

The Sevenfold Form of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel

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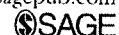
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Abstract

The Lord's Prayer, in the form we find it in Matthew's gospel, consists of seven petitions, carefully and chiastically arranged: the first three clauses go together and ask for God's glory, the last three ask for help in our struggle with evil; the fourth is different, linking the two groups and asking the Father in heaven to supply our down-to-earth needs. This rarely noted structure reflects Matthew's artistry, his belief in Jesus as the teacher and embodiment of God's perfection and the Sermon on the Mount's concern for God's kingdom and the Father's provision for his children.

Keywords

Lord's Prayer, Matthew, Sermon on the Mount, chiasm, daily bread, perfection, kingdom of God, teaching of Jesus, prayer

The Lord's Prayer is identified in Matthew's and Luke's gospels as the prayer specifically taught by Jesus to his disciples, and as such, like the eucharist, it has had an overwhelmingly important status and place in the Christian church and in Christian tradition.¹ This article is about the Matthean form of the prayer, the form universally used in the Christian church, arguing that we have mostly failed to see how carefully and significantly it is shaped.

¹ It has had less importance in recent scholarship, especially in English. Ernst Lohmeyer's *The Lord's Prayer* (London: Collins, 1965), and J. Milic Lochman's *The Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) are both translations from German. Two major French studies: Jean Carmignac's *Recherches sur le "Notre Père"* (Paris: Éditions Letouzey & Ané, 1969), and Marc Philonenko's *Le Notre Père De La Prière de Jésus à la prière des disciples* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) have not been translated.

Matthew's Carefully Formed Gospel

Whatever sources he used, the author of Matthew's gospel was not a crude scissors-and-paste editor; he skilfully shaped his gospel.²

² People have long noticed his use of repeated formulae (such as the citation formula 'this took place to fulfil....'), his gathering of Jesus' teaching into five blocks, etc. See W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 58-72.

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This can be seen at the very outset in chapter 1, where he presents the genealogy of Jesus in a schematic way, connecting Jesus to the history of Israel – from Abraham to David to the exile – and arranging the genealogy in three blocks of fourteen, quite possibly in order to suggest that Jesus is the seventh seven in God's plan, with the number seven suggesting divine perfection and recalling the creation story.³

When he reaches the Sermon on the Mount, where the Lord's Prayer is located, we find that section after section is carefully structured.

So the opening eight beatitudes are a carefully designed, almost poetic structure.⁴

- 1 Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 2 Blessed are those who mourn, *for they will be comforted.*
- 3 Blessed are the meek, *for they will inherit the earth.*
- 4 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, *for they will be filled.*
- 5 Blessed are the merciful, *for they will be shown mercy.*
- 6 Blessed are the pure in heart, *for they will see God.*
- 7 Blessed are the peacemakers, *for they will be called sons of God.*
- 8 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The passage is like a poem in two verses, with beatitudes 1-4 all being about people needing God's help

and kingdom, and beatitudes 5-8 all about people living kingdom lives. The whole passage is about the kingdom of God, hence the refrain 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' at the beginning and the end, forming what scholars call an *inclusio*.⁵

The whole Sermon may have been similarly shaped as an *inclusio*. Scholars have often noticed that Matthew 5:17 – 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them' – is a key verse near the start of the Sermon, and that it is echoed near the end of the sermon in 7:12 with its 'Whatever you wish that people do to you, so you also do to them. For this is the law and the prophets'.⁶

There are other possible artistic features in the Sermon before we reach the Lord's Prayer. Chapter 5:17-20 can be seen as a sort of 'chiasm' with verses 17 and 18 discussing Jesus' endorsement of the law and the prophets, mirrored by verses 19 and 20, applying this to the disciples in terms of their responsibilities.

Thus:

[Jesus and the law and the prophets]

- A Think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy them, but to fulfil them
- B *For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass, not one iota or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law, until all things happen.*

³ See D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33A, Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 6-8, and note Matthew's use of the word 'genesis' in 1:1. There are many other questions raised by Matthew's genealogy, including about the number fourteen, which are discussed by Hagner and other commentators.

