



## “Teach Us To Pray”

In Luke’s gospel we read that the disciples, after observing Jesus at prayer, asked of him, “Teach us to pray”<sup>1</sup>. What follows is a prayer that we today know as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, however, it is not referred to as such in the gospel of Luke or in the gospel of Matthew (the only two of the four that record this prayer). In fact, Luke and Matthew have a slightly different rendition of the prayer set in different contexts. In Matthew it is part of the discourse we refer to as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, whereas in Luke it is part of a discourse specifically on prayer. Once again we have to

understand that there are many layers to what we read in the gospels and this prayer is to be understood best when we peel back a number of layers.

Neither Mark nor John has this prayer recorded in their gospels, indeed, they say very little about Jesus teaching on prayer at all. They do record that Jesus was a man of prayer but they do not include any instructions to the disciples on the topic. It is almost universally accepted that the gospel of Mark is the first to have been written down and made available to the early Christian community. It is also widely accepted that Matthew and Luke draw on the material in Mark to construct their own gospels. They also draw on either a single document or a collection of materials known as ‘Q’ (from the German *Quelle* meaning *source*). The ‘Q Gospel’ is believed to be amongst some of the earliest recorded writing about Jesus emerging from around 40CE to 65CE and is therefore very close to the life of Jesus and the events surrounding and following his life. The earliest form of what we refer to as the *Lords Prayer* comes from the ‘Q gospel’, we then have two different (but closely similar) versions in Matthew and Luke, and a further version in a document called The Didache (which dates from late in the first century CE) with a final addition of the word *Kingdom* in several documents from the third century<sup>2</sup>.

All of this in no way lessens the importance of what we now know as the *Lords Prayer* but it does help us to see how our traditions have come to us and as such we also have the opportunity to take a fresh look at a prayer we have perhaps taken for granted for hundreds if not thousands of years. If we therefore take a look at the ‘Q Gospel’ rendition of what I am choosing to call the *Abba Prayer* we can consider it not merely as a prayer to recite by heart but as a prayer that provides us with a model for how we might pray in general on a daily basis. In conjunction with this I shall also be considering the prayer in what may well have been its original language - Aramaic – the language Jesus almost certainly spoke day by day<sup>3</sup>.

### Abba Father

*Abba* is the Aramaic word for personal father and as such it was not in common religious usage around the time of Jesus when referring to God. We find the Aramaic word *Abba* in Mark and in Paul<sup>4</sup> and both are at pains to translate it as father. In the first instance then we can see that Jesus’ usage of this title is a clear indication of his own sense of sonship. He is clearly comfortable with the concept of God as being his personal parent and he understands that he originates from God the father. This is why the parable of the prodigal son is so enigmatic, since it is really a parable about the loving father and as such carried a new and somewhat shocking illustration of God not as a distant deity but as a devoted father. It would not be too ambitious to imagine that in part Jesus comes to this understanding of God from a position of possibly not having a father from an early age. We know little about Joseph apart from the few references in the gospels and they cease once Jesus is an adult. Tradition has always taken the view that Joseph died when Jesus was quite young. *Abba* then becomes a very intimate and poignant title for God in the prayer adopted by the earliest Christians as the prayer of Jesus.

In the *Q gospel* there is no mention of ‘in heaven’ – this can be found in Matthew but not in Luke or Q. This may be because Matthew had a particular interest in the heavenly concept or it could also be that he had access to another tradition that included the words ‘in heaven’. It is not so important which but it is important that we understand what is being said. The fact that we do not have the reference to ‘in heaven’ in the *Q gospel* roots the idea that *Abba* is intimate and close. It is helpful to know that in Matthew *Our Father in heaven* need not be referring to a God who is afar off in the heavens although traditionally this has been the meaning we subconsciously attribute to it. This is made clearer when we consider translation of the Aramaic for *Our Father in heaven*, which is *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*. This phrase in Aramaic has a broad range of meaning rich in imagery and poetry. The Aramaic language, like the

<sup>1</sup> Luke 11.2

<sup>2</sup> See the additional sheet with each of the versions taken from *Jesus Before God – The prayer life of the historical Jesus* by Hal Taussig

<sup>3</sup> For this content I am indebted to a little book called *Prayers Of The Cosmos* by Neil Douglas-Klotz. An excellent meditation on the Lords Prayer in Aramaic.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 14.36; Romans 8.15, Galatians 4.6

Hebrew, is made up of root sounds and composite letters that convey meaning that is difficult to distil into a single word. Therefore the opening phrase *Abwoon* is a word that conveys not only the idea of a personal father from the root **ab** (*abba*) but also the idea of the absolute, the *Alaha* (Aramaic for God) literally *The Oneness* or the *All in all*. Further the addition of **bw** evokes the idea of birthing, a flow of blessing from the source (oneness) through the power of the Holy Spirit **oo** referring to breath and breathing, completed by the **n** which evokes the idea of vibration as each one of us is touched by the force of creation – the father/mother/creator. This can be sensed even as we sound the word *abwoon* breaking it up and slowing it down as *ab-woo-n*. Whilst there is a gender reference assumed when we think of the word *abba* it is also important that we understand that *abba* in the context of its derivative *abwoon* is beyond gender and therefore becomes more about the ground of our being in an intimate sense of who and what we are created to be – through divine parentage. In this sense we are all sons and daughters of the living God. When we link this phrase with *d'bwashmaya* (Aramaic for *in heaven*) we find that heaven is not a spatial concept, a place where God is, rather it is *all* of light and life – that in which we all exist and have our being. This transcends primitive cosmologies believing the heavens to be spatial locations above the clouds; indeed, even if this was what first century Christians believed about *heaven* it is no longer what we believe today with our understanding of cosmology. Hence the Aramaic language gives us a deeper understanding of what lies at the heart of the simple phrase *our father in heaven* – let me quote Neil Douglas-Klotz's expanded translation of this phrase;

*O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,  
You create all that moves  
in light.*

*O Thou! The breathing Life of all,  
Creator of the Shimmering Sound that  
touches us.*

*Respiration of all worlds,  
We hear you breathing – in and out –  
in silence.*

*Source of Sound: in the roar and the whisper,  
In the breeze and the whirlwind, we  
Hear your name.*

*Radiant One: You shine within us,  
Outside us – even darkness shines – when  
We remember.*

*Name of names, our small identity  
Unravels in you, you give it back  
As a lesson.*

*Wordless Action, Silent Potency –  
Where ears and eyes awaken, there  
Heaven comes.*

*O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos!*<sup>5</sup>

As we can see, once we stop to reflect on the simple form of a prayer we have known for most of our lives as the *Lords Prayer*, considering its roots and possible linguistic meanings, we find ourselves delving deeper into a way of prayer as well as a form. In this session I have only been able to touch on the opening phrase, in future sessions we will make our way through the prayer and hopefully be better equipped for our own prayer journey as we seek to grow in our faith and discipleship.

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<sup>5</sup> *Prayers Of The Cosmos* by Neil Douglas-Klotz pg 12