

The Lord's Prayer: A Hebrew Reconstruction based on Hebrew Prayers Found in the Synagogue

Chuck Day¹

Abstract²

The purpose of this article is to show that a Hebrew reconstruction of the Lord's Prayer can be gained quite easily using idioms found in other Jewish prayers found to this day in the Authorised Daily Prayer Book used in modern synagogues. Such a Hebrew reconstruction also helps to shed light on the meaning of some of the Greek phrases we find in the biblical version of the Lord's Prayer.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show that a Hebrew reconstruction of the Lord's Prayer can be gained quite easily using idioms found in other Jewish prayers found to this day in the Authorised Daily Prayer Book used in modern synagogues.

It is a lamentable fact that the words of Jesus have been handed down to the church in Greek rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic. In a great number of instances, reconstructing the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew and Aramaic allows a more authentic understanding of his teaching to be revealed. Nowhere is this truer than with the Lord's Prayer, which contains quite literal translations of idioms present in many ancient Jewish prayers. The Lord's Prayer, as it stands in Matthew 6.9-13, can actually be considered a very Jewish prayer.

¹ Chuck Day holds a PhD from the University of Pretoria. He has served as a missionary and lecturer in South Africa for many years.

² The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Examining these idioms as they are found in Hebrew allows a means of understanding the Lord's Prayer from a more Jewish perspective.

Using *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (ADPB) as a guide to the wording of ancient prayers is precarious at best and inaccurate at worst. Not all of the prayers contained within it go back to Second Temple times. However, some of them do. Therefore, particular stress will be laid on the wording of prayers which are considered to be the most ancient. The purpose for referencing these prayers from the ADPB is to demonstrate the fact that the idioms common to both the Lord's Prayer and other Jewish prayers have been in use in the synagogue and can be easily accessed by anyone (even non-scholars) with a copy of the ADPB. Thus, finding suitable idioms for a Hebrew reconstruction has never been that difficult. It must be made clear that a theoretical reconstruction does not displace the Greek text. Yet, the Greek wording must be governed by the semantic range of the Hebrew terms it represents.

2. Our Father, which art in heaven: **πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς**

It is perhaps fitting that this address is the easiest part of the Lord's Prayer to reconstruct from the ADPB. The Hebrew prayer address אֲבִינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמִי is found in the Morning service (Singer 1962:10) and frequently enough elsewhere.

3. Sanctified be thy name: **ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου**

An equivalent to the words ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου is also not difficult to find amongst Jewish prayers. The Morning Service for Sabbaths and Festivals says in one place (Singer 1962:179): אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְתְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁמֶךָ [Thy name, O Lord our God, be sanctified]. The syntax is reversed a few pages later (Singer 1962:196), in another portion of the same service: שְׁמֶךָ בָּנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשֵׁנֵי כָּל־חַיִּי: וּבְכֹן יְתְקַדֵּשׁ (Therefore, sanctified be thy name upon us, O Lord our God, in the sight of all living). The words שְׁמֶךָ יְתְקַדֵּשׁ seem to be a perfect match for ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου and will be used in the reconstruction.

The addition of the word בָּנוּ to this idiom in the prayer above finds a parallel in a textual variant to Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer found in Codex D (Luke 11.2) which adds the words *upon us* [ἐφ' ἡμᾶς]. If this petition in the Lord's Prayer is interpreted with an unstated *upon us* understood, then a

The Lord's Prayer: A Hebrew Reconstruction based on Hebrew Prayers
Found in the Synagogue

sanctification of the person and a divine favor resulting in answered prayer may be what early Jewish-Christians understood this to mean. Yet, this is not all that the idiom employed in this petition can mean.

In the Old Testament, God is frequently spoken of as desiring to make his name holy. He does so by manifesting his judgements (e.g., Isa 5.16). Here, especially, God makes his name (or himself) holy where his name has been profaned. Synonymous idioms include God revealing or making known his (holy) name (e.g., Ezek 39.6-7). God also makes his name holy through those who serve and worship him. Because God's name is synonymous with God himself, the idea of sanctifying God's name is closely related to the revelation of God's holiness in general (e.g., Lev 10.3; Isa 29.23; Ezek 36.23).

