The Lord’s Prayer

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Christians throughout the world recite the Lord’s Prayer in their personal devotions and in liturgical settings. Its universality and authority stem from its origin in the very words of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Thus, Cyprian of Carthage (210–258) could write: ‘For what can be a more spiritual prayer than that which was given to us by Christ, by whom also the Holy Spirit was given to us?’ (2004: 66). Early Christians established other versions that became standardized in communal prayer. Translations from Greek into Latin, Syriac, and other languages made the prayer more accessible, but they also separated the prayer from its full scriptural, linguistic, and cultural contexts, thereby often clouding some of the significant nuances in the original Matthean and Lukan versions. In turn, a rich theological and devotional commentary tradition – sermons, dedicated commentaries, scriptural commentaries, etc. – emerged that sought to unpack the prayer’s mysteries, refute misinterpretations, and suggest applications for daily life. The prayer contributed to Christian reflections on Christology, Trinitarian theology, ethics, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology – especially on the Eucharist and baptism – while also influencing such cultural expressions as music and art. The prayer and its accompanying traditions offer a summary of major themes in Christian theology and spirituality.

**Keywords:** God the Father, Eschatology, Exegesis, Forgiveness, Hope, Liturgy, Petition, Prayer, Scripture, Sermon on the Mount
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1 Introduction

‘Pray then like this: Our Father [...]’ (Matt 6:9). With this command, Jesus gave his disciples the words that would become the paradigmatic Christian prayer. This counsel is also echoed in the Lukan version, when Jesus responds to the disciples’ desire for a way to pray: ‘When you pray, say: Father [...]’ (Luke 11:2). Thus, given that the words came from Christ himself, future generations would consider the Lord’s Prayer to be the perfect expression of their love for and dependence on God.

Yet, as the prayer became a fixed feature in the personal and communal lives of Christians, its rote recitation came to rob it of its scriptural context and revolutionary implications. A rediscovery of its meaning therefore requires a return to its scriptural, linguistic, historical, and liturgical contexts. In addition, the rich history of its interpretive traditions reveals the many ways Christians discovered within this brief prayer sources for meditation, theological insights, ethical principles, and hope.

This article begins with an examination of the scriptural versions of the prayer (Matthew and Luke), along with other early versions and attempts to recover the ipsissima verba (exact words) of Jesus. It then provides an overview of the interpretive challenges and the history of themes found within the commentary tradition. Finally, it considers the liturgical uses of the prayer, the modern translation problems, and the presence of the prayer in music and art.

2 Biblical texts and early versions

The two principal versions of the Lord’s Prayer appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Modern scholars propose that each author transmits an adapted Greek translation of the original prayer to two distinct audiences. On the one hand, Luke’s version, addressing a primarily gentile audience, most likely maintains the original structure and length of Jesus’ words. On the other hand, Matthew’s rendering provides an augmented version for liturgical use in a Jewish-Christian community, while also reflecting more closely the original vocabulary (Albright 1971: 75–77; Fitzmyer 1985: 896–897).

2.1 The Matthean version

    Our Father who are in the heavens, 
    let your name be hallowed. 
    Let your kingdom come. 
    Let your will be done, 
    on earth as in heaven. 
    Give us today our daily/future/supersubstantial (epiousios) bread. 
    And forgive us our debts, 
    as we too have forgiven our debtors. 
    And do not lead us into temptation/trial,
The prayer appears within the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matt 5–7). In Matt 6:5–8, Jesus teaches the crowd to avoid ostentation and verbosity in their prayer. Instead, he tells them to ‘pray like this’, and then follows with the words of the Our Father. One should note two significant points in Jesus’ introductory words. First, Jesus does not command the people to pray in these exact words, but rather proposes a model that contrasts with the prolixity and public display of many prayers. Second, he tells the audience to pray according to the model; he does not propose the model for himself.

Modern scholars differ in their interpretations of the structure of the prayer, though one may clearly divide the prayer into two sets of petitions. The three so-called ‘you’ petitions – ‘let your name be hallowed’, ‘let your kingdom come’, ‘let your will be done’ – address the Father, and call for the glorification of God and the fulfilment of God’s will in creation. The remaining three (or four, if one divides the final petition) ‘we’ petitions – ‘give us this day our daily bread’, ‘forgive us our trespasses’, ‘lead us not into temptation and deliver us from Evil/the Evil One’ – entrust the community’s essential needs to the Father. These divisions may reflect the two parts of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments): duties toward God and duties toward neighbour (Lohmeyer 1965: 25; Harrington 2007: 97).

Matthew includes some important elements not found in Luke: (1) the ‘our’ in ‘our Father’, (2) the line ‘who are in the heavens’, (3) the line ‘let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’, and (4) the line ‘but rescue us from Evil/the Evil one’. These may be additions from the liturgical use of the prayer in the Matthean community (Fitzmyer 1985: 896–897). Furthermore, Matthew maintains certain idiomatic features that reflect the semitic original. For example, the metaphor of ‘debt’ for transgressions against God and neighbour (see Isa 40:1–2; 61:1–2) remains without a gloss since a Jewish audience would understand its meaning (Anderson 2009: 31–33).