⁴ The ninth beatitude (5:11, 12) differs from the others in being in the second person, not the third person, and because to some extent it repeats number 8. It almost seems tagged on to the others, or, more likely, serves to make the transition from the general statements about those who are blessed into the rest of the Sermon which is specifically addressed to Jesus' disciples – 'you'. For a similar point and for parallel instances see R. Deines, *Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora im Reich des Messias* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 158-59.

⁵ Note also the word 'righteousness' coming at the end of each verse, in beatitudes 4 and 8. Curiously the first four beatitudes are 36 words in Greek and so are the second four. This is probably not accidental, and indicates that we are dealing in Matthew with someone who was writing in artistic ways that would have been attractive to Jewish readers, and which would have assisted memorization. See my 'The Rock on Which to Build: Some Mainly Pauline Observations about the Sermon on the Mount' in D. M. Gurtner and J. Nolland (eds.), *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 187-206, and especially C. H. Talbert's *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2004) 49.

⁶ See my 'The Rock', but also U. Luz, arguing that the whole Sermon is 'ring-shaped'. 'It is built symmetrically around a center, namely the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13). The sections before and after the Lord's Prayer correspond to each other.' *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 211-13.

[Followers of Jesus and the law]

- B'** *So if anyone looses one of these least commands and teaches men so, he will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches, this will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*
- A'** For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁷

The six antitheses of 5:21-40 that follow fall into two groups, with the first three and the last three being introduced with the full formula: 'You have heard that it was said to the ancients...' (vv. 21, 33); the others more simply 'You have heard that it was said...' or 'it was said...' (vv. 27, 31, 38, 43). The first of the antitheses is, arguably, about treating your brother with forgiveness and love (vv. 21-26), the last about treating your enemy with love (vv. 43-47), so the whole section could be seen as illustrating the love command of Jesus. It ends with v. 48: 'So you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.'⁸

Then in chapter six Matthew moves on to religious righteousness, where there is a clear memorable structure, with a similar pattern of teaching being given on the three traditional Jewish religious practices: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In each case there is a negative:

*don't do it before people to be seen by them,
though that will bring its reward,*

and a positive:

*but do it in secret before your heavenly Father,
who will reward you....*

The Form of the Lord's Prayer

In that clearly structured section, in the paragraph on prayer, the Lord's Prayer is introduced. It can be seen

⁷ Compare Deines, *Gerechtigkeit*, e.g. p.447. For thorough discussion of the verses and the traditions behind them see P. Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 144-217.

⁸ This may simply be part of the last antithesis on love of enemy, but has been seen by some as rounding off all the antitheses. It could, then, be seen as a seventh saying following the preceding six, though it is not an antithesis, and as somehow summing up what Jesus and the kingdom of heaven represent and what the antitheses have been pointing towards, i.e. divine perfection.

as breaking the artistic pattern and introducing a tradition that does not belong in this context, a conclusion perhaps encouraged by Luke who places the Prayer elsewhere (11:2-4).⁹ However, given the highly organized nature of the Sermon up to this point, we should at least be alert to the possibility that the Prayer may itself be carefully shaped and structured.¹⁰

To see that this is indeed the case, it will be helpful to translate the prayer very literally from the Greek:

Father of us the one in the heavens

- 1 Hallowed the name of you
- 2 Come the kingdom of you
- 3 Happen the will of you, as in heaven also on earth
- 4 The bread of us for the coming day give us today
- 5 And forgive us the debts of us, as also we have forgiven the debtors of us.
- 6 And do not bring us into temptation,
- 7 But rescue us from the evil (one).

The commonest indisputable observation is that there are three petitions relating to God ('your name', 'your kingdom', 'your will'), and then four petitions relating to us ('our bread', 'our debts', 'us into temptation', 'us from the evil one'). As in the Decalogue, God comes first, then human concerns.

But there are more interesting things to observe:

- After the opening invocation of the Father, there are seven petitions – a fact widely recognized in the early church but remarkably often missed by modern commentators.¹¹

⁹ See B. Gerhardsson, 'The Matthean Version of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9b-13): Some Observations' in W. C. Weinrich (ed.), *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, vol. 1 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 209.

¹⁰ Lohmeyer comments on poetic features in the prayer, and also on the relationship of Matthew's form of the prayer to Luke's and to a possible original Aramaic form (*Lord's Prayer*, 30).