The Old Testament usage of this term was taken by the Rabbis and expanded by them in several ways. From God sanctifying his name through the righteous conduct of Israel, the idiom evolved to become understood as an action that people do. As a result, one could be said to sanctify God's name by doing the Law. Because of the connection between being faithful to God's law and sanctifying God's name, a deeper understanding emerged. The highest form of obedience was faithfulness to the point of giving your life. Sanctifying God's name therefore became a motivation for martyrdom. As such, in Jewish literature, *הַשֵּׁם קְדוֹשׁ* (*sanctification of the name*) primarily means martyrdom. Thus, in the prayer *Avinu Malkenu* (Singer 1962:59), amidst four verses with parallel phrasing for martyrs, is one which says: *לְמַעַן אָבִי בָּאֵשׁ וּבַמַּיִם עַל־קְדוּשַׁת שְׁמֶךָ* (*Our Father, our king, do it [have compassion upon us] for the sake of them that went through fire and water for the sanctification of thy name*).

It is not that Jesus is urging his disciples to volunteer for martyrdom. Yet, it must be recognized that the call for God's name to be sanctified is a declaration of willingness to allow God's sanctification process to include martyrdom (cf., Heb 2:10-11).

The use of *sanctifying* God's name as a synonym for *glorifying* his name developed from the recognition that the angels in heaven declare God's holiness. For instance, this theme, taken from Isaiah 6:3, is reflected in the ADPB in the Additional Service for the Sabbath (Singer 1962:212):

We will praise and sanctify thee according to the secret thoughts of the Seraphim of the holy place, who hallow thy name in the holy place, as it is written by the hand of thy prophet, and they called to one another, and said: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

Similarly, the third of the Eighteen Benedictions (Singer 1962:47) is an appeal to worshippers to join with the angels in singing *Holy, holy, holy*, etc. Thus, *sanctifying* God's name is sometimes lumped together with various terms for praising God (Singer 1962:9):

Therefore, we are obligated to thank thee, and to praise thee, and to glorify thee, and to bless, and to sanctify (וּלְקַדְּשׁ) and to give praise and thanks to thy name.

4. Thy kingdom come: ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου

The theme of this petition is certainly exhibited in a variety of Jewish prayers but, it must be admitted that there was no regular idiom in Jewish prayers calling for God's kingdom *to come*. In fact, there seems to have been no regular idiom regarding the kingdom of God in Jewish prayers at all. A variety of verbs are used with similar intent. Consider the following found in the ADPB.

p. 15	וּמְלִיךָ מַלְכוּתָהּ	<i>May he inaugurate his kingdom</i>
p. 70	וְתִגְלֶה וְתִרְאֶה מַלְכוּתוֹ עָלֵינוּ	<i>May his kingdom be revealed and be seen upon us</i>
p. 360	גַּלְהַ כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתְךָ עָלֵינוּ	<i>Reveal the glory of thy kingdom upon us</i>
p. 393	וְקַוֵּם מַלְכוּתְךָ	<i>And establish thy kingdom</i>

The call for God to actively *reign* over his people in ancient prayers can be demonstrated from the *Amidah*. In what corresponds to the eleventh of the eighteen benedictions are the words *reign thou over us* (וּמְלִיךָ עָלֵינוּ) (Singer 1962:50). Similarly, God is adjured in the Morning Service (Singer 1962:79): *לְתַמְנֵן עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שְׁרֵי* (*to perfect the world in the kingdom of the almighty*). Added to this is the call that all the inhabitants of the world take upon themselves *עַל מַלְכוּתְךָ* (*the yoke of your kingdom*), following which the

worshipper prays (Singer 1962:80): ותמלוך עליהם מהרה לעולם ועד (*and may you (God) reign over them speedily and for ever and ever*).

The Rabbinic concept of taking upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom entails doing God's will. This was applied even to the angels in heaven, again, in reference to Isaiah 6.3 (Singer 1962:40): מקבליים עליהם על מלכות שמים זה מזה (*They receive upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven one from the other*).

In this prayer, taken from the Morning Service, the aspect of God's rule as king is combined with the understanding of God's delivering power being manifested for his people (Singer 1962:40). Though the idiom, תבוא מלכותך, is not found in the ADPB, the great variety of prayer idioms calling on God to establish and manifest his kingdom reduces the amount of objection to a literal reconstruction of ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου.