2.2 The Lukian version

Father, let your name be hallowed.
Let your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily/future/supersubstantial (epiousios) bread.
And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive each one who is in debt to us.
And lead us not into temptation/trial. (Luke 11:2–4)

The context of Luke’s shorter version differs from Matthew’s. Jesus, having concluded his time of personal prayer, responds to a disciple’s request: ‘Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples’ (Luke 11:1). Jesus then offers a model for his disciples to follow: ‘When you pray, say […]’ (Luke 11:2). After giving the prayer, he encourages the audience to persevere in prayer and trust in the Father for all their needs (Luke 11:5–13).
Other distinctions are noteworthy. First, the different tenses of the verbs result in significant emphases: Matthew has an aorist imperative for ‘give’, which indicates a complete and one-time action – ‘Give us once and for all our bread’ – while Luke has a present imperative implying continuous action – ‘Give us bread regularly’. Additionally, Matthew also has an aorist form of ‘forgive’, implying a complete action that takes place before God forgives – ‘Father, forgive our debts as we have already forgiven others’ – while Luke uses a present tense, suggesting a continuous action that is simultaneous with God’s definitive (aorist tense) act of forgiveness – ‘Father, forgive us while we, at the same time are regularly forgiving others’. Second, Matthew uses the word sēmeron, ‘today’, while Luke uses the expression to kath’hēmeron, ‘daily’ or ‘each day’. The expression ‘daily’ coincides with the present imperative verb and highlights the repeated action: ‘Give us bread each day’. Finally, Luke glosses the semitic metaphor of ‘debt’ with the word ‘sin’ to explain its meaning. This perhaps indicates Luke’s need to explain the metaphor to a Greek-speaking audience (Black 2018: 47–48).

Before considering other versions of the prayer, one should note that Matthew and Luke have numerous problems for interpreters and translators. In addition to those already mentioned, these include: (1) the unique adjective epiousios (‘epiousios bread’), which has been translated as ‘daily’ (epi+tēn ousan+hēmeran), ‘future’ or ‘bread to come’ (epi+ienai), and even ‘supersubstantial’ (epi+ousia) (Day 2003; Harvey 2018); (2) the dual sense of the Greek word peirasmos as ‘trial’ or ‘temptation’ (Grayston 1993; Munari 2015); and (3) the ambiguous gender of the final ponērou in Matthew’s version, which could be ‘the Evil One’ (masculine) or ‘Evil’ (neuter; Black 2018: 208–209). These problems and others result in varied translations and applications for the prayer over the centuries.

2.3 Reconstructing the original prayer

Attempts to reconstruct the ipsissima verba of Jesus are fraught with problems. First, scholars remain uncertain of the language Jesus used. While most assume an Aramaic original, some argue that many rabbis in Jesus’ day used a form of Hebrew or an elevated form of Aramaic for formal teaching (de Moor 1988; Ponomariov 2015). Second, scholars disagree regarding possible sources for unveiling the original behind the Greek. In the first half of the twentieth century, many suggested such Jewish communal prayers as the Kaddish for Jesus’ inspiration, though the Kaddish specifically has been refuted because of its late composition. Others have mined the vocabulary and structures of the targumim – spoken and written translations of the Hebrew scriptures in Aramaic – as sources (Petuchowski 1978; Graubard 1978). Finally, the existing translations of the prayer in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect, have provided limited insights. In the end, though scholars have written carefully crafted reversions, we cannot know Jesus’ exact words with absolute certainty.
2.4 Other early versions

Two other early versions of the prayer stand out. Scholars vary in their dating of the Didachē (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), with some identifying it as a late first or early second-century text. The work treats ethics, prayer, and community life. It advises members of the community to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day, and transmits a version of the prayer that differs slightly from the scriptural texts:

Our Father who are in heaven,
Let your name be hallowed.
Let your kingdom come.
Let your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily/future/supersubstantial bread.
And forgive us our debt, as we too forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation/trial,
But rescue us from Evil/the Evil one.
Because yours is the power and the glory forever. (Didache; Milavec 2003: 333–350)

Though this version resembles closely that of Matthew, one may highlight the following distinctions: While Matthew has ‘heavens’, the Didache uses the singular ‘heaven’; ‘Debt’ is singular in the Didache; and the prayer concludes with a doxology, which also appears as a variant in some versions of the Gospel of Matthew.

The earliest extant Latin translation comes from the second-century North African theologian Tertullian. He offers a strikingly different version, along with commentary, in his *On Prayer* 2–8:

Father, [you] who are in the heavens,
Let your name be holy.
Let your will be done in the heavens and on earth.
Let your kingdom come.
Give us today our daily (*quotidianum*) bread.
Forgive (*dimitti*) us our debts,
[As we also forgive (*remittere*) our debtors].
Do not lead (*inducas*) us into temptation (*tentationem*),
But bear us away (*devehe nos*) from Evil/the Evil One. (Tertullian. 2004: 42–48)

Among the differences in Tertullian’s version, one finds: the lack of ‘our’ (also absent in Luke’s version); the translation of ‘daily’ for *epiousios*; the use of ‘heavens’ twice; the reversal of the second and third petitions; and the Latin *devehere*, ‘carry or bear away’ for ‘rescue’.

Scholars are aware of other versions of the prayer from the early centuries, though witnesses are not extant. For example, Tatian’s second-century harmonization of the
gospels, the *Diatesseron*, contained a version of the prayer, though scholars debate whether Tatian composed it in Greek or Syriac (Ephrem the Syrian. 1993: 4–9).

### 3 Commentary traditions

#### 3.1 Early commentaries and themes

The scriptures themselves offer the first ‘commentary’ on the Lord’s Prayer. On the one hand, the prayer echoes major themes and images from the Hebrew scriptures: addressing God as Father (e.g. Deut 32:6; Isa 64:8; Hos 11:1); the kingdom or reign of God (e.g. Exod 19:5–6; Judg 8:23; 1 Chr 29:11–13); the gift of and need for bread (e.g. Deut 8:3; Prov 9:1–6); and the undergoing of divine trials or tests (e.g. Gen 22:1–2; Deut 8:2). Jewish audiences would certainly have recognized these images and others within Jesus’ concise expression.

On the other hand, the New Testament writings expand on the central themes found in Jesus’ words. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses the expression ‘my Father’ or ‘the Father’ twenty-six times (e.g. Matt 10:32–33; 12:50; 15:13), ‘your Father’ eighteen times (e.g. Matt 5:45; 6:1; 23:9), and ‘our Father’ only once. In doing so, he makes a clear distinction between his divine sonship and that of his disciples (Juel 1993: 60). The petition for the coming of the kingdom receives ample treatment in Jesus’ own preaching (e.g. Matt 11:11–12; 12:28; Luke 19:11–27). The request for bread finds its explication in the call for greater trust in God as opposed to dependence on material wealth (Matt 5:3; 6:30–34; Luke 11:9–11). The Gospel of Matthew, in particular, expands on the need for the reconciliation with one’s neighbour that the prayer calls for (e.g. Matt 6:14–15; 18:23–35). The eschatological import of the final petition acquires greater depth through Jesus’ emphasis on readiness before trials and the consummation of things (e.g. Matt 24:36–44; Luke 21:36).

