Criticism of Verbosity in Ancient Philosophical and Early Christian Writings: Jesus’ Critique of the ‘Polylogia’ of Pagan Prayers (Matthew 6:7) in its Graeco-Roman Context

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1 Jesus and the Gentile Babblers in Matthew 6:7

The prayer in Matthew 6:9b–13, known as the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ or ‘Our Father’, is perhaps the most popular and most frequently recited passage of the New Testament. Liturgical use has been instrumental in promoting the diffusion of the Matthean version. The prayer, however, has been preserved in two other recensions, namely the shorter edition of Luke 11:2b–4 and the version of Didache 8.2, which, apart from minor linguistic details, largely agrees with the Matthean text. Liturgy and piety have led to a widespread diffusion of the Lord’s Prayer. Tradition and common practice, however, have attributed less importance to the context in which Matthew introduces the prayer in the gospel narrative. Luke introduces the Lord’s Prayer as a direct answer to a petition of one of the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). The Matthean narrative does not mention any such request. Unlike Luke, Matthew introduces the Lord’s Prayer as part of a larger instruction on prayer, which starts in Matthew 6:5 with a polemic against the “hypocrites” (ὑποκριταί), whose prayers are described as a form of religious exhibitionism. Since the “hypocrites” of Matthew 6:5 pray “in the synagogues,” the polemic is probably directed against Jewish devotional practices. In Matthew 6:7, however, Matthew shifts his polemical target from the Jews to the “Gentiles”: “When you are


2 Biblical quotations in English are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

3 See Betz, Sermon, 361; and Luz, Matthew, 358–59.
praying, do not heap up empty phrases (μὴ βατταλογήσητε) as the Gentiles (ἐθνικοί) do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words (ἐν τῇ πολυλογίᾳ). Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven..." A distinctive feature of the Matthean version is that the Lord’s Prayer is presented as a response to what Matthew’s Gospel describes as a pagan inclination towards lengthy and babbling prayers. According to Matthew, the Gentiles rely on the abstruseness (πολυλογία) of their prayers to secure the attention of their gods and the satisfaction of their requests. Unlike the Gentiles, says Matthew, Christians should rely on God’s foreknowledge of their needs and replace the wordy prayers of the pagans with the Lord’s Prayer. As noted above, these characteristics are specifically Matthean. Luke does not have any polemical undertone, while the polemical component of Didache 8.1–2 is aimed at the “hypocrites” rather than the Gentiles. Neither Luke nor the Didache refer to verbosity when introducing the Lord’s Prayer.

The vocabulary of Matthew’s reference to Gentile verbosity presents some linguistic difficulties. The verb βατταλογέω (‘to babble’) is not attested in Greek prior to Matthew 6:7a and is a hapax legomenon in the New Testament. Subsequent occurrences are found in Christian texts mostly in direct connection with Matthew 6:7. Apart from two occurrences in the Pseudo-Clementines, the noun βαττολογία is hardly used in Greek before the fourth century. The cognate verb βατταρίζω (‘to stammer’) occurs in Plato (Theaetetus 175d), Strabo,

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4 Matthew 6:7–9a.
6 Instead of referring to God’s foreknowledge of one’s needs and the rejections of long petitions, Luke accompanies his discourse on prayer with the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8). As the midnight caller obtains attention thanks to his shameless persistence (ἀναίδεια), so too Christians are invited to persevere in their prayers; see Mathias Nygaard, Prayer in the Gospel: A Theological Exegesis of the Ideal Prayer (Biblical Interpretation Series 114; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 165.
7 In non-Christian authors, βατταλογέω occurs in the first-century CE Life of Aesop (Vita Westernmanniana) 109 and in Simplicius’ sixth-century Commentary on Epictetus’ Enchiridion 37.
8 Epistulae de virginitate 1.8.2 and 112.3, which may date to the third century CE. On the dating of the Pseudo-Clementine Epistulae de virginitate, see Daniel Caner, Wandering, Begging Monk: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 65–6.