5. Thy will be done: γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου

A Hebrew equivalent to this petition is found frequently in Jewish prayers: יהי רצון מלפניך (e.g., Singer 1962:8, 49, 72). This idiom goes back, at least, to the Tannaitic period as *Pirque Aboth* 5.23 puts this in the mouth of Rabbi Judah, the son of Tema (Singer 1962:275). Evidence that Jesus prayed in such a way can be seen in Matthew 11.26, where οὕτως εὐδοκία ἐγένετο ἔμπροσθέν σου can easily be seen to stand for יהי רצון מלפניך.³

It is difficult to know just how much force to impute to יהי, because, as a jussive, it can express a desire, a wish or a command. Jastrow ([1903] 1992:1492) translates יהי רצון מלפניך as 'be it thy will' in *bBer* 60a and other places where it is so common that it is merely abbreviated as ירמ. If an imperative sense is given to יהי in this idiom then the object being prayed for is

³ This begs the question, why does Matthew render the words two different ways? One answer may be that Matthew has inherited a Greek form of the Lord's Prayer (evidenced by the fact that both he and Luke make use of the unusual word ἐπιούσιος). Yet, both Matthew 6.10 and 11.26 show signs of deliberate interpretation rather than direct translation. For 6.10 see below. In 11.26 Matthew's translation of יהי by ἐγένετο reflects the fact that, in biblical Hebrew, יהי is also able to mean *thus it was*]. Other possibilities for translating include: γένοιτο (cf, Lk 1.38) and ἔσται (cf. Mk 11.24).

being commanded to be formed, created, manifested, done with an authoritative force. יהי seems to have had this sense for ancient Jews (in so far as they used it) when placing a blessing on someone. *Peace* (שלום), for example was seen in a tangible way as something within a person that they had the authority to bestow on or withhold from another. A blessing of peace often started with יהי-שלום (e.g., *bBer* 64a; Singer 1962:162).⁴

A quick look in the Septuagint version of Genesis 1 shows that γενήθῃτω is the word employed to translate יהי in verses three and six. Matthew has purposely sought to create a link between Jesus and Genesis 1. By translating יהי with γενήθῃτω, rather than γενέσθω (as Luke does [cf., Luke 22.42]), Matthew provides an unavoidable homiletical connection between Jesus' teaching on prayer and creation. The connection between God's will and creation is confirmed in the first line of the *Kaddish: Magnified and sanctified be his great name in the world, which he created according to his will*.⁵

Though a direct reconstruction of γενήθῃτω τὸ θέλημα σου would result in יהי רצונך, the prolific use of יהי רצון מלפניך in ancient sayings and prayers suggests that this idiom should be employed.

6. As in heaven and on earth: ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς

The phrase *on earth as it is in heaven* is usually taken to mean that God should do his will on earth the way it is done in heaven (i.e., perfectly). The presumption is that God's will is done in heaven, but not yet on earth. But the Greek text ὡς ἐν τοῖς οὐράνοις καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς can just as easily be translated *as in heaven and on earth*. When heaven and earth are referenced in Jewish literature, it usually refers to the totality of God's creation (cf., Gen 1.1) rather than a contrast between the two. In the Morning Service (Singer 1962:10), the same paragraph in which the words שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם אֲבִינִי are found, begins: בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ (You are he, O Lord our God, in heaven and on earth). To emphasize the point, Psalm 135 is quoted in the Morning Service (Singer

⁴ An alternative syntax can be seen in a blessing found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 2.13): לִי יהי שלום [peace be upon me].

⁵ Other evidence for this connection can be seen in the Thanksgiving Scroll (1QH col 1, line 20) as well as elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Rev 4.11).

1962:25), which includes the words $\text{בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבְאָרֶץ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-רָחַץ}$ (*All that the Lord desires, he does in heaven and on earth*).

Thus, it is true that the third petition of the Lord's Prayer asks for God's will to be done perfectly, but not from the standpoint of the earth in contrast to heaven. Heaven and earth, signifying creation, obey God's will and stand in contrast to that which resists his will and needs to be changed—be it the petitioner(s), a situation, or whatever the concern is. Even as God commanded: *Light, be (manifested)!* (according to his will), so those of the Kingdom, as his sons, should likewise command those things that are his will to be manifested.

**7. Give us today our constant bread: τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον
δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον**

One of the most perplexing problems in interpreting the fourth petition is the presence of the word ἐπιούσιος in both Matthew and Luke's versions of the Lord's Prayer (as well as in the version contained in the *Didache*). Outside of the Lord's Prayer, it is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, even outside the New Testament it can only be found in literature discussing the Lord's Prayer. Papyrus fragments purported to contain this word are disputed and none are from the time of the New Testament.