The earliest commentaries dedicated to the prayer began to appear in the second century. These commentaries assumed several genres: expositions dedicated to Christian prayer, biblical commentaries, catechetical works, and letters. Among the Latin commentators we find Tertullian (155–220), Cyprian of Carthage (210–258), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Chromatius of Aquileia (d. 406), Jerome of Stridon (c. 342–420), John Cassian (360–435), Peter Chrysologus (380–450), Coelius Sedulius (fifth century), and the anonymous monastic writer known as the Master (sixth century). Greek and Syriac expositors include the *Didache*, Origen of Alexandria (184–253), Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315–386), Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), John Chrysostom (349–407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428), Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), and Maximus the Confessor (580–662).
The early expositors present the Lord’s Prayer as the model for all Christian prayer. In the third century, Tertullian lauded the prayer for its brevity and profundity: ‘Without exaggeration, a summary of the whole Gospel is to be found in the prayer’ (On Prayer 1; Tertullian. 2004: 42). Cyprian of Carthage, in On the Lord’s Prayer 9, echoed this sentiment: ‘How great, dearest brothers, are the mysteries of the Lord’s Prayer, how many, how magnificent, gathered together in spiritual power’ (Lord’s Prayer 9; Cyprian of Carthage. 2004: 70). Augustine, in his Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, even correlated the prayer’s petitions with the Beatitudes, thereby making the entire prayer a petition for the coming kingdom (2.11.38; Augustine of Hippo. 2001: 147).

All the commentators reflect on the boldness in addressing God as ‘Father’, noting that humans are unworthy of such a filial status. They justify this claim through the theme of divine adoption and deification (Gavin 2021: 20–25). The audacity of claiming God’s paternity finds its basis in the divine adoption effected in Jesus Christ: humans receive their filial status not by nature, but through divine gift (see Rom 8:23; Gal 4:5; John 14:2). Thus, the seventh-century monk Maximus the Confessor, in his Commentary on the Our Father, emphasized the gift of this new status demonstrated in the prayer: ‘We are also taught to speak to ourselves of the grace of adoption, since we are worthy to call Father by grace the one who is our Creator by nature’ (Maximus the Confessor. 1985: 106).

This adoption, however, cannot remain static since it serves as the foundation for the deification of the human person. On the one hand, each baptized person must grow in the virtues that reflect the divine qualities. Peter Chrysologus, in his Sermon 67 to catechumens, preaches: ‘So act, too, that you become your Father’s image by your holy way of life’ (1953: 115). Declaring God one’s Father therefore has significant ethical implications. Maximus the Confessor declares:

We sanctify his name on earth in taking after him as a Father, in showing ourselves to be his children, and in extolling by our thoughts and our acts the Father’s Son by nature, who is the one who brings about this adoption. (Maximus the Confessor. 1985: 106)

One must conform one’s will to God – ‘thy will be done’ – through a life that reflects the divine. On the other hand, many early expositors emphasize the communal nature of deification by highlighting the ‘our’ in Matthew’s version of the prayer. Cyprian of Carthage gives voice to this position: ‘Our prayer is common and collective, and when we pray, we pray not for one but for all people, because we are all one people together’ (Lord’s Prayer 8; Cyprian of Carthage. 2004: 69).

Each of the petitions inspires significant theological themes on the part of these interpreters. ‘Hallowed be your name’ raises the question of God’s holiness and the need
for human acknowledgment of this holiness. Why should one even make such a request if God is already holy? For these authors, the petition demands that all come to glorify God especially through their words and deeds. One most effectively hallows the name by growing in sanctity and virtue. Evagrius Ponticus, in a commentary on the Our Father that survives in Coptic and Arabic translations, wrote: ‘May thy name be hallowed among us in that, because of our good deeds, we are glorified by the nations who say, “Behold the true servants of God!”’ (Evagrius Ponticus. 2006: 151).

The early interpreters understood the call for God’s reign as both an acknowledgment of the inbreaking of God’s kingdom and an expressed longing for its fullness. In particular, the kingdom emerges from Christ’s defeat of the devil, sin, and death. Some, such as Cyprian of Carthage, identify the kingdom with Christ himself, who established God’s Reign and will complete it with his return (Lord’s Prayer 13; Cyprian of Carthage. 2004: 74). Gregory of Nyssa, citing a rare variant in the Lukan version (also known by Marcion of Sinope in the second century), even identifies the kingdom as the coming of the Holy Spirit: ‘The Kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit. We pray that it will descend upon us’ (Sermon 3; Gregory of Nyssa. 1954: 53). All of them call for due preparations for the coming of the kingdom through virtuous living and prayer – the essential foundation for the approaching judgment and resurrection of the dead.

The petition ‘thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ does not imply that something could impede God’s will, but that the unification of heaven and earth emerges through obedience to the divine will. Commentators such as Evagrius Ponticus and Maximus the Confessor suggested that, through obedience to God, human beings may become isangeloi or ‘equal to the angels’, thereby drawing together the heavenly and earthly realms (Gavin 2009: 189–225). Christ himself establishes the very possibility of this assimilation to God after the disobedience of the fall, since he obeys the Father’s will in his taking up the cross (Matt 26:39; see also Bathrellos 2004: 60–98). Thus, Tertullian declares: ‘He [Christ] was himself the will and power of the Father, and yet, in order to show the endurance that is due, he abandoned himself to the Father’s will’ (On Prayer 4; Tertullian. 2004: 45).

