

NEW TESTAMENT NOTES

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A PROVISIONAL NEW TRANSLATION OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

The General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia meeting in 1966 in the wider context of Prayer Book revision, released a provisional new translation of the Lord's Prayer in English. In view of the widespread interest which followed we invited the writer of this article to contribute a personal comment on the new version which reads as follows:

Our Father in heaven, your name be hallowed.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth.
Our bread of the morrow give us today,
and forgive us our debts,
as we too have forgiven our debtors,
and do not bring us to ordeal
but save us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory,
for ever.
Amen.

Ed.

It would be expected that the introduction of a new version of something as sacred and venerated as the Lord's Prayer would arouse considerable controversy. So it turned out to be when, in the wider context of an investigation into the need for Prayer Book revision, the Anglican General Synod in Australia released a provisional new translation of the Lord's Prayer. Out of the mass of expression of feeling and prejudice, the comment and criticism both favourable and unfavourable, relevant discussion centred on two main issues. Firstly, should there be a new version of the Lord's Prayer? Is a new version needed? Secondly, is this provisional translation an adequate (modern) version of the Lord's Prayer?

The language of the Lord's Prayer as we know it is the language of the Authorized Version. With the passage of time it is no longer as intelligible or as correct a translation as when it was first produced. There is the need for a new version, just as there is the need for modern versions of the Gospels and the whole New Testament. A new version will be justified if it is more intelligible than the old version to those who read it and use it in worship and private prayer, and if it is a better expression in current English of the words which Jesus Christ taught his disciples. Presumably the provisional new translation is intended to be both as clear as possible and as accurate a translation as possible in today's English.

An important requisite for a version of the Lord's Prayer which is intended for use by Christians, as the familiar version is, is that it be assured of wide

if not universal acceptance. The merits of a new version, including its clarity and accuracy, may do much to commend it. However it would be harder for a version produced by a denominational body to achieve wide acceptance than for the version contained in Matt. 6: 9–13 of a widely accepted version of the Scriptures. The fact that there is not yet a modern English version of the Scriptures of sufficient status and acceptance does not make it any easier for a denominational version to win universal support.

How does the provisional new translation measure up to the criteria of clarity and accuracy? I leave aside the question of style, although I believe the language of prayer should be plain rather than literary. (I am sure Jesus first gave the prayer in plain Aramaic, and the familiar version of the A.V. was once plain English.) 'Our Father in heaven' avoids the cumbersome relative clause with which the familiar version opens. 'Your' and 'yours' are used in place of 'thy' and 'thine' which are archaic even though still quite readily understood. 'Today' replaces 'this day' and 'do not bring us' is the form of the negative imperative conforming to modern usage. 'Save' takes the place of 'deliver' which is seldom used in the sense of 'save' today. These are good points in the new version.

On the other hand we should note that the archaic 'hallowed' is retained. T.E.V. 'kept holy' or Phillips 'honoured' (sc. 'because it is holy') indicate that there are modern equivalents available. 'The morrow' is another archaic form introduced in the new version: 'tomorrow' is current English. We note, too, two examples of very odd word order which are not in the familiar version: 'Your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth' and 'our bread . . . give us today'. These both appear to arise from a slavishly literal adherence to the word order of the Greek. They make the meaning less intelligible and are plainly bad translation. No attempt has been made to translate the third person imperatives ('hallowed', 'come', 'be done') with forms of English in current use. For example, we do not say 'your kingdom come' in regular speech. T.E.V. expresses it with a subjunctive, 'may your kingdom come', weakening its force somewhat, but saying it as it might be said today. (To retain the imperative force would require the clause to be recast in a second person form like 'send your kingdom'.) The final ascription ('yours is the kingdom . . .') has been retained, although modern versions of the Scriptures omit it because of its absence from most of the best manuscripts.

Three places at which changes of word meaning have been introduced should be noted. While each altered meaning is undoubtedly a possible translation of the Greek text, it seems that each makes the new version less intelligible than the traditional version.

1. 'Bread of the morrow' (A.V. 'daily bread'). The archaic nature of 'the morrow' has been mentioned above. The rendering 'tomorrow's bread today', which is in essence what the provisional version says, introduces a paradox which could not have been intended by Jesus: *epiousios* is difficult, and reference to lexicons and commentaries indicate three main possible derivations and meanings: 'day by day', 'for the ensuing day', and 'which we need'. It probably arises from a none-too-clear understanding of what Jesus said in Aramaic, which must have been a plain statement. However, apart from a footnote in R.S.V. and N.E.B., the most widely used English

versions all avoid the 'tomorrow's bread' idea, because it is not clear enough. Just to mention one difficulty involved in it, there is the non-equivalence of Jewish reckoning of days and our modern reckoning. Did Jesus teach his disciples to pray in the morning for the evening's meal? Or did he teach them to pray at night for the next day's (same day by Jewish reckoning) meals? Surely the prayer is for the supply of immediate needs, and thus 'daily bread' (A.V., R.S.V., N.E.B. or 'food we need' (Phillips, T.E.V.) are the clearest and best translations of *epiousios*.

2. 'Debts' and 'debtors'. Only at this point does the traditional Lord's Prayer depart from the A.V. rendering of Matt. 6: 9-13. It does so on the basis of Matt. 6: 14, 15 which gives unambiguously the meaning of *opheilēma* in that context. 'Debts' is a common meaning of *opheilēmata*, but the plain fact is that in current English it means 'money which is owed'. This is not what Jesus meant. He meant sins or wrongs. This is made quite clear by the comment in Matt. 6: 14, 15 and also by Luke's use of *hamartia* at this point of the prayer (Luke 11: 4). In Jewish thought sins were referred to figuratively and rather euphemistically as 'debts'. The Aramaic 'ob, 'oba carries this figurative meaning of 'sins'. Matthew's literal rendering *opheilēmata* is obviously meant to carry the figurative meaning too. But 'debts' in English does not. 'What we owe' (Phillips, T.E.V.) softens out the money aspect a little, but still falls short of the real meaning. N.E.B. is certainly the best translation to date with 'forgive us the wrong we have done'.

3. 'Ordeal' without the article (A.V. 'temptation'). The clause in which this translation of *peirasmos* is used, 'do not bring us to ordeal' is poor English because ordeal is not commonly used as an abstract noun without any article, and it is hard to understand what is meant. 'Ordeal' itself would seem to be rather a marginal meaning from the whole area of meaning covered by *peirasmos*. It gives one the feeling of torture or test of endurance rather than afflictions or trials or times of testing. If the rather narrow meaning 'temptation' (a test leading to sin) is not intended here, then 'trial' or 'testing' would seem to be the best rendering. N.E.B., T.E.V., Phillips follow this rendering in various ways, although 'the test' (N.E.B.) seems to imply one specific occasion not in keeping with the lack of the article in Greek. *peirasmos* occurs in Luke 22: 28, Acts 20: 19, Jas. 1: 2, 12, 13, 1 Pet. 1: 6, 2 Pet. 2: 9, and the regular meaning is 'trials' or 'tests'. When Peter wants to refer to ordeals in 1 Pet. 4: 12 he qualifies *peirasmos* with 'fiery'. Likewise in Rev. 3: 10 *peirasmos* is qualified to give the stronger idea of a time of ordeal which the bare word does not carry.

In conclusion then, for this reviewer, the provisional new translation of the Lord's Prayer is inadequate, not because he is against the principle of a new version, but because in several ways it is lacking in clarity and accuracy as an expression in English of the prayer our Lord gave to his disciples. It seems to lack the inherent quality, as well as the authorization, which would be needed to commend it to the whole of English-speaking Christendom.