

## John the Baptist and Prayer

1) He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." 2) And he said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. 3) Give us each day our daily bread; 4) and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'" Luke 11.1-4

A brief article bordering upon a few notes, nothing more.

This is an intriguing passage worth a few words. Obviously the "Our Father" grabs the attention of most people and rightly so. However, what about the reference to John the Baptist having taught his disciples to pray? Where did the disciples get this information which seems to be lacking in the Gospels? It's something that had been on their minds since hooking up with Jesus. Might as well ask him now or never.

As for the larger context of the excerpt from Luke's Gospel, it takes place right after Jesus had visited his dear friends Martha and Mary. According to 10.38 he went there with his disciples, so they were witness to what is to follow. Famously Jesus said to Martha who was taken up with the details of waiting on him, *henos de estin chreia* or "one thing is needful" [10.41].<sup>1</sup> Jesus is deliberately vague here. He doesn't let on in the least as to this "one thing" but throws it out as *chreia* or of use, advantage or service. In other words, Martha in her busyness would have recognized how Jesus uses this noun, for she's doing it right now as waiting on him. So it comes down to how she interprets *chreia*. Mary was present as well. It'd be interesting to get her take on it. As for us, we can only feel around which is what Jesus wants us to do.

This *chreia* contrasts with the *agathen merida* or "one good thing" of her sister Mary, *meris* also as portion, share. Jesus is clear on one thing, namely, that Mary had chosen it which implies that she had seen its value relative to other things. Chapter Ten concludes with this *meris* not being taken away, *aphaireo*

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This "one thing" brings to mind Ps 86.11: "unite my heart to fear your name." The verb is *yachad*, to unite in the sense of making one.

or to be removed. So we could say that *chreia* and *meris* are the same and that the anxiety and trouble of Martha are threats to both. The countermeasure as associated with Mary is *eklego*, a verb meaning to pick or single out (*ek-*, from). Note that *eklego* (i.e., the negative of it) isn't associated with her making the choice. Instead, it appears as something firmly established, free from the *merimnao* and *thorubazo* of Martha: to think earnestly upon and to trouble or to disturb.

So Chapter Ten ends without a resolution between the attentiveness of Martha tinged with anxiety and the composure of her sister Mary, sitting there with full knowledge that she's better off. Jesus must have left immediately after having uttered his words, leaving it up to the two to sort out his words. Did they share their respective observations or slug it out in one way or another? If the latter, it would be surprising that their brother Lazarus stepped in. He too much have been fascinated by what the two told him, each in their own unique way. However, what will happen to him will surpass them both, being raised from the dead.

The disciples knew Martha, Mary and Lazarus (he isn't mentioned in the above incident) but certainly not as well as Jesus. One can't help but wonder their impressions of this motley group. So when they left with Jesus, most likely having been privy to some if not the entire conversation, we can assume it had blown right over their heads. This doesn't come as a surprise, for it conforms with many instances in the Gospels of their inability to comprehend Jesus' words and actions. Still, they understood enough to keep tagging along with him.

The disciples' inherent thickness brings us to Chapter Eleven where Jesus "was praying in a certain place," the verb *proseuchomai* being the most frequent verb for to pray. Also it means to offer vows or to make a vow. Note the preposition *pros-*, indicative of direction towards-which prefaced to *euchmai* also as to pray, to make a vow. In other words *pros-* gives this verb a certain direction and hence intensity especially when it comes to making a vow.

Vs. 1 has Jesus ceasing (*pauo*: to come to an end, to rest) his *proseuchomai* after which one of his disciples poses the question central to this short essay. This unidentified man could be one among the others who were watching Jesus

as he prayed, fascinated by his composure and intensity. How it was done isn't specified but left to our imagination, this being the case throughout all the thing described here. Also "certain place" is obviously vague and can intimate a spot that Jesus preferred, one also known to his disciples. That could be under a certain tree, by a stream or even an overhang of rocks...in other words, some place that's sheltered or quasi-sheltered.

The disciple asks Jesus the million dollar question, something that had been on their minds since joining him which according to Luke, is after his encounter with John the Baptist. We can assume that they weren't present but surely must have been informed of Jesus' baptism, he telling them as many details as they could grasp, albeit dimly. As for the question, the undisclosed disciple wants to learn how to pray as John taught his disciples to do the same, the verb *proseuchomai* being used again. As for teaching, the common verb *didasko* is used, however, the Hebrew verb *lamad* may be presumed which implies training, getting accustomed to. In other words, *lamad* suggests a master-disciple relationship where the learning isn't done in one shot but over an extended period of time. This is not unlike *paideusis* among the Greeks, a teaching that begins with childhood and continues into maturity.