One finds a variety of interpretations for ‘give us this day our daily bread’. For some commentators, such as Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine, the ‘bread’ of the prayer suggests a form of spiritual food (e.g. Wisdom or the Eucharist). However, the majority focus on the simplicity of bread: the prayer does not request material goods but rather it seeks the basic nourishment for the body in the form of bread (Brown 2000). Despite Christ’s maxim – ‘seek not work for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life’ (John 6:27) – human beings should still entrust their essential needs to the God who cares for them. Maximus the Confessor summarizes this idea: ‘Let us prove that we eat to
live and let us not be convicted of living to eat’ (Commentary on the Our Father, Maximus the Confessor. 1985: 114).

The Greek modifier of bread, *epiousios* – a word that appears in this form of Greek only in the Lord’s Prayer and therefore puzzled later commentators – also shaped the various understandings of the ‘bread’. Modern scholars have proposed different etymologies for this unique word, leading to such translations as ‘the bread to come’, ‘the bread for today’, ‘the bread for the coming age’, or even ‘supersubstantial bread’ (Day 2003). Yet, Origen of Alexandria anticipated these modern readers in his *On Prayer*, where he examines these possibilities and finds them all plausible, though he prefers ‘supersubstantial bread’ as its meaning (27.1–13; Origen of Alexandria. 2004: 175–184). Thus, even Jerome, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, could translate the petition as ‘give us today our supersubstantial (supersubstantialis) bread’, which suggests a spiritual food that exceeds man’s ordinary sustenance (6.11; Jerome of Stridon. 2014: 88).

The petition ‘forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are in debt to us’ acts as an ethical demand for reconciliation with God and neighbour. The Hebrew metaphor of ‘debt’ for transgressions against God and neighbour receives a clarifying gloss from Luke when he substitutes ‘debts’ with the word for ‘sins’ (e.g. Isa 40:2; Matt 18:23–35; see Marshall 1978: 461). The remission of debts therefore suggests a Jubilee Year (Lev 25:10–11), a liberation from a sum accrued against God through disobedience, that in turn becomes a model for one’s own behaviour toward the neighbour (Gavin 2013: 117–120). The anonymous author of the *Rule of the Master* explains the responsibility of one who voices the prayer’s petition: ‘Therefore before we hear these words of the Lord, brethren, let us first examine our hearts as to whether we are with justice asking the Lord what we have not denied to those asking us’ (*Rule of the Master*; Eberle 1977: 99). The Lord’s Prayer fosters a community of reconciliation modelled on divine forgiveness of humanity.

The third ‘we’ petition, ‘lead us not into temptation/trial’, seems to suggest that God might deliberately drive someone into an occasion of sin or suffering (Brotherton 2018; Munari 2015). Indeed, interpreters do state that God allows trials to assist the soul’s growth in humility and dependence on God. After all, Christ himself underwent trials in the desert (e.g. Luke 4:1–13; Matt 4:1–11) to show human beings how to bear suffering and respond to temptation. One’s request for liberation from trials (*peirasmoi*) must therefore include the possibility of accepting suffering in this life. Peter Chrysologus concludes: ‘The one who implores that he be delivered from evil by the action of God is appropriately humble in his own regard and does not presume to be saved by his own resources’ (*Sermon 68*; Peter Chrysologus. 2004: 279).

‘Deliver us from evil/the Evil One’ highlights the eschatological import of the prayer (Brown 1968). The prayer calls for a liberation from evil not only at the end of the age, but also
now in the life of the believer and the community. It culminates, on the one hand, with the desire for freedom from evil (ponēron: neuter) and the evil one (ponēros: masculine) in this life, that is, liberation from suffering, sin, and the demonic. On the other hand, it also requests the definitive liberation that will take place with the second coming of Christ. The prayer concludes in hope for the consummation of all things in God. In his poetic commentary on the prayer, the fifth-century Latin poet Coelius Sedulius concludes that God has one desire for the sheep and the lambs of the Lord's flock: 'to escape from the bloody maw of the wolf and enjoy the life within the pastures of Christ' (*Carmen Paschale* PL 19; Coelius Sedulius. 1846: 634).

### 3.2 Medieval commentaries and themes

Eastern Christians during the medieval period both transmitted the interpretations of the early Church and offered new approaches, principally through commentaries on the scriptures and the liturgy. Theologians such as Germanus of Constantinople (640–733), Peter of Laodicea (seventh to eighth century), Nicholas of Andyda (1055–1063), and Theophylactus the Bulgarian (1050–1125) contributed commentaries in the Greek-speaking world, while other language traditions found worthy expositors in the writings of such figures as Martyrius-Sahdona (Syriac, seventh century), George of the Arabs (Syriac, 686–724), and Moses bar Kepha (Syriac, 813–903; Stevenson 2004: 103–116).

These writers continued to emphasize the privilege of the baptized faithful in calling God 'Father'. Claiming divine paternity demonstrates the believers' new state of existence, since, in the words of George of the Arabs, the baptized 'have gone forth from under the dominion of evil, and have been set free from being, as they were, sons of wrath' (*An Exposition on Baptism, the Eucharist, and the Consecration of the Chrism*; George of the Arabs. 1913: 12). In turn, the prayer calls for equality with the angels through grace and the hallowing of the Father's name through virtuous living (e.g. *On the Divine Liturgy*; Germanus of Constantinople. 1985: 101; *Exposition on the Lord's Prayer* PG 86.2; Peter of Laodicea. 1863: 3332C). Though the connection between the coming of the kingdom and the accomplishment of God's will remains prominent, Peter of Laodicea, in his *Exposition on the Lord's Prayer*, extends the prayer to non-Christians through an emphasis on the two natures of Christ: 'Since Christ, as economically man, is called God by nature, but king as man, believers pray this also come to non-believers, such that by believing in Christ, they might profess him as their own king' (Peter of Laodicea. 1863: 3332B). In fact, the petitions of the prayer convey not only one's personal needs, but also the necessities of the entire world:
He [Christ] shows that he who prays takes upon him a solicitude for the whole earth and this appears from the fact that he did not say, ‘Thy will be done’ ‘in me,’ or ‘in us,’ but ‘in earth’. (An Exposition on the Liturgy; Moses bar Kepha. 1913: 81)

