

# Reflections on Surah Fatiha and the Lord's Prayer

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The first surah of the Qur'an is recited as a prayer several times a day by Muslims. Many Christians say the Lord's Prayer in their personal devotions or in family prayers. In the worship of Muslims and Christians these respective prayers are used both in public and in private. The surah is repeated at least 17 times a day during Nimaz. In this paper I will try to appreciate the meaning of both these prayers and to note some similarities and differences. It is perhaps easier for the Christian to join in the Amen to Surah 1 than for the Muslims to join in the Amen to the Lord's Prayer. The opening words "Our Father" are so revolutionary for most of our Muslim friends. The Muslim feels compelled to deny God as Father in order to safeguard the unity, the majesty and the nature of God.

However, let us first look at the first Surah – its name and its text – and then at the text of the Lord's prayer, before finalising our conclusion.

The first Surah of the Qur'an has several names:

***Al Fatiha*** is the verbal noun of ***fataha*** "to open", and means *The Opener* or *The Opening*. It can be used in metaphorical as well as literal ways. Literally, it can mean the physical opening of the Book. Symbolically, it can mean to enter into its spirit and try to unlock the deeper meanings of its words. Hasan Askari, a modern mystic and philosopher, sees "The Opening" as an on-going spiritual experience – the Opening which involves other openings.

***Umm al-Kitab*** - the Source of Origin, or the Mother of the Book. It is therefore the essence or a brief summary of the Qur'an.

***Sa'ban min al-Mathani*** - the seven oft-repeated (verses) of Q. "we have already given thee the seven verses which ought to be constantly repeated as well as the Qur'an". Note that the Fatiha and the Qur'an are distinguished from each other.

Other names include:

***Fatiha al-Kitab*** – the opening of the Book, Bukhari 12:14, used in a saying by Abu Huraira that "no prayer is complete without the recitation of the Fatihat-al-Kitab."

***Surah al-Salat*** – the Chapter of Prayer as it is essential to evening prayer.

***Surah al-Du'a*** – The Chapter of Supplication because the whole surah is a supplication to God.

***Surah al-Hamd*** - The Chapter of Praise, as it begins with the praise of God.

Sam Baba Mala in his article on *The Fatiha and the Christian Response*, which I am using extensively in this paper, notes the features and the peculiarities of the Fatiha:

1. As a revelation. It is a **tanzil**, the first prayer of Islam. It is regarded as an early Meccan revelation by most scholars.
2. Its structure and content – 7 verses in three sections.
  - v. 1-3 absolutely related to God – al Rahman, al Rahim and Rabb
  - v. 4 relation between God and man
  - v. 5-7 for human beings, and contains the petition for help, guidance and favours which worshippers make to God.
3. Its location – at the beginning of the Qur’an, while all other short surahs are at the end. Bukhari 12:15, 16, 23 – Muhammed intended it to be at the beginning for he used it regularly in the very early period.
4. Its form – a prayer. The only complete surah in such a form.
5. Amin is added in reciting the Fatiha – a unique practice.
6. Its verbs – all first person plural, not singular, because “*in reciting the verses man stands in his primordial state before God, and prays in the name of all creatures.*”

Al-Fatiha plays a remarkable role in the devotional life of a Muslim

1. as a recitation for the ritual prayer
2. as an all-purpose prayer.
3. as a pattern –
  - invocation of the name of God
  - praise and glorification of God
  - worshipping of God
  - seeking God’s guidance and blessing.

#### Note on Surah 1 vv 6&7, by Sale

“the way of those to whom God hath been gracious, that is, of the prophets and faithful who preceded Muhammed, under which appellations are also comprehended the Jews and the Christians, such as they were in the times of their primitive purity, before they had deviated from their respective institutions.”

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Now let us turn to the Lord’s Prayer – Matthew 6 vv 5-15 and Luke 11 vv 1-13. Only a dedicated Christian can really pray this prayer. It is called “The Lord’s Prayer” cf Matthew 6 v.12. Christ never prayed it, but its words came from his mind and heart. To offer this prayer in sincerity and truth is to signify that one is a child of God and a disciple of Christ. Therefore, the prayer is the quintessence of those things that distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian. It is in truth the prayer of the Christian Church, not that of the world.

The Lord’s Prayer requires preparation.

1. Sincerity Mt.6 v5 *...not ...as the hypocrites*
2. Secrecy Mt.6 v6 *....shut the door* Physical withdrawal, mental detachment
3. Simplicity Mt.6 v8 *.....not vain repetitions*
4. Serenity Mt.6 v8 *.... Your Father knoweth*

In the Lord's Prayer there is both a pattern of prayer and a command to pray.

There are THREE SECTIONS.

1. Invocation – *Our Father, who art in heaven*
2. Petition re –
  - a. God – His name, His kingdom, His will
  - b. Prayer – need of bread, forgiveness and victory.
3. Doxology in old MSS (In Matthew 6. v13 it is in brackets)

Now let us look at parts of this prayer in greater detail. *Abba* = "Father" is the Aramaic word Jesus used ("Daddy"). See Mark 14 v.36. Cf Romans 8 vv 15,16; Galatians 4 v6. The word *Abba* passed into the vocabulary of the early church to describe the relationship between God and the believer. The believer becomes a partaker in the divine nature (2 Peter 1 v.4; 1 Peter 1 vv3,23)

