

## A Disconcerting Prayer: On the Originality of Luke 23:34a

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Luke 23:34a (“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”), one of the famous “seven last words” of Jesus, is enclosed by double brackets in NA<sup>27</sup> and UBS<sup>4</sup>, indicating that the logion is known not to be a part of the original text.<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, a vigorous debate rages on, with the proponents of the shorter reading tending to emphasize external evidence, and defenders of the longer reading focusing on intrinsic probability. Both sides have claimed victory in the transcriptional arena but have paid little, if any, attention to early Christian interpretations of the prayer, giving this aspect of the debate a regrettably speculative flavor.<sup>2</sup> In this essay I shall review the external evidence, arguing that

I would like to thank Bart D. Ehrman, Elizabeth A. Clark, and T. J. Lang for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Proponents of the shorter reading include Jason A. Whitlark and Mikeal C. Parsons, “The ‘Seven’ Last Words: A Numerical Motivation for the Insertion of Luke 23:34a,” *NTS* 52 (2006): 188–204; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002), 154; Jacobus H. Petzer, “Anti-Judaism and the Textual Problem of Luke 23:34,” *Filología Neotestamentaria* 5 (1992): 199–204; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (2 vols.; AB 28, 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2:1503–4; Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (trans. John Bowden; New York: Scribner, 1971), 298–99; John Martin Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (1930; repr., London: Macmillan, 1942), 286–87; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1914), 531, 544–45; B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings* (1882; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 68. Proponents of the longer reading include Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119–23; Joël Delobel, “Luke 23:34a: A

proponents of the shorter reading have exaggerated their case. Then, after examining the formidable intrinsic evidence in favor of the longer reading, I shall turn to neglected transcriptional evidence that shows that Luke 23:34a was a problem passage in early Christianity.

### I. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

The evidence for the spuriousness of Luke 23:34a is both early and diverse. The prayer is missing from arguably the two strongest Alexandrian witnesses,  $\text{p}^{75}$  and Codex Vaticanus, as well as from 579 and the Sahidic version. It is missing also from important Western witnesses—most notably, the first hand of Codex Bezae and the Old Latin manuscripts *a* and *d*—and from the Caesarean manuscript Codex Koridethi. Finally, it is missing from Byzantine manuscripts stretching from Codex W in the late fourth century to 597 in the thirteenth century.

Although it lacks the august company of an early papyrus, the long reading also enjoys early and diverse attestation. Jason A. Whitlark and Mikeal C. Parsons have attempted to characterize the prayer as a distinctively Western reading, claiming that “the evidence for the inclusion of Luke 23.34a is restricted to the Western text prior to the fourth century.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the only pre-fourth-century witnesses to the text of Luke are  $\text{p}^{75}$  and a handful of church fathers, hardly enough evidence to justify speaking of a variant being confined to a particular text type. Moreover, one of these pre-fourth-century witnesses is Origen (ca. 185–254), whose citations of Luke consistently support the Alexandrian text.<sup>4</sup> Whitlark and Parsons dismiss Origen’s

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Perpetual Text-Critical Crux?” in *Sayings of Jesus: Canonical and Non-Canonical. Essays in Honour of Tjitze Baarda* (ed. William L. Petersen et al.; NovTSup 89; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1997), 25–36; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:971–81; Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus: Tradition and Interpretation in the Passion Narrative* (WUNT 2/33; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 91–92; Charles H. Talbert, “Martyrdom and the Lukan Social Ethic,” in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts* (ed. Richard J. Cassidy and Philip J. Scharper; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 109; Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates* (1925; repr., London: Macmillan, 1961), 138–39; J. Rendel Harris, “New Points of View in Textual Criticism,” *Expositor* 8 (1914): 316–34; Adolf von Harnack, “Probleme im Texte der Leidensgeschichte Jesu,” *SPAW* 11 (1901): 251–66.

<sup>3</sup> Whitlark and Parsons, “Seven’ Last Words,” 191. Earlier in the article the authors say that “all early evidence for its inclusion prior to the fourth century belongs almost exclusively to the Western text-type” (p. 190; emphasis added). It is not clear what they mean by saying that all the evidence belongs almost exclusively to the Western text, so I have focused on the less ambiguous formulation of their argument cited above.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “The Majority Text and the Original Text of the New Testament,” in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee; Studies and Documents 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 205.

testimony, claiming that his “writings evidence many distinctly Western readings,” but they make no attempt to explain why one should presume that Origen used a Western text when writing *De Pascha* (2.43.7–14) and *Homiliae in Leviticum* (2.1.5), both of which quote the prayer.