Their treatments of the petition for bread, the call for forgiveness, and the freedom from trials serve as further examples of these authors’ continuity and originality. Their interpretations generally echo familiar themes: the limiting of possessions, the avoidance of anxieties, and the sharing with others (e.g. Luke 12:15, 33–34; Matt 6:25). Yet, these authors also admit various understandings of *epiousios* that emphasize bread for the ‘future age’ that will nourish the stable image of God in humanity (e.g. Peter of Laodicea. 1863: 3333A) and its connections with bread in the celebration of the Eucharist (e.g. Germanus of Constantinople. 1985: 101). Forgiveness of others must precede the forgiveness one receives from Christ, and the request for liberation from trial and temptation points to the need for divine aid in the struggle with Satan himself: the prayer strengthens one for spiritual combat in this life (e.g. Moses bar Kepha. 1913: 83–84; Germanus of Constantinople. 1985: 102). Thus, these later Eastern writers transmit the legacy of the Patristic era, while emphasizing the cosmic and liturgical import of the prayer (Stevenson 2004: 103).

The Western church of this period composed commentaries within a variety of genres: sermons, scripture commentaries, liturgical commentaries, theological works, and expositions dedicated directly to the prayer (Stevenson 2004: 117–150). Rabanus Maurus (780–856), Amalar of Metz (775–850), Paschasius Radbertus (785–865), Rupert of Deutz (1075–1130), Anselm of Laon (1050–1117), Hugh of Amiens (d. 1164), Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), Bonaventure (1221–1274), Albert the Great (1200–1280), Mesiter Ekhard (1260–1328), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), and others shaped the reception and understanding of the prayer both in Latin and vernacular languages.

Though their treatments draw from the traditional interpretations of the early church, they also exhibit novel approaches that often portray the prayer as an itinerary for the Christian life. Anselm of Laon, for instance, elected to comment on the prayer backwards, beginning with the last of the seven petitions and moving from requests for purification toward the desire to experience the beatific vision. Thus, ‘deliver us from evil’ calls for liberation from both original and actual sin; ‘lead us not into temptation’ and ‘forgive us our trespasses’ seek freedom from vices and lead to love of neighbour; ‘our daily bread’ then asks for the Eucharist, the scriptures, and sound preaching. The final petitions – fulfilling God’s will, entering the kingdom and hallowing God’s name – can only be fulfilled in heaven among...
the saints, the culmination of the Christian’s life pilgrimage (*Ennarationes in Mattheum* PL 162; Anselm of Laon. 1854: 1226–1500).

Francis of Assisi composed an expansion of the Lord’s Prayer that also serves as a commentary on the petitions. For example, his treatment of ‘Your kingdom come’ addresses God directly and clarifies the meaning of the request for God’s reign:

> That you [God] may rule in us through your grace and enable us to come to your kingdom where there is clear vision of you, perfect love of you, blessed companionship with you, eternal enjoyment of you. (Francis of Assisi. 1999: 158)

He desires that his exposition become a prayer for his brother mendicants that focuses especially on the theme of love for God and neighbour: ‘Your will be done on earth as in heaven […] That we may love you […] and we may love our neighbour as ourselves by drawing them all to your love with our whole strength’ (Francis of Assisi. 1999: 159).

Bonaventure, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, offers another example of a tightly structured theological-spiritual itinerary (2003: 1016–1030). The five petitions begin with the most noble – the consummation of God’s glory – and then proceed through the preservation of grace in humanity and reconciliation through forgiveness. Thus, once again, the prayer gives a reverse journey toward beatitude: victory in spiritual combat (‘lead us not into temptation’), forgiveness (‘forgive us our debts’), satisfaction with the essentials (‘daily bread’), perfect reverence (‘your kingdom come’), and the sharing in perfect knowledge and wisdom (‘hallowed be thy name’).

Thomas Aquinas gave a series of sermons in the Neapolitan dialect in 1273 (Najapfour 2020). Though they only survive in the form of notes, they still offer a glimpse into vernacular preaching that sought to form Christians morally and spiritually in the faith. Thomas regularly cites earlier expositors and structures his preaching around the promotion of virtues. Invoking the Father demonstrates the virtue of confidence; the desire for the kingdom exhibits piety; the request for bread – whether material or spiritual (the Eucharist or God’s Word) – fosters gratitude and simplicity; forgiveness leads to humility; and the petition to avoid temptation hungers for growth in virtue. In all, the prayer forms the Christian in confidence, order, rectitude, devoutness, and humility for the sake of sharing in true beatitude (Aquinas 1990).

Dante Alighieri begins Canto 11 of his *Purgatorio* with the souls in purgatory – those being cleansed before entering paradise – proclaiming a paraphrase of and commentary on the Lord’s Prayer that highlights the theme of human dependence on God’s love and mercy. Since the petitions cannot have meaning for these dead about to share in eternal joy, the utterance of prayer must apply to ‘the ones behind us yet to come’. Dante then draws the
conclusion that those still in this life must also pray the words yet more fervently for both the living and the dead:

If for our good the spirits there [purgatory] pray still, what can be done or said for them on earth by those in grace, the root of man’s goodwill? (Dante Alighieri. 2004: 117)

Amalar of Metz offers an example of a liturgical commentary from the period that understood the prayer within the celebration of the rite of the Eucharist. In his On the Liturgy (3.29), he notes that the priest pronounces the prayer out loud to show its communal (‘our’) nature. All the prayers, readings, and preaching up to this point in the liturgy prepare the baptized for the public recitation of Jesus’ words. It contains seven petitions, symbolizing the seventh day of rest, prayer, and charity in anticipation of the resurrection. One also receives a cleansing through the prayer for the reception of the Eucharist. His version of the liturgy concluded the prayer with ‘free us from evil – past, present, and future’ – a triple request that symbolizes Christ’s three days in the tomb before his resurrection. Amalar’s interpretation of the liturgical role of the prayer, through use of allegory, therefore assumes the common themes of spiritual purification in anticipation of Beatitude (On the Liturgy 3.29; Amalar of Metz. 2014: 201–209).

