

Thinking About Language and the Lord's Prayer

Leann Williams for Spokane Friends Church May 3, 2026

I have always loved words and language. My awareness of this began in kindergarten. The method of reading instruction that was used in my kindergarten classroom was the See and Say or Look-Say method. Students memorized words in a specific progression through the Dick and Jane stories. I really wanted to learn to read. I knew that what we were doing was memorizing. I'd been going to church since I was born. We memorized Bible verses in Sunday School. I didn't really know what reading was, but I knew it wasn't just memorizing.

When I was in Bible college, still part of the ultra-conservative sphere of Christianity, the study of Greek and Hebrew was emphasized...for the male students. I got to take a class entitled "Missionaries Wives' Problems." When Bruce and I were first married, the church where we met offered a basic course in New Testament Greek. I enrolled, the only woman in the class which our church people thought was weird.

I continue to enjoy learning about languages and the process of translation. My most recent explorations have been around the Aramaic language specifically through a book entitled Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus by Neil Douglas-Klotz. He holds a Ph D in comparative Semitic language hermeneutics.

Language is complicated. It is alive, ever morphing to adapt to new knowledge, experiences, philosophies, and the whims of culture. If someone said, "I Googled it" before 2002 when it was used in an episode of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it would have sounded like nonsense. When I was teaching a high school speech class many years ago, I was giving an impassioned speech on the role of well-ordered reasoning in ancient Greece and the development of democracy. I used the phrase "public intercourse". It did not communicate what I had intended.

Words can have multiple meanings. Take, for instance, the English word "fine". It can mean a financial penalty for breaking a law, exceptional quality as in "fine China", the measure of small particles such as sand, or thin or slender as in fine hair. How you say the word can mean simply acceptable as in "that's fine" or applied to a person it means something quite different as in "she's fine!" meaning attractive.

English word structure is linear. We take a word and add prefixes before or suffixes after the word to change the meaning. The word "teach" is a verb. Add a suffix to make it teachable, and it becomes an adjective. Add a prefix to make it unteachable, and the word is still an adjective but has the opposite meaning.

Aramaic and Hebrew words are constructed differently. Semitic languages generally use three consonants to form a root word. There are language patterns of vowels into which root words are inserted that change the meaning. Other letters are added that indicate number, gender, a definite article, and sometimes pronouns and/or prepositions. So, it is often impossible to translate a word in Aramaic or Hebrew to just one word in English.

Culture and belief systems are part of language that exist largely unrecognized. I am reading the book Let This Mind Be in You, by author Bradford Scott, a historical study of the differences between Greek and Hebrew thought. In it he gives a review of Greek philosophers that introduced new thoughts that became part of our Western mindset. The Greek poet Homer who is credited with writing the Iliad and the Odyssey, introduced hero worship that lies at the core of ancient Greek society which we can observe in our own today. Socrates philosophized that man's evil actions are caused by ignorance. He developed the Socratic method of reasoning from particular facts to a general idea. He taught that one should rely on their own intellectual reasoning to find truth. Plato contributed the idea of the dualism of man, a separation of soul from flesh. He taught the soul was good and flesh was evil and that the body was only a passing phase of our existence. Aristotle was Plato's most famous student. He taught that truth was discovered by systematic thinking working from premise to conclusion.

All of these philosophies influenced Alexander the Great. His strategy to conquer most of the known Western world at that time included the spread of Greek thinking. According to Scott, Alexander knew he could only accomplish that goal through language. By introducing the Greek language, he could change the conquered peoples' whole view of life. He established schools throughout the conquered regions to train future leaders.

When Rome conquered Greece this western way of thinking was firmly established in Alexander the great's empire and was transferred to the Romans. The Roman Empire included much of the Middle East including Judea during Jesus' lifetime and the period in which the New Testament books and letters were written.

It is generally accepted in western Christianity that the New Testament was written in Greek. However, Jesus spoke Aramaic. It was the common trade language used throughout the Middle East from roughly 700 BC to about 200 AD. So, when Jesus spoke to the crowds or with his disciples it was likely in Aramaic. Eastern Christian Churches use a version of the New Testament in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic closely related to the language spoken by Jesus. It was likely translated in the early 5th century. Scholars and researchers use it for insights into the perspective and meaning of Jesus' words from his cultural context.

Jesus was Jewish and was raised in the Jewish culture with Hebrew scriptures. Though the Greek culture and language was influential, Eastern thought and culture was dominant among the Jews. Eastern thought sees the world holistically. Body, mind, and spirit are intertwined. All creation is understood as interconnected with the Creator and the community of created. Seen and unseen worlds are part of the web of connection.