Having thus characterized the pre-fourth-century evidence, Whitlark and Parsons assert that the presence of the logion in Codex Sinaiticus is due to mixture with the Western text, citing Westcott and Hort’s claim that “Western readings [in Codex Sinaiticus] are specially numerous in St John’s Gospel, and in parts of St Luke.”<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, Whitlark and Parsons do not attempt to explain why Luke 23 should be considered one of the parts identified by Hort, thereby demoting an important Alexandrian witness to a Western text without an argument. This treatment of the evidence is particularly unfortunate in light of the absence of Western readings in Sinaiticus at the end of Luke, an absence that suggests that Sinaiticus retains its Alexandrian character here. Apart from a few very minor exceptions, such as the omission of ῥῶδη in v. 44, Sinaiticus never agrees with Bezae against p<sup>75</sup> or Vaticanus in Luke 23. Moreover, Sinaiticus disagrees with Bezae on every major variant in Luke 23, and lacks the Western non-interpolations.<sup>6</sup>

Other Alexandrian witnesses to Luke 23:34a are Codex Regius and the Bohairic Coptic version, as well as Didymus the Blind.<sup>7</sup> The Palestinian Syriac version, thought to be based on a Caesarean *Vorlage*,<sup>8</sup> also contains the prayer, as do a number of Western witnesses, including Old Latin versions (it<sup>aur, b, c, e, f, ff2, 1, r1</sup>), the Vulgate, and the Old Syriac. The prayer is also found in the Byzantine manuscripts A, Y, and Syr<sup>pal</sup>, and the Armenian, Ethiopic, Georgian, and Slavic versions.

Whitlark and Parsons have, therefore, underestimated the diversity of texts witnessing to Luke 23:34a. It must be admitted, however, that Codex Sinaiticus is the earliest manuscript containing the prayer and would seem to be outflanked by p<sup>75</sup>, which is from the late second or early third century. Yet patristic citations offer a powerful and neglected counterweight to the papyrus. The prayer is cited by Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.18.5) and apparently by Marcion (in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 42.11.6) in the second century, Hippolytus (*Ben. Is. Jac.* 27.28) in the late second or early third century, as well as Origen (*Pasch.* 2.43.7–14; *Hom. Lev.* 2.1.5) in the third and Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23) in the fourth. Ephrem cites the prayer three times in his commentary on the *Diatessaron*, which suggests that the prayer was in Tatian’s text in the middle of the second century (10.14; 21.3; 21.18). In addition, the prayer is

<sup>5</sup> Westcott and Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 151; cf. Whitlark and Parsons, “‘Seven’ Last Words,” 190.

<sup>6</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 228, 258 n.183.

<sup>7</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *Didymus the Blind and the Text of the Gospels* (New Testament in the Greek Fathers 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 256.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100.

found in the Pseudo-Clementine literature (*Rec.* 6.5; *Hom.* 11.20); Archelaus, *Disputation with Manes* 44; *Apos. Con.* 2.3.16; 5.3.14; *Didascalia* 25; *Gos. Nic.* 10; and *Acts of Philip* (ANF 8:500). Moreover, while the significance of Eusebius's citation of Hegesippus is disputed—a problem to which I shall return—Hegesippus also cited the prayer in the second century, if Eusebius transmitted his source more or less faithfully. As Kim Haines-Eitzen has noted, “These witnesses demonstrate that the prayer was known in the second century in Gaul, Alexandria, Palestine, Syria, and Rome.”<sup>9</sup>

In sum, the external evidence for the shorter reading is both early and diverse, but proponents of this reading have inaccurately characterized the long reading as Western—it is in fact attested by all four text types including one of the most important Alexandrian witnesses—and have neglected the patristic evidence that counterbalances the antiquity of  $\text{p}^{75}$ . If we were forced to make a decision on the basis of external evidence alone, however, it would be difficult to offer a decisive answer to this text-critical conundrum.