Both Eastern and Western commentators during this period certainly transmitted various interpretations of the early church. Yet, one may note the East’s greater emphasis on the liturgical context on the prayer, as opposed to the West’s focus on the prayer as a structured itinerary for spiritual growth.

3.3 Modern commentaries and themes

From the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, theological interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer found inspiration in the return to classical learning, the scientific revolution, and a greater dissemination of the text through printing and preaching. Expositors also sought to convey the significance of the prayer to the faithful who were confronting new divisions in Christianity, mounting challenges to their beliefs, and sweeping cultural changes. Sermons, treatises, liturgical commentaries, catechetical works, and spiritual writings conveyed the fruits of these inspiring and challenging years.

Among the major early expositors of this period, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Frowin of Engelberg (1100s) stand out for their appropriation of the new learning in their commentaries. A canonist and early humanist, Nicholas composed a sermon on the prayer that exhibits both the influence of classical sources – especially Neoplatonism – and traditional Christian doctrine. In his reading, the prayer both reveals and effects the emanation from and return to God, or the return of the dissipated many to full divine union. Knowledge of God’s name, ‘Father’, and the prayer for the kingdom, seek this unification
with the Trinity. The daily bread represents the Truth, God’s Word, and participation in Christ’s very life, which, unlike normal food, assimilates the receiver to God (cf. John 6:50–51, 56). Divine forgiveness heals the universal wound of humanity and leads to communion through forgiveness with others. Deliverance from evil separates one from the deceptions of the world and restores one to eternal life. Nicholas, though following platonic themes, never loses the frame of his Christian faith and offers a reading of the prayer that points the believer toward hope in God (Nicholas of Cusa. 2006). Frowin’s extensive commentary, in contrast, focuses on theological issues of his time, such as the question of free will and moral questions. For instance, his discussion of evil in the Explanatio Dominicae Orationis defines sin as a perverse will grounded in error or ignorance of the good. His subsequent examination of sin guides one from the traditional approaches to the prayer into detailed analysis of fallen humanity (VII.1; Frowin of Engelburg. 1998: 387–398, CCCM 134).

The Protestant Reformers also contributed their own original approaches that addressed contentious issues of the time. Martin Luther (1483–1546) preached and commented on the prayer on numerous occasions, forming a body of interpretations that focused especially on existential and soteriological concerns (Dorneich 1982: 93–94; Lienhard 1992: 86–87). For instance, in An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen, preached during the Lent of 1517, Luther notes that the prayer teaches believers how and what to pray for through a series of seven petitions. Each petition both humbles and raises up: it humbles by awakening believers to our failure to obey God, our adherence to vices, and our general pride; it raises up by revealing the gifts of baptism, the kingdom of virtues formed in us, and the nourishing power of God’s Word. God’s forgiveness is the greatest indulgence, given free to all, that erects Christ’s church. He concludes his commentary with an extended dialogue between God and the soul regarding the fruits of the prayer (Luther 1969). The prayer inspires confidence in the believer ‘to have us acknowledge and confess that He is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that He can and will give us still more’ (The Sermon on the Mount; Luther 1956: 144).

In his Institutes of Christian Religion, John Calvin (1509–1564) composed a more philosophical presentation of the prayer, with an emphasis on the themes of sanctification and obedience (Lienhard 1992: 88). He reduces the number of petitions to six – combining ‘lead us not into temptation’ with ‘deliver us from evil’ – and stresses the reception of God’s gratuitous mercy that leads to the growth in virtue. All the petitions, even those that address our needs, combine to give God glory and teach us what is worthy of God. Calvin also emphasizes that the prayer, in the end, does not bind us to its words but to its form:
No man should ask for, expect, or demand, anything at all except what is included, by way of summary, in this prayer; and though the words may be utterly different, yet the sense ought not to vary. (Institutes of Christian Religion III.xx.49; Calvin 2006: 917)

The Counter-Reformation found its voices both in the form of the Council of Trent and in such Catholic spiritual reformers as Teresa of Avila. Published in 1566 as a resource for clergy, The Catechism of the Council of Trent dedicates Part IV to topics in prayer, with nine chapters focusing on the Lord’s Prayer. God, who is Father as Creator, Governor, and Redeemer, allows the baptized to approach as adopted children of God. The petitions of the prayer follow an order of priority in the things sought, proceeding from God’s glory to believers’ freedom from trials. The theologically rich exposition contains some interpretations directed toward the reformers – e.g. the kingdom is identified with God’s indwelling, the turning from sin, and the extension of the church; the forgiveness of mortal sins calls for the sacrament of confession – but in general it forms priests to be pastors of souls called to live out and share in the fullness of their baptism (Catechism of Trent 1917: 432–508).

The Carmelite nun and foundress Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) composed The Way of Perfection around 1565–1566 for the first members of her reformed monastery (Tagliafico 2018: 442). The Lord’s Prayer shows a way ‘from the beginning stages until God engulfs the soul and gives it to drink abundantly from the fount of living water, which He said was to be found at the end of the way’ (Way of Perfection 42.5; Teresa of Avila. 1980: 203). In fact, addressing God as ‘Father’ is an invitation to know God better and delight in the intimacy of prayer. It also fosters the virtues of communal life, such as poverty (‘give us this day our daily bread’), surrender to God (‘let your will be done’), and mutual forgiveness (‘as we forgive those who trespass against us’). Most of all, the prayer fosters the fundamental virtue of humility such that God might work freely in the soul of the Christian.