¹¹ But see H. D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 376, and G. Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 107, 123, who compares Matt 1:17, 5:3-9, and chapter 23's 7 woes; also B. T. Coolman in J. P. Giesenman, T. Larsen, S. R. Spencer (eds.), *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 59-80. O. Cullmann confidently asserts that 'the grammatical construction in Greek really only allows the

- The first three relate to God, the last four to 'us' (as already observed). But the first four are all petitions asking for good things, the last three are prayers against evil.
- The first three petitions (1-3) are extremely similar formally and grammatically, each with a third person imperative and then a subject + the genitive 'of you'.
- Each of these three petitions is four words in the Greek, though number 3 has an additional clause added at the end, 'as in heaven also on earth'.
- The last three petitions (5-7) are similar to each other in form, each starting with a conjunction ('and...and...but'), this leading into an imperative inviting God to do something for 'us' in connection with evil ('forgive', 'don't lead', 'deliver').
- Each of these petitions is six words in the Greek, though number 5 has an additional clause 'as also we have forgiven our debtors'.¹²
- Petition number 4 emerges as an odd one out: 'Our bread for the coming day give us today'. It is different grammatically, with eight words in the Greek and with the verb coming towards the end of the petition. It is also different substantially, having a claim to belong to numbers 1-3 because it is asking God for something good (and no opening conjunction), but also a claim to belong to numbers 5-7 because it is an 'us' saying.¹³ Furthermore,

all the other petitions could be described as 'spiritual' in some way, but number 4 looks *prima facie* a more materialistic, down-to-earth sort of petition.

What can be deduced from these observations about the form of the prayer?

Jesus is into perfection in Matthew's gospel, and it is surely significant that the Lord's prayer has seven clauses.¹⁴ Of those seven, three (all beginning with a third person imperative) relate to God and his glory; then there is the petition about daily bread (with the imperative at the end of the clause); then there are three more petitions each relating to 'us' (all opening with a conjunctive particle (and, but) and a second person imperatival form).¹⁵

An attractive suggestion is that the seven petitions are arranged chiastically and concentrically, with the first three balancing the last three and with number 4 linking the two sequences.¹⁶ This view was put forward in a Russian article by Bishop Kassian in 1951: 'Towards a Question About the Structure of the Lord's Prayer'.¹⁷ In this he argues that the petitions 1-3 are 'positive' prayers (i.e. prayers asking for positive things) presented in a descending pattern – from the high starting-point, 'Hallowed be your name', down to the more mundane, 'Your will be done on earth',¹⁸

possibility that the petition is a subordinate clause in the sixth petition, which supplements it'. *Prayer in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1995), 66. However, the formal analysis we have offered makes it clear that 13b does indeed go with 13a but also with v.12, and that it should be seen as one petition among the seven others.

¹² Petition 6 is negative – 'don't lead us' – and this produces the conjunction 'but' (*alla*) in the Greek instead of 'and' (*kai*). This could be seen as detracting from the argument that 5-7 are similar in form. Gerhardsson argues this, claiming that numbers 1-3 are a coherent unit saying much the same thing, but that numbers 4-7 with their linking conjunctions are a group of quite independent sayings ('Matthean Version', 209). He fails to see that 5-7 are very similar structurally; arguably they belong together in terms of content in much the same ways as 1-3.

¹³ See Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1998) 26.

¹⁴ On perfection in Matthew see 5:48, 19:21, and our earlier remark about the genealogy, p. XXX. But note H. Schürmann's caution on this point in *Das Gebet des Herrn* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958) 19.

¹⁵ Lohmeyer comments suggestively: 'The verbs are put side by side in asyndeton....., where they speak of the things of God, but where they speak of human things they are joined by conjunctions.' *The Lord's Prayer*, 27.

¹⁶ Terminology is tricky: is it an inverted chiasm, concentric parallelism, or even a 'chiastic heptacolon' (a category so-called by Wilfrid G. E. Watson in *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 311-91)? It is interesting to note again Luz's view of the whole gospel being 'ring-shaped' with the Lord's Prayer as the mid-point, *Matthew*, 211-13.