## II. INTRINSIC PROBABILITY

There is only one serious intrinsic argument in favor of the shorter text. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and others have noted that the prayer interrupts the flow of the narrative because the implied subjects of the verbs both before and after the prayer are Jesus' killers.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, the shift from the soldiers to Jesus and then back to the soldiers is a bit abrupt, which could suggest that the saying is secondary. On the other hand, advocates of the longer text agree that the saying is in some sense secondary; *ex hypothesi*, Luke is inserting a new saying into his version of the Markan passion narrative, and the third gospel is not immune from awkward redaction (e.g., Luke 8:5–15; cf. Mark 4:3–20).<sup>11</sup>

Fitzmyer also argues that the manuscripts containing the long reading prematurely “introduce a motif of ignorance, which is otherwise found in Acts (3:17; 13:27; 17:30).”<sup>12</sup> This claim is question-begging; the ignorance motif is found in Acts alone only if the third evangelist did not introduce it here, and one can hardly expect Luke to introduce this motif before Jesus has been crucified. Indeed, Fitzmyer is hoist with his own petard, for the similarities between Luke 23:34a and the ignorance motif in Acts offer striking evidence that they came from the same author.<sup>13</sup> Like Luke 23:34a, Acts 3 links the ignorance of the Jews with mitigated

<sup>9</sup> Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2:1503; cf. Whitlark and Parsons, “‘Seven’ Last Words,” 193.

<sup>11</sup> Harnack, “Probleme im Texte,” 257.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2:1503.

<sup>13</sup> See Eldon Jay Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (SNTSMS 3; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 41–63, esp. 45.

culpability and the opportunity to be forgiven: “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” (3:17–19 NRSV alt.). Raymond E. Brown aptly sums up the significance of this conspicuous confluence of ignorance and the possibility of forgiveness: “the ignorance motif is clearer in Luke-Acts than in any other NT writing. If one is tempted to posit that a copyist read passages like Acts 3:17 and 13:27 and then formulated this prayer [i.e., Luke 23:34a], one has even better reason to posit that the prayer was a formulation by Luke himself.”<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, an integral part of the apostolic kerygma for Luke is the idea that all nations wallowed in ignorance until the resurrection of Jesus revealed God’s plan.<sup>15</sup> Paul explains the gospel accordingly at the Areopagus: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent in view of the fact that he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31 NRSV alt.; cf. 14:16; 26:9). In Acts, then, ignorance and innocence go hand in hand.

Luke’s interest in the relationship of knowledge and guilt can be seen again in his redaction of the parable of the watchful servants (12:35–48; Matt 24:42–51).<sup>16</sup> After declaring that the master will punish the unfaithful servant (cf. Matt 24:50–51), Luke adds:

That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (12:47–48 NRSV)

Thus, Luke 23:34a coheres not only with Luke’s understanding of the ignorance of Jesus’ killers as found in Acts but also with his particular interest in the relation of knowledge to culpability.<sup>17</sup>

The Lukan character of the prayer is revealed also by its similarity to the martyrdom of Stephen, who dies with a prayer of forgiveness on his lips. Some commentators have made the transcriptional argument that the similarity of the two prayers can be explained as an attempt to harmonize the two martyrdoms, or to ensure that Stephen does not outstrip Jesus in following Jesus’ own teach-

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 976–77.

<sup>15</sup> Green, *Death of Jesus*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Note also Luke’s portrayal of God as one who forgives even before repentance is expressed (15:20; 19:10), Jesus’ instruction to pray for one’s enemies (6:27–29), and Luke’s frequent portrayals of Jesus praying. See Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 976.

ing.<sup>18</sup> Yet the complete lexical dissimilarity of the two prayers makes this harmonization hypothesis unlikely. As Ehrman has noted, “Scribal harmonizations are rarely (ever?) oblique; they involve word for word, verbal agreements.”<sup>19</sup> If Luke 23:34a were based on Acts 7:60, then we must suppose that the scribe was careful to reproduce the concept without the wording, a scenario suggesting that these two prayers are the work of a single author rather than an imitator. The weakness of the transcriptional argument for the shorter text points us back to the intrinsic argument for the longer text; it is unlikely that Luke 23:34a is a harmonization to Acts 7:60, so we must conclude that the long form of the text has in its favor not only the ignorance motif but also a striking resemblance to the death of Stephen.

