matthew* 19.14.) The first word God speaks in the Septuagint version of *Genesis* is in this form – genēthētō phōs, “Let there be light;” The identical verb is used in the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer usually translated “Thy will be done, genēthētō to thelēma sou.” To hint at the echo of *Genesis* one might translate “Let your will come into being!” This form of the Greek verb can indeed be used for commands or legal requirements, especially when a religious sanction is involved. But it also occurs in ritual settings, when people cry out or make ritual exclamations, as in the Greek tragedy Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, “Let the good win out” (121 and 139). It is used in a similar way in the ancient Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint, for example:

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,

*for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.*

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

let all the peoples praise you.

Psalm_67 vs. 3-6 (This and other translations are from the New

Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In the Septuagint numeration

this is Psalm 66).

In such cases verbs of this form often occur in clusters, two or more in close proximity, as they do in the first triad of the Lord’s Prayer. In *Matthew’s* Greek of

the Lord's Prayer each of these verbs stand at the beginning of a four word clause. Their endings rhyme and so do the nouns and pronouns that depend on them. The rhyme is especially strong at the end of each clause:

hagiasthētō to onoma sou. (Hallowed be your name.)

elthetō hē basileia sou. (Your kingdom come.)

genēthētō to thelēma sou. (Your will be done.)

The tone of exaltation invites something far beyond pious mumbling. These are exclamations, perhaps cheers of acclamation, or shouts of excitement. At the very least they call for exclamation marks as punctuation and sounds of jubilation when read aloud.

The Second Panel

The first panel in this diptych-like prayer begins and ends with an image of heaven; it ends, however, not as most translations have it, "... on earth as it is in heaven," but in the inverse order, literally, "as in heaven, also on earth." The word order is important. *Heaven* looks back to the beginning of the prayer, while *earth* sets the stage for the three down-to-earth petitions of its second panel. While these petitions balance the triadic structure of the first part, they are a surprising selection among many things for which one might pray, for example,

wisdom, strength, peace. Instead the requests for bread, release from debts or other obligations, and for avoidance of temptation are for down-to-earth things expressed in down-to-earth style. Gone is the rhythm of four word rhyming units. The most striking contrast between the two panels is, however, the shift from the repetition of *thy* (*thy name ..thy kingdom ... thy will*) to the emphasis on *us* (*give us ... forgive us.. lead us*) but the petitions of the second triad are also longer and vary considerably in length. The grammar also changes; to be sure, the petitions are all phrased as commands, but they do not use the rhyming, high-fallutin' third person imperatives of the first triad, but a variety of forms common in everyday speech. The second triad thus sounds more prosaic than the first. It asks for things close to home, including a request about "temptation" which has for centuries troubled Christian theologians and now leads the Pope to nod favorably to translations such as "Do not let us fall into temptation," rather than ones that might be construed to mean that God might actively lead his people to sinful desires.

The Pope is right in one respect: the Greek verb used in this passage is not a way to talk about *leading*. But neither can it be stretched into a request for help in avoiding falling into temptation. There are plenty of ways in biblical Greek to talk about falling, moral missteps, or stumbling, but those are not the words in

the prayer in *Matthew*. Instead, the text has a verb used for moving something or some person from one place or condition to another.

The interpretive clue to understanding this part of the prayer may lie, however, not in the verb, but in the noun peirasmos, often translated “temptation.” This can be seriously misleading, especially if *temptation* is understood in the modern sense - “The desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise,” as one dictionary has it. This understanding of temptation as a subjective state, a set of feelings in the mind of the individual, has now largely displaced an older one closer to its origin in a Latin word for *trying* or *testing*. The earliest uses of *temptation* in English often convey the idea of enticement, or luring someone toward sin, but they have in view not so much emotions as an external situation or force. That force is often objectified as the Tempter or the Devil.