¹⁷ Bishop Kassian (Bezobrazov) 'K voprosu o postroenii Molitvy Gospodnei', in *La Pensée Orthodoxe* vol VIII (Paris: YMCA, 1951) 56-85, especially pp. 66-67. I am grateful to Mr. Insur Shamgunov for explaining the relevant pages of Kassian's article to me.

¹⁸ 'Your will be done on earth as in heaven' has been understood eschatologically as a petition for the future

and that petitions 5-7 are a corresponding group of 'negative' prayers (i.e. prayers about sin and evil, asking for forgiveness and deliverance) presented in an ascending order, starting with our sins on earth and with the negative climax being 'deliver us from the evil one'.¹⁹

It is not difficult to see how this might work:

Number 1 positive is the big prayer for God's name to be honoured; it corresponds to number 7 negative which is the big prayer for deliverance from 'the evil one' who opposes God.²⁰

Number 2 positive looks for God's kingdom or rule to come in the future; it corresponds to number 6 negative which asks for protection from future 'temptation'.²¹

Number 3 positive asks for God's will to be done on earth as also in heaven;²² this corresponds to number 5 negative which is a petition for forgiveness for 'our debts' to God, in other words for those times when we have failed to do

his will; again there is an 'as...also' clause here 'as we also forgive our debtors'.²³

This leaves clause 4, which stands out grammatically, but also in terms of content, since all the other petitions have what we might term a spiritual reference, whereas this petition is down to earth, praying for 'bread' 'today'.

So the prayer looks like this:

Father of us the one in the heavens

- A Hallowed the name of you
- B Come the kingdom of you
- C Happen the will of you, as in heaven also on earth
- D The bread of us for the coming day give us today
- C' And forgive us the debts of us, as also we have forgiven the debtors of us.
- B' And do not bring us into temptation,
- A' But rescue us from the evil (one).

coming of the kingdom, but it may be more 'down to earth'; see the references to doing the Lord's will in Mt 7:21, 12:50, 21:30; also P. Bonnard, J. Dupont and F. Refoulé, *Notre père qui es aux cieux La prière oecuménique* (Latour-Mauborg: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 90-4; they note the dual application to future and present.

¹⁹ Lohmeyer's *Lord's Prayer*, 26, sees petitions 1 & 2 as balancing petitions 6 & 7, and 3 balancing 5. More recently Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis*, 26, 27, offers a similar analysis, even comparing the Jewish seven-branched candlestick. He explains his views more fully in 'La Composizione de Padre Nostro', *Civiltà Cattolica* 155 (2004) 241-53.

²⁰ For the translation 'from the evil one' see, plausibly, Lohmeyer, *Lord's Prayer*, 211-217, 229. But contrast Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 385. Note the two themes of glorification and deliverance from the evil one in John 17:1-26.

²¹ Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis*, 27, observes that both the kingdom and temptation are 'entered' in the gospels. Scholars sometimes argue that 'temptation' in the Lord's Prayer refers to the 'eschatological suffering' of Jewish expectation, in which case there may be a significant parallel with the positive prayer for the kingdom to come. But our analysis does not necessarily favour a purely future understanding of the coming kingdom or the coming temptation.

²² Betz and others favour the view that the 'as' clause of v. 10c covers all three of the first petitions (*Sermon*, 377).

A puzzling feature of this analysis could be the central place that it gives to the petition 'Give us today our daily bread'.²⁴ In this sort of chiasmic structure the middle point typically is the hinge point,²⁵ and is often identified as particularly important. But can that be so in this case?

Petition 4 can certainly be seen as a central hinge point.²⁶ We have observed that it belongs with the first three petitions that ask God to act in positive God-like ways, whereas the following petitions ask him to deal with sin, but it also belongs with the next three petitions which relate specifically to 'us'. So

²³ Doing the divine will on earth as in heaven – petition 3 – means in practice that people should love God and their neighbour; the negative and opposite is failing in our relationship with God and with each other, and so the balancing petition 5 addresses our 'debts' to God and our debt to our fellows.

²⁴ Jean Carmignac, *Recherches*, 385, rejects Kassian's analysis on this and other grounds.