Finally, the style and vocabulary of Luke 23:34a are distinctively Lukan. In Matthew and Mark the vocative *πάτερ* is never used without a modifier, but Luke uses it this way seven times (not including the verse in question), and two of these instances occur during his passion narrative (22:42; 23:46; see also 11:2; 15:12, 18, 21; 16:24).<sup>20</sup> Further, the petition “forgive” (*ἄφεσις*) followed by a rationale (*γάρ*) is exactly the same as in the Lukan form of the Lord’s Prayer (11:4).<sup>21</sup>

In sum: the intrinsic evidence offers strong—some would say decisive—reason for supposing that Luke 23:34a was composed by the same person who wrote Luke-Acts. The strength of this evidence is thrown into sharper relief if one considers the alternative: a scribe who assiduously imitated the theology and style of Luke-Acts, who copied the death of Stephen without using any of Stephen’s words, and who inserted this prayer only into the Gospel of Luke, but never into the other Gospels.<sup>22</sup> We turn now to examine neglected transcriptional evidence which offers a more credible explanation of the data.

### III. TRANSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE

Since the time of Westcott and Hort, many scholars have opined that no Christian could have omitted something as exquisite as Luke 23:34a. Hort advanced this

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2:1503.

<sup>19</sup> Ehrman, “The Text of the Gospels at the End of the Second Century,” in *Codex Bezae: Studies from the Lunel Colloquium, June 1994* (ed. D. C. Parker and C. B. Amphoux; NTTs 22; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 112.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 976.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Harnack argues that “[s]ollen die Worte ein späterer Zusatz sein, so ist es auffallend, dass nicht eine einzige Handschrift ihn im Matthäus- oder Marcustext aufweist, die doch an dieser Stelle mit dem Lucastext fast identisch sind. War das Bedürfniss, an dieser Stelle ein Gebet des Herrn für seine Feinde zu lesen, so gross, so begreift man nicht, warum es sich nur in einem Text geltend gemacht hat” (“Probleme im Texte,” 258). This last point may be an argument from silence, but turnabout is fair play; NA<sup>27</sup> cites the absence of the prayer in the other Gospels as evidence of its spuriousness.

argument in no uncertain terms: “Its omission, on the hypothesis of its genuineness, cannot be explained in any reasonable manner. Wilful excision, on account of the love and forgiveness shown to the Lord’s own murderers, is absolutely incredible.”<sup>23</sup> Others, most notably Adolf von Harnack, B. H. Streeter, J. Rendel Harris, and Eldon Jay Epp, have suggested that the prayer could have been omitted because of anti-Jewish bias, or because the siege of Jerusalem in 70 c.e. proved that the Jews were not forgiven, with Epp offering the further observation that the prayer is missing from Codex Bezae, the very manuscript that evinces discomfort with the ignorance motif in Acts.<sup>24</sup> The anti-Jewish hypothesis has not persuaded everyone, however, because, as Epp himself admits, it assumes that Jesus was praying for the Jews rather than the Romans or someone else, and also because the hypothesis is thought to be too speculative to overwhelm the external evidence.<sup>25</sup> Whitlark and Parsons, for example, reject the anti-Jewish hypothesis because “the assumption here is that the logion is understood to be addressed to the Jews.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Jacobus H. Petzer turns the anti-Jewish hypothesis on its head, arguing that the logion was actually read as a prayer for the soldiers who crucified Jesus and was added to Luke to increase the guilt of the Jews.<sup>27</sup> The evidence, however, does not support this conjecture.

After examining early interpretations of Luke 23:34a, I have discovered no evidence suggesting that anyone ever understood Jesus’ prayer to be on behalf of the soldiers. Occasionally commentators universalized the sin of the crucifixion, claiming that Jesus was killed by the human race, but, if a specific culprit is mentioned, it is invariably the Jews.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Christians consistently read the verse as a prayer

<sup>23</sup> Westcott and Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 68; see also Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 298; Creed, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 286; Plummer, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 544.

<sup>24</sup> Harnack, “Probleme im Texte,” 251–66; Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 138–39; Harris, “New Points of View,” 316–34; Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Epp, *Theological Tendency*, 45. Metzger, for example, simply avers that the variant “can scarcely be explained as a deliberate excision by copyists who, considering the fall of Jerusalem to be proof that God has not forgiven the Jews, could not allow it to appear that the prayer of Jesus had remained unanswered” (*Textual Commentary*, 154).