So did this disciple know how John the Baptist *lamad* his followers? One way to narrow this down is to consider Andrew and Simon Peter (brothers) who were under John's tutelage (cf Jn 1.39-39). This puts the unidentified person possibly as one of the brothers. As for their relationship, vs. 35 has John standing with them, *histemi* meaning as in his presence, this taking place when John saw Jesus as he was walking. As for this walking (*peripateo*: to walk around or *peri-*), it appears not to be toward John but probably on the opposite bank of the Jordan River. Nevertheless, Jesus is doing this deliberately, making sure that he's seen both by John and his disciples, notably the two who on the spot left their master to follow Jesus. More precisely, they followed right after John exclaimed "Behold, the Lamb of God" [Jn 1.36].

Such is the background behind the question posed to Jesus with regard to prayer. In a sense, this request is a double-take. It can intimate that prayer as taught by John and Jesus are essentially the same; also, that Jesus had learned from John about prayer. Nevertheless, we find nothing explicit about prayer up to this point, either by John or by Jesus. Part of the reason is that we have

specific ideas about prayer and project them on to the persons involved even if we realize the difference between us today and them two thousand years ago.

Instead of launching into an explanation, in vs. 2 as the disciple had hoped, Jesus foregoes this which is pretty much in line with how he had dealt with Martha and Mary. And so Jesus equates *proseuchomai* with what we now call the Our Father. As far as Luke's account, the article here won't get into that because it doesn't impinge directly upon the subject under consideration.

However, Jesus doesn't stop there. He expands upon the Our Father, if you will, with a parable about a man coming to his friend's house in the middle of the night asking for three loaves of bread. This request isn't for himself but for a friend who had just arrived. The man in bed relents after some hesitancy simply to get rid of the one who roused him. Note that he's in bed with his children. They must have been frightened at the incident and asked their father to comply so as to get rid of him. This incident is a far more explicit way of asking than doing it for daily bread and forgiving trespasses associated with the Our Father. It shows that the person is acting in an importune manner and having received his three loaves of bread, walks away without offering the slightest apology to his friend. One can imagine how later the two dealt with each other, not to mention the children, but that's another story.

So the unnamed disciple—again, keeping in mind it could be Andrew or Peter—comes away with something he must decipher on his own. We can see him listening to Jesus while simultaneously comparing his words with what he had learned from John. Also, did he run back to John in order to compare notes? Perhaps, but if he did, he would have been rebuked sharply, given John's single-mindedness. Then if Jesus got wind of this, he would have suffered the same fate. In light of this, the disciple felt it best to leave things as they are.

Although the Our Father and parable about the man being disturbed in the middle of the night may be taken as one and the same, can we say that they answer the disciple's question? In other words, how does he respond? As with the recent encounter with Martha and Mary, we have no answer. It's left up in the air for us to figure out. However, the question strongly suggests that the person asking it had familiarity with the way John taught (*lamad* in the sense of being a disciple) about prayer.

Judging by all accounts, John was a very focused individual, most likely close to intolerable to be with. In fact, he bears some resemblance to the importune man who asked three loaves of bread in the middle of the night. Since the excerpt we have is from Luke's Gospel, we can see if any clues as to John's *lamad* on prayer are present. Certainly they are not in the sense that we're accustomed to have in a method which we could adopt. Instead, we have to infer any *lamad* from his life.

Keeping in mind that the excerpt at the beginning of this short text is from Luke's Gospel, the following are listed from the beginning of that Gospel up to this point or up to Chapter Eleven. In other words, we have to read in between the lines to get an indirect picture of how John may have talked about prayer. And such talk is bound up with incidents going back to before he was born. For example, he must have recounted these incidents to his disciples, the scriptural verses being applicable to him as follows:

1.41: And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb.

1.66: And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts saying, "What then will this child be?"

1.68-79: the Benedictus: And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

3.4: The voice of one crying in the wilderness, that is, John citing Isaiah.

3.10: What then shall we do? In response to this, John asks his listeners to share their resources with those less fortunate.

3.15: And the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John.

3.21-22: When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove.

5.33: The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers...but yours eat and drink.

7.18: Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?

7.24 & 27: What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?...Behold, I send my messenger before your face who shall prepare your way before you.

7.28: I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

9.7: It was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared and by others that one of the old prophets had risen.

All very helpful as an outline of John the Baptist's life according to the Gospel of Luke. Surely the disciple who had questioned Jesus about learning his way of prayer in light of John's was present when some of these scriptural verses were uttered or had taken place. Also he could have had information about the birth of John, how special it was, but had difficulty putting all the pieces together. Even the encounter with Martha and Mary confused him all the more. So if we're looking for prayer as commonly understood—and this applies equally to the disciple—both we and he don't get it. You have to continue on being with Jesus, sticking it out past his death and resurrection until we come to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach...will *lamad*...you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" [Jn 14.26].

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