²⁵ See on chiasmic structures see N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (1942, reprinted Hendrickson, 1992), especially pp. 40-43. Also Watson, *Traditional Techniques*, 370.

²⁶ Lochman compares it to 'a railway switch or turntable which we now reach and cross', pp. 83, 84.

petition 4 can be said to look in both directions and to link the two halves.

Perhaps it also does so because 'Give us today or daily bread' can be seen as the most mundane and down to earth clause in the prayer, if Bishop Kassian is right to detect a descending/ascending pattern.

Whether its central position means that it must be particularly important is questionable on literary grounds. However, the request for bread should not be regarded as in any way trivial.

Bishop Kassian came to the view that the reference must be to Eucharistic bread; so a rather ordinary petition becomes more spiritual. However, there is nothing in the context to suggest that the 'daily bread' is Eucharistic. The meaning of the word 'daily' (Greek: *epiousios*) is much debated, but there is a strong case for taking 'daily bread' in its most obvious meaning, i.e. to refer to the food that we need for the coming day.²⁷ If this seems disappointingly unspiritual to modern commentators, perhaps this is a reflection of an affluent society that takes its daily food for granted. Matthew and Jesus lived in a world where food was a top concern for people, and the Sermon on the Mount will go on specifically to discuss worrying about material needs, with Jesus assuring his disciples that 'your heavenly Father' knows your needs, and that 'all these things will be added to you' (6:31-33).²⁸

²⁷ The most plausible literal translation of *epiousios* may be 'for the coming day'; Luke's *kath hemeran* suggests that he saw the petition as a prayer for daily provision.

²⁸ Lochmann speaks of 'the Bible's big regard for eating' (p. 88), and notes Jesus' own reputation for eating with people. See also Cullmann, *Prayer*, 22 and 51-54, warning against spiritualizing and docetic readings. The feedings of the 5000 and 4000 later in Matthew attest the importance of physical feeding for Jesus. One attractive view is that the petition could allude to God's Old Testament provision of manna for his people, day by day in the wilderness. So Jesus, who in chapter 4 has faced hunger and temptation in the wilderness, teaches his followers to trust God their Father for daily sustenance on their journey. Philonenko connects the petition to the provision of manna (*Le Notre Père*, 117-130). His suggestion that the Matthean Lord's prayer is an amalgamation of Jesus' own form of prayer in addressing his father (the first three clauses) and of the prayer that Jesus taught his own disciples to use (the remaining clauses) is ingenious, but unlikely, the more so if

Admittedly Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about food, drink, clothing, etc. but to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. This could tell against Jesus' prayer having at its centre a prayer for material provision. But it need not do so. That very passage affirms the importance of practical needs, assuring the disciples that their heavenly Father will provide for them. But should we pray about our material needs? Asking the heavenly Father for things is positively encouraged at the end of the Sermon (7:7-11), and the example of paternal generosity given is that of a father responding to his son asking him for 'bread'. So, although being consumed by anxiety for material needs at the expense of concern for God's kingdom is not appropriate for disciples, asking God who cares about our needs and who is our creator and heavenly Father is entirely appropriate.²⁹

It is perhaps not unjustified to say that the Lord's Prayer represents precisely the balance of concerns that the Sermon as a whole sees as appropriate for disciples: the priority in terms of the number of petitions (6 out of 7!) and their arrangement is very much in terms of God's kingdom and his righteousness; but material needs are not unimportant, indeed have a central place in the purposes of the Father as reflected in the prayer.

Such an understanding of the prayer is plausible and the proposals about the overall shape and form of the prayer explained in this article make attractive sense of what Matthew saw as the 'perfect' prayer given by the Lord to his disciples.³⁰

the analysis of the prayer that I have proposed is anywhere near correct.

²⁹ Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis*, 27, argues interestingly that it is the request for bread more than any other that requires the opening invocation of God as Father (as opposed to 'King' or 'God').

³⁰ Students of mine in Bristol have made interesting observations in line with the ideas presented in this article: (a) the opening word and words of the prayer 'Father (*Pater*) of us' and the concluding word and words 'us from the evil one (*ponerou*)' could be seen as in some sort of balance with each other. (b) The two 'as' clauses in verses 10 and 12 both relate things in heaven to things on earth (the Lord's will and forgiveness).