"The passage from Romans is to be seen in a baptismal context. The baptismal candidates had gone down into the waters, died, come up into newness of resurrection-life, and the first thing they do is to cry out jubilantly, exultingly. '*Abba, Father!*' They are in the family! Not only is this passage a baptismal one; it is also a Trinitarian one. *Jesus, the Son par excellence*, used the word *Abba*. The *Spirit* enables us to use it. So we approach the *Father* with confidence. '*We are bold to say Our Father, as the ancient liturgies had it.*' {2}

Bilquis Sheikh describes the moment of her conversion as the moment when she dared to call God father – *abba*. It was a moment when suddenly she was able to pour out her innermost thoughts to God as if he were her father. For a Muslim to call God "father" under the conviction of the Spirit is to enter into a new relationship with the family of God. One can to some extent understand that this is something revolutionary and daring. It is therefore much more difficult for a Muslim to say Amen to the Lord's Prayer than for the Christian to say Amen to the Fatihah. However, "the intimacy of *our Father* is balanced and supplemented by the reverent desire that His name, i.e. His nature and being, be treated as holy" {3} The name is the revelation of the character of the person who bore it. (Exodus 3 v14) The Biblical names of God can be listed as general, covenant and special. The prayer is that people may acknowledge and keep holy God's name (Isaiah 29 v.23; Ezekiel 36 v.23) in their lives, in the church and in the world. The children, by the help of the Spirit, start to bear the Father's likeness. (1 Peter 1 v13)

***Thy kingdom come.*** The prayer is that the Father's divine sovereignty should more and more fully attain its rightful place in the heart and life of fallen mankind . . . . in the highest instance it is a supplication that the kingly domination of God which came with power into the life of mankind in the first coming of the Son into this world should come fully and finally in the second coming. {4} The Muslim may have some problems with the eschatological perspective of this prayer. "Islam is theocratic, by which is implied precisely that 'God is king'. The prophet was only a messenger and the caliphs His representatives. No-one is Lord, except God. Hence the Kingdom is a fact, a reality, and there is no need to pray about it." {5} Qur'an 5 v.20, 64 v.1, 67 v.1, 85 v9. In the Lord's Prayer kingdom [*basileia*] = kingly power, royal sovereignty, not kingdom in a spatial sense.

***Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.*** The forgiveness is not requested on the ground of the fact that those who pray also forgive their enemies, but on the ground of the grace of God. But in order to utter this supplication in all sincerity, there should be no unwillingness on the part of a man to forgive his fellow-men. Otherwise he would be playing the hypocrite. (Eph 4 v.32). Muslims believe that God can and does forgive sin. One of the 99 names is Forgiver – *al Ghafur* (the forgiving one) but the Muslim does not know if God will forgive specifically. Neither forgiveness nor mercy is one of the seven eternal attributes of God. The Muslim may not have problems with many of the actual sentences in the whole prayer, but from the outset the nature of God is defined in a way beyond his categories. Herein lies a problem. Let me quote from Travis:

"*Prayer, too, is at the heart of worship, and at the heart of prayer is the Lord's Prayer. Because this was intended by Jesus as the distinctive prayer of his followers (Luke 11 vv1f), it summarises what Jesus wanted us to be concerned about. The first two petitions express our longing that God be known and honoured, and that his rule should come on earth. The last three petitions deal with things which hinder his rule in us - anxiety about the basic need of life, sin which needs forgiveness, the temptation to give up the struggle for the kingdom when things get tough. But at the same time the prayer reveals the nature of the God for whose kingdom we pray: He is a father with a plan to fulfil, who meets the needs of his children, who forgives them and sustains them in the face of trial. When the church prays this prayer it is a sign of the kingdom, because it is focussing on God's true purpose, and is drawing strength for its witness to that God and that purpose.*

For only in worship can the church's vision for the future be sustained in the face of difficulty, failure and frustration. If God is the one who brings his kingdom - both within history and beyond history - then to focus on him is the most hopeful, the most revolutionary act of all. {6}

Muslims sometimes ask Christians when and how they pray. How might the Lord's Prayer feature in the answers? I can only make a few suggestions, based on my own experience.

1. One can refer to the Lord's Prayer and its wide use by Christians, and offer to recite it and explain it.
2. One should not invite a Muslim to pray it unless he has become a disciple of Jesus.
3. It is better to stick to one version. I chose Matthew's version. It is sometimes possible to study it in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, which greatly appeals to some Muslims as being the Way of Jesus.
4. If the matter of the two versions comes up, then obviously a discussion of form and meaning, inspiration, and revelation may ensue; but it may not be a profitable discussion at this point if the focus of enquiry relates to the prayer.
5. There may be some profitable discussion on ritual prayers and personal prayer, and how the Lord's Prayer relates to both. {7}

### Footnotes

1. Bulletin on Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations in Africa. Oct 1984  
Vol 2, No4
2. Paul: Portrait of a Revolutionary. Donald Coggan. p212  
Hodder & Stoughton 1984 See pp 210-212
3. The Gospel according to St. Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction,  
Notes & Indices. A H McNeile p76 Macmillan & Co. London 1949
4. The New London Commentary on the N.T., Luke J.N.Geldenhuys.  
Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1950
5. Bible study Mt. 6 vv9-13 S.V.Sicard p.7
6. I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus p249 Stephen H Travis  
Hodder & Stoughton 1982
7. For "sins", Luke uses the Greek word *hamartia*, missing the mark, acting wrongly, breaking the law of God. "As we forgive" – present tense.

There are some ideas present in the Lord's prayer which do not occur in the Surah Fatiha:

Daily bread – distinguish between needs and wants: toothpaste & razor = wants, clothing, shelter, money to buy these = needs.

Lead us not into temptation – Do not allow us to be brought into fires where we are tested, but deliver us from evil – the evil one, Satan.