In later centuries, commentators drew upon both their ancient and modern predecessors, along with new approaches to exegesis, to produce a variety of works on the Lord’s Prayer. Spiritual commentary, in the form of sermons and even popular expositions, sought to awaken believers to the transformative teachings the prayer offered. John Wesley (1703–1791) divided the prayer into six petitions, emphasizing its formation of the believer: ‘And indeed our prayers are the proper test of our desires, nothing being fit to have a place in our desires which is not fit to have a place in our prayers’ (Sermon 26, 2; Wesley 1984: 578). John Keble (1792–1866) reflected the concerns of the Oxford Movement by glossing each petition of the prayer as a request for Christian unity (Keble 1847). Women commentators such as Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) and Raïssa Maritain
(1883–1960) demonstrated the prayer’s capacity to draw one into the divine life (Underhill 1940; Maritain 1963). The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann (1921–1983) broadcasted a series of radio talks on the Lord’s Prayer from the United States to the Soviet Union in which he sought to convey the depths of the prayer to both atheists and Orthodox Christians (Schmemann 2003). These interpreters and many others contributed to a renewed interest in Jesus’ words and their application for modern Christians.

The application of the historical-critical method also gave new impetus to the study of the Lord’s Prayer. Exegetes drew upon the ever growing historical, linguistic, and cultural resources for biblical studies, as well as new approaches through literary analysis and critical theory. As noted earlier, scholars also sought to place Jesus’ words into the greater context of Jewish prayer and liturgical vocabulary. Thus, these interpreters opened new areas of study by grounding the prayer in Jesus’ self-understanding and mission.

Each petition of the prayer received close analysis. Joachim Jeremias, in a subsequently-challenged thesis, sought to demonstrate Jesus’ unique understanding of God as the intimate Father, especially in his use of the Aramaic word abba (Jeremias 1978). The twentieth century’s focus on the category of the kingdom as the central teaching of Jesus’ mission also came to shape the understanding of second petition, both in its eschatological and performative dimensions – ‘your will be done’ (France 2007: 247). Scholars continued to labour on the question of the epiousion bread in its spiritual and material senses (Harvey 2018). The theme of mercy also loomed large after the two world wars, especially in its emphasis within the Sermon on the Mount, and served to challenge churches to respond to economic and political injustices in the world (Lohfink 2019; Wright 1996). The concluding petition for liberation from evil suggested an overall eschatological significance for the prayer, which sought the fulfilment of God’s kingdom in the consummation of history (Brown 1968). These and many other themes have come to the fore in wake of the research during the last few centuries.

As noted above, commentators in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries sought to rescue the prayer from rote recitation and restore its radical and transformative power. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for instance, opposed the growing power of the Nazi regime through a call for solidarity, a recognition of the destructive influence of sin, and the need for divine grace. The Lord’s Prayer teaches this radical vocation to discipleship and communion: ‘As a summing up, Jesus emphasizes once more that everything depends on forgiveness of sin of which the disciples may only partake within the fellowship of sinners’ (Bonhoeffer 1979: 187). The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff (2005) also illumined the prayer’s call to realize God’s kingdom and to side with those who suffer trials from injustice. Many other theologians continue to reveal the ongoing relevance of this brief compendium of Jesus’ teachings.
Some scholars suggest that the Lord’s Prayer, even in its scriptural versions, took form in communal and liturgical contexts. For instance, the addressing of God as Father echoes the Abba address of Jesus in Gethsemane and the eucharistic cup – ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours, be done’ (Luke 22:41–42) – while Paul’s use of Abba may also imply the prayer’s presence in the baptismal rite with its theme of divine adoption (e.g. Rom 8:15–16; Gal 4:6–7; cf. Hadidian 1982: 133). The Didachē, in advising the people to pray it thrice daily, further attests to its prominence as the paradigmatic prayer for Christians and anticipates the inclusion of the prayer within the divine office. Thus, the prayer acquired a meaning distinct from its original context in Matthew and Luke for Christian formation and worship.

The prayer came to play an important role in catechesis for those awaiting baptism. For some centuries, Christians practiced a disciplina archani – the reservation of sacred words or rites to initiates alone – regarding Christ’s words, reserving them to the baptized faithful who alone could call God ‘Father’ (Hammerling 2008: 167). In some churches, however, in addition to the creedal traditio – the catechists’ Lenten exposition of the Creed – and.redditio – the catechumens’ demonstration of their competency regarding the core tenets of the faith – one finds an equivalent traditio-redditio of the Lord’s Prayer. Augustine and Peter Chrysologus, for instance, allowed catechumens to recite the prayer in anticipation of their illumination in the font. Augustine, in the traditio of the prayer on the fifth Sunday of Lent, would read the text from Matthew 6, followed by a full exposition of the prayer’s meaning and importance for their impending divine adoption (Chan 1993). Surviving catechetical orations (e.g. Augustine’s Sermons 56–59) on the prayer treat major themes for new Christians: divine filiation and adoption through the sacrament of baptism; repentance and forgiveness; ecclesial unity and fraternity; and eschatological expectation (Hamman 1966; Ferguson 2009). The ongoing association of the Lord’s Prayer with baptism – i.e. in baptism one received divine adoption and could address God as ‘Father’ – would lead to the creation of vernacular versions of the prayer in later centuries, such that both catechumens and Godparents could receive due preparation to pray the sacred words (Larson-Miller 2012).

Given the prominent role of the Lord’s Prayer in baptismal catechesis (e.g. Ambrose’s De mysteriis), it also came to have a place in the eucharistic rite: baptism allowed one to call God Father and, in turn, partake in the Eucharist (Denis-Boulet 1966: 79). The earliest references to the prayer within the eucharistic rite come from the fourth century in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem and Optatus of Mileve (Jungmann 2012; Taft 2000). By the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine could state that almost all churches included it after the anaphora (the eucharistic prayer or canon for the consecration of the bread and wine; Letter 149; Augustine of Hippo. 1953: 250–251). Its exact position in the rite could
vary: in the East, it followed the anaphora and the fraction (the breaking of the consecrated bread); in the West, Gregory the Great took the step of moving the prayer from after the fraction to directly after the anaphora (Taft 2000: 142). During the early centuries, in both east and west, the people prayed the words out loud with the celebrant, though many western churches would eventually reserve the recitation to the celebrant alone (Denis-Boulet 1966: 83).