The tradition of native Middle Eastern and Hebraic mysticism held that a sacred writing should be considered at three levels. The intellectual or literal reading considered words and their meanings. In Semitic languages words have many layered meanings. The second reading would consider the metaphoric or poetic meaning. The third reading would call the reader to consider what the passage meant in their life. How was it speaking to the reader personally? How were they moved to respond? For me, this tradition fits with a Quaker way of reading the Bible.

Taking all of what I have just spoken about into consideration, Neil Douglas-Klotz offers a translation of the Lord's Prayer that opens a new and for me, a deeper understanding of the text. Much of the following information comes from his book. Let's look at the first section together. In your bulletins or online, you should find a half-page set of notes that will help you follow along. We will only cover the first section of the prayer today as there is a lot to unpack.

The first part of the Lord's Prayer reads, *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

Those first words, "Our Father which art in heaven" are translated from two Aramaic words *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*. The first word, *Abwoon*, is translated "Our Father". There are several concepts at work in this word:

- **A** (from which we get Abba and Allah) represents the Absolute Being, The Source, oneness or unity
- **ab** refers to all fruit that emanates from the source of unity. It is ungendered, so it could be translated "divine parent".
- **bw** represents a birthing, creation, or a flow of blessing from this source
- **bwn** signifies a ray or emanation from the source from potential to actual. It brings physicality to this word.
- **oo** refers to the breath or spirit that carries this flow - This flow includes forces we now call magnetism, wind, electricity, etc. It is related to a word translated Holy Spirit.

- *n* represents the vibration of the breath or energy from the source as it touches, moves, or changes the receiver, something in the physical world.

“Our Father” expands in my mind to Our Creator who gave birth to us, the source of all we are, all we see and hear, and forces and possibilities unknown to us. “Our Father” includes the ongoing vibrating energy of the universe ever responding to and permeating the physical world.

The second Aramaic word in the phrase is *d'bwashmaya*. The *d'* indicates to and from, a movement of energy. Again, *bw* indicates a flow of blessing or a birthing. The root word *shm* indicates that which rises and shines in space, the entire sphere of a being. The ending *aya* functions something like an all-inclusive preposition. It indicates every center of activity, every place we see, and the potential abilities of all things. This was the Aramaic concept of heaven. When translated into Greek or English, “heaven” became a separate place rather than the entire ongoing processes of all of creation.

For me, with this word, *d'bwashmaya*, *Abwoon*, Our Father becomes personal and knowable through the universe and physical world. It brings to my mind Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork. Day unto day pours forth speech, and night unto night shows forth knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.” I also think of the words spoken by the apostle Paul in Athens to a group of Greek philosophers recorded in Acts 17. He described God as the one who made the world and everything in it, who gives life and breath to all things, in whom we live and breathe and have our being.

The words “who art in heaven” seem totally insufficient to express the sphere of God’s creative energy and ongoing relationship with all of creation. The whole phrase *Abwoon d'bwashmaya* could be translated “Oh Creator who gave birth to us, source of all we are, all we see and hear, and forces and possibilities unknown to us, you permeate the ongoing dynamic processes of creation.

The next part of the Lord’s Prayer is “hallowed be thy name”. In Aramaic, it is *Nethquduah shmakh*.

In this phrase the same root word *shm*, the name that represents all of a being, has *akh* added which is the possessive pronoun “your”. Your name, source of all that we are and know, is *qadash* or holy, set apart for the sacred. A prefix, *neth*, is added which means let it be. In Aramaic, the word *nethqadash* creates images of clearing and preparing the ground for a valuable or treasured plant. Internally we can sweep clear our hearts and minds to

prepare a place for planting the values, intentions, desires for a holy life, a life separated for holy purposes. It could be translated, "Let your name be holy in us."

There's a lot to ponder in the first section of the Lord's Prayer. As I pondered all these concepts, my understanding kept shifting and the words kept changing in how I would translate it. Today, I will end this sermon with my translation which has changed slightly from what you have printed in the notes. I think it leads us well into our silent worship together.

Oh Creator who gave birth to us, source of all we are, all we see and hear, and forces and possibilities unknown to us, in the ongoing dynamic processes of creation, let us clear our hearts and minds from all that disconnects us from the values, intentions, and desires for a life set apart for sacred use to let your name be holy in us.

No one translation can hold all that this scripture holds. I invite you to ponder what the passage stirs within you.