

The Prayers of Our Fathers



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Christians and Jews conclude all their prayers with the same ancient Hebrew word: *Amen*. Perhaps no other word so succinctly underlines the continuity between the two faiths, coming at the point of the very heart of religious devotion: prayer. None other of their religious practices so clearly underlines what is the same and what is different.

The earliest prayer book for both was the book of Psalms, which is directly quoted in the New Testament no less than 79 times.¹ But early Judaism had many other prayers, and the synagogues were schools of prayer. It was Judaism that introduced the practice of congregational worship, continued by Christianity and later by Islam. The second major part of the synagogue liturgy consisted of the Eighteen Benedictions, recited while the congregation stood and responded with a hearty *Amen*. On Sabbaths and holy days the number was reduced to seven, and six of these seven were adopted by some regions of the

early Church, as seen in an early Church Order (*Apostolic Constitutions* 7:33-38). The seventh was probably omitted because it was to be recited only in Hebrew (*Mishnah Sotah* 7:2).

In no aspect of his religious life was Yeshua more Jewish than in his prayers. The Gospels, especially Luke, emphasize how much Jesus prayed (see Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 22:34, 45, 46). He offered thanks at meals, including the Passover meal that came to be the memorial feast known as the Lord's Supper, now one of the few universal rituals of Christianity. It is often called the Eucharist, from the Greek word for giving thanks. One of the last things Yeshua said as he died on the cross was the so-called Cry of Dereliction. Mark reports it in the original Aramaic: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") These words are a quotation from Psalm 22:1. The fact that he did not repeat them in the original Hebrew of the Bible, but rather in what must have been the words of

a targum (the Aramaic interpretation that followed scripture lections in the Palestinian synagogue service) shows how much Yeshua had absorbed the prayer language of the synagogue services of his youth.

The Christian prayer *par excellence* is the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that Yeshua taught his disciples (Luke 11:2-4) and that Matthew included in the famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9-13). According to a very early Church Manual called the *Didache*, this prayer was to be recited three times a day, apparently instead of the *Shema* (*Didache* 8:2, 3). Scholars have often pointed out how much the Lord's Prayer echoes the language of traditional Jewish prayers.² Particularly noteworthy are the parallels to the *Qaddish*, which at the time probably read like this:

Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world which he created according to his will. May he rule his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speed

ily and soon. And to this, say: Amen.³

Yet there are differences. The Lord's Prayer begins by addressing the Lord as "Our Father," which is reminiscent of the Hebrew address *Avinu shebashemayim* ("Our Father in Heaven"). But if Joachim Jeremias is correct the original word that Yeshua used to address his Father was not the word *Av*, but rather the intimate word *Abba* (cf. Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). Both the *Qaddish* and the beginning of the Lord's Prayer are prayers for the eschatological consummation of deliverance, but the prayer of Yeshua introduces an extra note of confidence and certainty when it says, "May Thy Name be hallowed; may Thy kingdom come; may Thy will be done—on earth *as it is in Heaven*." For Christians the reign of God had already been inaugurated in the ministry of Yeshua, though they awaited a final consummation.

With the *Qaddish* and the Lord's Prayer we are dealing with set prayers. But neither the Rabbis nor Yeshua were content to reduce prayer to the mere repetition of forms. Prayer was to be more than the heaping up of words. The prayers of pagans were quasi-magical concatenations of grand phrases intended to flatter and manipulate the gods. Rabbi Simeon, enjoining heedfulness in prayer, urged: "When thou prayest make not thy prayer a fixed form, but a plea for mercies and supplications before God" (Mishnah *Aboth* 2:13). Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus declared: "He that makes his prayer a fixed task, his prayer is no supplication" (Mishnah *Berakoth* 4:4).

Yeshua taught: "In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:7, 8). Not the number or form of words, but the faith and disposition of the heart is what counts. In this Yeshua

and many of the Rabbis were agreed. But some aspects of Yeshua's teaching about prayer appear to be unique, especially the note of confidence: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:9, 10).⁴ Related to this aspect of Christian prayer is another feature recorded in the Gospel of John: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13, 14). This feature of Christian prayer, of course, distinguishes it from Jewish prayer. But it means not merely the repetition of a verbal formula; it means to pray in the confident and obedient spirit of Yeshua.

Yeshua laid down conditions that must be met for prayers to be answered. God forgives us if we forgive: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Reconciliation with God must be connected to reconciliation with our fellows: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23, 24). And we must pray in faith.

There is one further difference between Jewish praying and Christian praying, and it has to do with where the *Shekinah* dwells. Both acknowledge that God dwells in heaven (1 Kings 8:27), but they believe that in some mysterious way His Presence also tabernacles on earth. In Judaism one prays toward Jerusalem, for the Temple was there. In Christianity God's dwelling place among men on earth is diffused, for it is in fact God's people. In the fourth chapter of John's Gospel we find a dialogue between Yeshua and a Samaritan woman whose manner of life was morally marginal. When

his diagnosis of her problems became too uncomfortable she sought to shift the conversation to a theological disputation: "We Samaritans worship on Mount Gerazim, but you Jews say the right place is Mount Zion in Jerusalem." Yeshua replied: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24).

Accordingly the apostle Paul declared that God's Temple is now the Church: "Do you not know that you are God's Temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's Temple, God will destroy him. For God's Temple is holy, and that Temple you are" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; "you" in the original Greek is plural, signifying the people of God as a collective body, not as individuals).

Jews and Christians pray to the same God, using many of the same words and forms. They differ mainly in their beliefs about where He is now to be found.

¹See the list in the United Bible Societies edition of *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed., pages 898-99.

²See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) and Jakob J. Petuchowski and Michael Brocke, eds., *The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). Jeremias offers a reconstruction of what he believed to be the original Aramaic form of the prayer (Jeremias, 15), and Petuchowski supplies a Hebrew version (Petuchowski and Brocke, ii).

³Translation in Jeremias, 21.

⁴Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.