The prayer did not function as a continuation of the anaphora, but rather served as a communion prayer: ‘The Our Father in the precommunion looks forward, not backward, is not an end but a beginning, a preparation for what follows, the reception of communion’ (Taft 2000: 144). Its themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as of church unity in the reception of the Bread of Life, served as a preparation for the reception of Eucharist. The prayer also provided a summary of all that came before in the liturgy: the sanctifying of God’s name in the *Sanctus*; the *epiclēsis* as a calling down of the Spirit and God’s reign; and the doing of God’s will through obedience to Christ’s command to ‘do this in memory of me’ (Jungmann 2012: 279). It referred to the foundation of a Christian’s participation through baptism, the rite of adoption as a child of God.

Two other liturgical and communal uses of the prayer come to the fore: the Liturgy of the Hours, (the daily praying of the psalms and other prayers at set hours of the day), and the Rosary (the praying of the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and other prayers, generally with the use of beads). The prayer first found a place in the Liturgy of the Hours in late antiquity and Benedict’s *Rule* required its recitation at the conclusion of each liturgical hour (*Rule* 13; Benedict of Nursia. 1982: 42–43). It continues to hold its place before the concluding prayer in the principal hours. In the late Middle Ages, the laity would take up the repetition of Hail Mary’s and Our Father’s that would come to form the *rosarium* (the ‘rose garden’) or recitation of the rosary (Pierce 2008: 84–85). Thus, the Lord’s Prayer acquired a significant presence in personal devotions outside of monastic or clerical circles.

5 Translation controversies

The growing place of the Lord’s Prayer in liturgical contexts led to many translations and even catechetical paraphrases. The numerous Latin versions that emerged during the Middle Ages attest to this significance, along with translations into vernacular languages (Stevenson 2004). English versions abounded in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, exemplified by John Wesley’s greatly expanded poetic rendering of Jesus’ words (*Sermon* 26, 16; Wesley 1984: 589–591). Thus, the prayer assumed its place as the paradigmatic form in the lives of the faithful.

Yet, some elements of these translations faced intense criticism. Two modern controversies come to the fore. First, the feminist critique of biblical and theological discourse led to an intense reconsideration of patriarchal language in Christian prayer and
liturgy. Feminist theologians considered the fatherhood of God to be an over-literalized metaphor that excluded feminine images of God and made men the exemplars of the divine presence in the world (Johnson 1992: 173). While these critiques generally did not lead to any major revisions in the liturgical versions of the prayer, it did inspire much discourse on the maternal nature of God with such suggestions as ‘our Mother-Father in Heaven’ for use in the prayer (Douglas-Klotz 2009). Others, in responding to these critiques, noted the dangers in departing from scriptural language and the formation of an ‘androgynous’ God that eliminated divine transcendence (Frye 1992).

Second, the petition ‘lead us not into trial/temptation’ has received much attention in recent years. The major concerns remain theological and pastoral: Would a good and loving God deliberately lead someone into temptation to sin or into a period of suffering? The Church of England grappled with these issues during its participation in the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET) and the formation of the Alternative Service Book in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties, resulting in the current retention of ‘lead us not into temptation’ in both approved versions (Buchanan 1995). In 2017, Pope Francis suggested that the petition should be changed to ‘do not let us fall into temptation’, a version already adopted in French and Spanish translations to avoid suggesting God’s responsibility in human sinfulness. This ignited intense debates among translators of the Bible, theologians, pastors, and laity regarding the meaning of the petition and the best ways to avoid negative images of God (Brotherton 2018).

6 The Lord's Prayer in art

The prayer has inspired both poetry and song. Melodies for the Latin chants emerged between the fifth and seventh centuries, while the Middle Ages produced poetic renditions that served as catechetical resources (Jungmann 2012: 289; Stevenson 2004: 141–147). Modern composers such as Peter Tchaikovsky, Ciprian Porumbescu, Igor Stravinsky, and John Tavener authored symphonic and choral works inspired by the prayer (Mirea 2016). Such artists as Duke Ellington and hip-hop artist Faith Child gave the prayer settings in new genres of popular music, thereby sharing reflections with contemporary audiences.

The prayer has also acquired renderings in the visual arts. Eastern icons, such as the Russian Otche Nash, illustrate the prayer through a series of symbolic depictions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds a fifteenth-century woodcut that shows each of the petitions and the four ages of the world (The Lord’s Prayer and the Four Ages of the World). The Brooklyn Museum holds the French artist James Tissot’s (1836–1902) collection of paintings on the life of Jesus, including Le Pater Noster, which portrays Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray (1886–1896). Such depictions demonstrate how the simple depth of the prayer inspires creativity.
Conclusion

Given the brevity of the Lord’s Prayer, one may struggle to explain its incredible influence on theology, spirituality, ethics, liturgy, and art over the centuries. Yet, Jesus’ admonition against prolixity – ‘Do not use many words’ (mē battologēsēte) – reveals something fundamental about Christian prayer: profundity coincides with simplicity; verbiage robs prayer of depth. Gregory of Nyssa describes what one discovers in the Lord’s Prayer:

Prayer is intimacy with God and contemplation of the invisible. It satisfies our yearnings and makes us equal to the angels. Through it good prospers, evil is destroyed, and sinners will be converted. Prayer is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of the things to come. (Sermon 1; Gregory of Nyssa. 1954: 24)

Intimacy with God, a simple and upright life, and hope for the future – all themes discovered within the Lord’s Prayer – have inspired expositors of the past and continue to rouse Christians of the present. Christians undoubtedly have more to discover in these words that Jesus gave them.

Attributions

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• Further reading

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