The oldest attempts (for which we have manuscript evidence) to translate the Lord's Prayer into Hebrew seem to understand ἐπιούσιος to mean *continual*. For instance, $\text{וְהָתַן לָחֶמֶן תְּמִידִית}$ (*give us our continual bread*) is found in both the Shem Tov and du Tillet Hebrew versions of Matthew 6.11. Both of these versions are only known from manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages, but represent a tradition which probably goes back hundreds of years earlier. Lapidé (1984:8-10) gives several examples of Hebrew translations of the Lord's Prayer from the ninth and tenth centuries employing תְּמִיד. Readings utilizing תְּמִיד correspond well to the Old Syriac, which has “continual” (אמניא). The idiom לֶחֶם תְּמִיד (*continual bread*) does appear in the Bible, as a reference to the shew-bread (Num 4:7). Yet, an allusion to the shew-bread does not feature much in ancient Jewish prayers. Use of תְּמִיד in connection with the words לֶחֶם (*bread*) and מִזֵּן (*food*) occurs several times in the Grace After Meals (Singer 1962:378) to emphasize the fact that God gives continual

The Lord's Prayer: A Hebrew Reconstruction based on Hebrew Prayers
Found in the Synagogue

sustenance. For example: ובטובו הגדול תמיד לא־חסר לנו ולא יחסר־לנו מזון לעולם ועד (And in his great goodness always food has not been lacking to us; and may it not fail us forever ...).

The prayer goes on to connect God's continual provision of bread with the Exodus and entry into the Promised Land. The word תמיד is not used with היום (today) (as is suggested by σήμερον in Matt 6.11), but it is used with כִּלְיוֹם (every day) (as is suggested by καθ' ἡμέρα in Luke 11.3) in a prayer (Singer 1962:378) giving thanks for the food God has given ובְּכֻל־שָׁעָה ובְּכֻל־יְמֵת ובְּכֻל־יְמֵי הַתְּמִיד (always, every day, and at each time, and in every hour).

The Shorter Form of Grace (Singer 1962:384), which also thanks God for leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, adds a word of thanks for לְשֹׂבֵעַ לֶחֶם (bread to satisfy). This is an allusion to the promise of daily manna in Exodus 16.7. The lack of dichotomy between the physical and spiritual understanding of God's provision of bread (which is true for the Lord's Prayer as well; cf. John 6.32-35) is apparent by the way this prayer joins thanksgiving for bread with eschatological expectations, and concludes with an appeal לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם (for life of the world to come).

8. Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors: καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν

The word ὀφειλήματα seems to point to an Aramaism. The Aramaic word for *debt* (סְבִיבָא) can also mean *sin*. It is used regularly in the Targums to translate the Hebrew word for *debt* (חֵב) as well as the word for *sin* (חַטָּא). The concept of *sin* as a *debt* was already popular in first-century Judaism. However, it must be admitted that Mishnaic Hebrew did not use חֵב or its feminine counterpart, חֵבָה, to mean *sin*. They are most commonly used for *an obligation* (Jastrow [1903] 1992:429), and, often in religious usage, *guilt*. Though the plural חֵבוֹת is not used in a prayer for forgiveness of sin *per se*, an extremely close example from the ADPB can be seen in *Avinu Malchenu* from the Morning Service, which has: בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים כָּל־שִׁטְרֵי חֵבוֹתֵינוּ אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ מְחַקֵּק (Our Father, our king, erase, in your great mercies, all the records of our guilt) (Singer 1962:58). This line is used in synonymous parallelism with the two previous lines which beg forgiveness of sin and the blotting out of transgressions.

Could an Aramaic meaning be given to חֻבָּה in a Hebrew prayer? It is certainly possible. An analogy can be gathered from *jBerechot* IX, 14b. This passage speaks of those who would interpret the Hebrew phrase אֲדַע חֻבָּתִי וְאֶעֱשֶׂנָּה (*I would know my obligation and I will do it*) in Aramaic as דְּאֶעֱבִיד מִזְנָה כְּוֹתָהּ הֵי דָא חֻבְתָּה עֲבָדִית (*what sin did I do that I may do a good deed to equal it*).

The earliest example of the plural חֻבוֹת used for ὀφειλήματα in a Hebrew version of the Lord's Prayer comes from the *Abinu Sebacamaim* of Cusa, dated from the end of the ninth century (Lapide 1984:9). A guide for the reconstruction of ἄφες ἡμῖν can be found in the sixth benediction from the *Amidah*. There, the use of סְלַח-לָנוּ (Singer 1962:48) for *forgive us* mirrors quite well the ἄφες ἡμῖν of this petition.

9. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν

A very close parallel to this petition is in a prayer in the Morning Service (Singer 1962:8). It is also found in the Talmud (*bBer* 60b). It says:

וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנִי לֹא לְיַדֵּי חַטָּא	<i>And bring me not into the power of sin</i>
וְלֹא לְיַדֵּי עֲבָרָה וְעִוְוֹן	<i>And not into the power of trespass and iniquity</i>
וְלֹא לְיַדֵּי נְסִיוֹן	<i>And not into the power of temptation</i>
וְלֹא לְיַדֵּי בִזְיוֹן	<i>And not into the power of anything shameful</i>

A Hebrew reconstruction of this petition need not use לְיַדֵּי. The εἰς of the Greek text can be better accounted for by the preposition בְּ. An apocryphal psalm found at Qumran in the Psalms Scroll, 11Q5 (= 11QPs^a), contains a verse very similar to this petition in the Lord's Prayer. In column 24, line 10, are the words: זְכוּרֵנִי וְאַל תִּשְׁכַּחֵנִי וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנִי בְקִשּׁוֹת מִמֶּנִּי (*Remember me and do not forget me, and do not lead me into things too difficult for me*).

10. But deliver us from evil: ἀλλὰ ῥύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ

The reconstruction of ῥύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ should be הַצִּילֵנוּ מִן הָרַע. The word *evil* can be interpreted as:

- evil in general

The Lord's Prayer: A Hebrew Reconstruction based on Hebrew Prayers
Found in the Synagogue

- the evil one – Satan
- an evil person
- the evil inside of each one of us

The ambiguity present in the τοῦ ποιηροῦ need not be diminished. Neither Jews nor Christians in ancient times differentiated particularly between the various definitions of *evil*. Similar to the petition for deliverance from evil in the Lord's Prayer, the prayer in the Morning Service follows the request not to be led *into the hands of sin, trespass, iniquity, testing and shame* with a request to be safeguarded against some of the categories of evil mentioned above: וְאַל תְּשַׁלְּטֵנוּ יֵצֶר הָרַע וְתִרְחִיקֵנוּ מֵאָדָם רָע וּמִחֶבֶר רָע (Let not the evil inclination have power over us; keep us far from an evil man and an evil companion).

A prayer for personal deliverance from all the categories of evil follows soon afterwards:

תְּצִילֵנִי הַיּוֹם וּבְכָל־יּוֹם מֵעַוְוֵי פְּנִים וּמֵעֲזוֹת פְּנִים מֵאָדָם רָע וּמִחֶבֶר רָע וּמִשֶּׂכֶן רָע וּמִפְּנֵע רָע וּמִשֶּׂטֶן הַמְּשַׁחֵת

Deliver me this day and every day from the arrogant men, from arrogance (itself), from an evil man, from an evil companion from an evil neighbour, from an evil accident and from Satan the destroyer.

An example from the ADPB which comes close to this final petition can be found in another prayer in the Morning Service (Singer 1962:68), which uses the words: וְהַצִּילֵנוּ מִכָּל־רָע (deliver us from all evil).

11. The full reconstruction

Putting it all together, we now have the following reconstruction:

Hebrew	English
אָבֵנוּ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם	<i>Our Father, who is in heaven</i>
יְתַקְדֵּשׁ שִׁמְךָ	<i>Thy name be sanctified!</i>
תָּבֵא מַלְכוּתֶךָ	<i>Thy kingdom come!</i>
וְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְפָּנֶיךָ	<i>Thy will be manifested,</i>

The Lord's Prayer: A Hebrew Reconstruction based on Hebrew Prayers
Found in the Synagogue

כְּבַשְׁמַיִם וּכְאָרֶץ	<i>as in heaven and on earth!</i>
תִּנְנוּ הַיּוֹם	<i>Give to us today,</i>
לֶחֶמֵנוּ תָמִיד	<i>our constant bread!</i>
וּסְלַחֲלָנוּ חַוֹבוֹתֵינוּ	<i>And forgive us our debts</i>
כְּשֶׁסְּלַחְנוּ חַיִּיבָנוּ	<i>as we forgive our debtors!</i>
וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנוּ בְּנִסְיוֹן	<i>And lead us not into temptation,</i>
אֲלָא הַצִּילֵנוּ מִן הָרָע	<i>but, deliver us from evil!</i>

The Lord's Prayer, as with so many reconstructions of the words of Jesus, is not so much misunderstood as not *fully* understood. Jesus routinely spoke in idioms which were thoroughly Jewish. Only by examining the Lord's Prayer against similar Jewish prayers can the meaning of each petition emerge, releasing a more authentic understanding and a greater impact. If students of the New Testament want to truly appreciate the words and message of Jesus a trip to the local Synagogue might be the place to start.

Works cited

- Jastrow M [1903] 1992. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. New York: Judaica Press
- Lapide P 1984. *Hebrew in the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Singer S 1962. *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.