That is exactly what happens to Jesus when he is “tempted.” Just a few pages before the prayer in *Matthew* Jesus is said to have been led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness “to be tempted (peirasthēnai) by the devil” (*Matthew* 4.1). After fasting for forty days Jesus is confronted by “the Tempter” (ho peirazōn), who says to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to

become loaves of bread” (4.3). Jesus uses scripture to reject this incitement. He also turns a subsequent inducement back on the Devil by citing *Deuteronomy* 6.16, “Do not put the LORD your God to the test.” (The verb in both the Septuagint and *Matthew* 4.7 is ekpeiraseis, another relative of peirasmos.) The “temptation” of Jesus, in other words, arises not from inner doubts or desires but from a divinely sanctioned situation which the Devil exploits to test Jesus’ determination and commitment. These close verbal ties between the “Temptation” and Jesus’ prayer two chapters later help the reader understand that sometimes God may indeed put his people to the test.

The “temptation” of Jesus, moreover, echoes a twofold testing in the account of the Israelites in their flight from Egypt. The Israelites are tested by great hardships: “Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing (ekpeirasēi in the Septuagint) you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.” (*Deuteronomy* 8.2). The Israelites, however, also put God to the test, as they did near Massah and Meribah whose names were given by Moses because there “the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (*Exodus* 17.7). Such “temptations” are not, then,

ways of turning a person's inner desires into sinful acts, but situations where one's commitments and determination are tested.

Again, in the book of *Job* God grants Satan permission to put Job to the test through a series of disasters, sufficient, it would seem, to make any ordinary person "curse God and die" (*Job* 2.9). But Job shows what sort of man he is, standing firm despite all the Devil's machinations. Jesus, like Job, comes unswervingly through his testing. Ordinary people, however, might well want to pray to be spared such testing and to be rescued from the wiles of the Evil One. That, I am convinced, is the implication of the petition not to be brought into "temptation."

These passages also help explain the final phrase in the prayer, alla rhusai hēmas apo tou ponērou, sometimes rendered as "but deliver us from evil," sometimes more literally as "rescue us from the evil one." The article tou clearly points to something more specific than generic evil. Reading the prayer with Jesus' experience in the wilderness in mind helps resolve this matter. In the wilderness it is the Devil who puts Jesus to the test. In the Lord's Prayer the "evil one" seems almost surely again to be the Devil.

It is hard for modern readers to understand temptation in this way, and harder still to come to terms with a prayer that begins with a benign heavenly father and ends, abruptly, with the Devil. But it is harder still to avoid the inference that the prayer concludes in this way. *Matthew's* narrative of the Sermon on the Mount then resumes (after a brief explanatory comment in verses 14-15 about the request for forgiveness in verse 12). To be sure, some ancient authorities add a third panel, making the prayer a triptych: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen" (King James Version). This is an attractive addition, but the earliest and best manuscripts do not contain these words; only relatively late sources contain them. Clearly, then, these words must be treated as an addition to the original text of this gospel.

So the prayer concludes, without even an Amen. Perhaps the surprising absence of this mark of affirmation and closure is a signal that those who have prayed in this way need not stop their requests to the heavenly father with whom the prayer began. This is an open-ended text, leaving the way clear for continued prayer and contemplation, or for expressions of praise and gratitude..

Conclusion

Where does this text leave the reader? Before the two panels of the diptych are closed and superimposed on one another, there is a moment for reflection on the relationship between them. In so doing, the contrast between heaven and earth is neither to be overlooked nor understood in modern terms. The first panel, as we have seen, begins and ends with the heavens, but heaven in this cultural setting is not a place for studying physical law, nor where nice people go when they “pass away.” The heavens have a story to tell:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,*

(Psalm 19.1-2. This psalm is also a diptych, with a divide at the end of verse 7.)

Their story is about God’s power and glory.

In this respect the heavens contrast with what is emphasized in the second panel of the prayer. These petitions, as we have seen, speak in less exalted, more earth-bound terms and end with an allusion to the Devil. He is an earthly figure. In *Job*, for instance, when God convenes the heavenly beings, “Satan [“the Devil” in the Septuagint] also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the LORD, ‘From going to and fro on the earth,

and from walking up and down on it.” (Job 1.7). We can easily guess what that means: Satan is up to no good; the earth is a place where he can put people to the test. The reader, then, stands on the edge between these stories, or, one might say, between heaven and earth, waiting for a resolution that may come in time but which the prayer in *Matthew* leaves open.

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