

Two Notes on the Lord's Prayer

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” (3 Nephi 13:9–13)

Four versions of the Lord’s Prayer are found in scripture, in Matthew 6, Matthew 6 JST, Luke 11, and 3 Nephi 13. Recent research enhances our appreciation of the words that Jesus chose to use.

Lead us not. An article by James H. Charlesworth argues that although the New Testament was written originally in Greek, one must consider “the Aramaic substratum of the gospels and the Semitic milieu in which earliest Christianity came to life.”¹ As an example, Charlesworth explains that the Greek phraseology in the line “lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:4) “looks suspiciously like an erroneous rendering” of the Semitic expression found in the Syriac manuscripts of this passage. That expression uses the *Aph’el* form of the Semitic verb, which may have two meanings: (1) a causative meaning, “lead us not into temptation,” or (2) a permissive sense, “do not permit (or allow) us to enter into temptation.”² Both are possible understandings of the Semitic construction, but Charlesworth favors the permissive sense (compare James 1:13).

Charlesworth’s analysis is compatible with Matthew 6:14 JST: “And *suffer us not to be led* into temptation.” As the footnote to Matthew 6:13 in the LDS Edition of the scriptures indeed notes, the Syriac version reads “do not let us enter into temptation.”

The ambiguity that Charlesworth points out may have been welcomed by Jesus, who may have wanted his disciples to understand both senses of this verb. He may have wanted them to pray, in effect, “do not lead us into temptation, but lead us some other way,” and at the same time to pray “do not permit us to enter into temptation.” Thus, both English translations capture part of the richness of what the Savior may have intended.

For thine is the kingdom. On several occasions Jesus taught people how to pray. Nothing demands that he said precisely the same thing each time. In fact, his counsel against vain repetitions (see Matthew 6:7) might suggest that he did not use the same words each time he prayed or spoke about prayer, which would explain in part why the texts of the Lord’s Prayer differ.³

The differences in audiences may shed light on these variations. For example, generally speaking, the more sacred the setting, the more profound the ending of the prayer. Prayers in the temple at Jerusalem did not end simply with “Amen” but with “Praised be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and eternally.”⁴ Thus, in 3 Nephi 13, when Jesus spoke at the temple in Bountiful, he concluded his prayer with more than “Amen.”

On other occasions, Jesus spoke more informally. In Luke 11:1, one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In this intimate setting, probably in the wilderness where he often went to pray, Jesus reviewed the basic steps of prayer (see Luke 11:2–4). But he cut short that instruction to talk about two related subjects: asking God and being generous (see Luke 11:5–13). In that instructional setting he did not need to give his words on prayer a formal conclusion and simply ended with “Amen.”

The longest ending for the Lord's Prayer is found in Matthew 6:15 JST: "forever *and ever*, amen." Here Jesus speaks to his apostles as he sends them into the mission field to testify of eternal truths (see Matthew 5:3-4; 6:25-27; 7:1 JST). In this priesthood setting, the ending emphasizes the everlasting nature of the kingdom of God.

Thus, variations between the four scriptural versions of the Lord's prayer are understandable. Rather than being problematic, the differences each bespeak authenticity through the authority of actual experiences.

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Notes

1. James H. Charlesworth, "Semitisms in the New Testament and the Need to Clarify the Importance of the Syriac New Testament," in *Salvación en la Palabra* (n.p., 1986), 633.

2. *Ibid.*, 637.

3. See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 206-8.

4. *Ibid.*, 81, 207.