<sup>26</sup> Whitlark and Parsons, “‘Seven’ Last Words,” 192.

<sup>27</sup> Petzer, “Anti-Judaism and the Textual Problem of Luke 23:34a,” 199–204. He argues that (1) Epp’s study of Codex Bezae shows that the Western text, unlike the Alexandrian text, is anti-Jewish; (2) Luke 23:34a is a Western reading; therefore, (3) Luke 23:34a is an anti-Jewish addition that attempts to exculpate the Romans by portraying Jesus praying for the Roman soldiers. This argument is problematic for a number of reasons: first, as we have seen, the external evidence for Luke 23:34a comprises all four text types, not simply the Western. Second, Petzer’s assumptions about the Western text are based on Epp’s study of Codex Bezae, but Codex Bezae is one of the manuscripts that omits Luke 23:34a. Third, Petzer offers no patristic evidence that Jesus’ prayer was read as a prayer for the Roman soldiers.

<sup>28</sup> See Chrysostom’s universalizing interpretation: “Being crucified he prays for those who crucified him . . . and because of this he came, to be crucified by us” (*Cruc. [PG 49:405]*).

for the Jews beginning with the very earliest exegetes (e.g., in the second and third centuries, Hippolytus, Origen, Archelaus, and the *Didascalia*), and stretching on into late ancient Christianity (e.g., Ambrose).<sup>29</sup>

In light of the fact that the available evidence suggests that second-century Christians read Luke 23:34a as a prayer for the Jews, it is important to note that the variant originates in the second century, a time of fierce Christian–Jewish polemics.<sup>30</sup> In this context, Jesus’ prayer for the Jews must have been troubling to those who, like Melito of Sardis, were convinced that the siege of Jerusalem was divine retribution for Jesus’ death (*Homily on the Passover* 99).<sup>31</sup> In fact, as we shall see below, Luke 23:34a was worrisome to early Christians for this reason and others as well.

### *Jesus’ Apparent Forgiveness of the Jews*

Luke 23:34a was problematic for early Christians because it seemed to absolve the Jews for killing Jesus. Ambrose (*Job* 5.12–13), Jerome (*Ep.* 120.8.2 [PL 22:993]), Theodoret (*Interpretatio in XIV epistulas sancti Pauli* [PG 82:241]), Leo the Great (“Sermon 52”), and John Chrysostom (*Cruc.* [PG 49:405]) downplay this fact by

<sup>29</sup> Hippolytus, *Ben. Is. Jac.* (PO 27:38); Origen, *Pasch.* 2.43.7–14; Archelaus, *Disputation with Manes* 44; *Didascalia* 25; Ambrose, *Job* 5.12–13. Matthias Blum argues that in *Apos. Con.* 2.3.16; 5.3.14 and *Gos. Nic.* 10 Jesus prays for the soldiers (“ . . . denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun”: *Zur Rezeption der Fürbitte Jesu am Kreuz (Lk 23,34a) in der antiken jüdisch-christlichen Kontroverse* [NTAbh, n.F. 46; Münster: Aschendorff, 2004], 58–66, 193–96). Blum’s main evidence is the attempt to lessen Pilate’s culpability in these texts, which, according to Blum, implies sympathy for the soldiers, and the fact that it is the soldiers who actually affix Jesus to the cross. These arguments are far from decisive: the Gospel of Luke also appears to mitigate Pilate’s culpability and depicts Jesus being crucified by soldiers, and it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the recipients of the prayer in Luke. The identity of the recipients of the prayer in *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Gospel of Nicodemus* is at least as ambiguous as it is in Luke, if not more so. In *Demonstratio adversus Judaeos* the author—once thought to be Hippolytus—provides what may be the only extant example of an early Christian reading Luke 23:34 as a prayer for a specific group other than the Jews. He writes, “In my prayer to you, Lord, I said, ‘Father, forgive them, the Gentiles,’ for it is the time for favor with the Gentiles” (*ANF* 5:219–20). Yet this reformulation of the prayer arouses suspicion; no Christians thought that Jesus was crucified by “the Gentiles” in the generic sense of the term, least of all the author of this treatise against the Jews. This form of the prayer attempts to displace the Jewish recipients of Jesus’ prayer by changing “for they do not know what they are doing” to “for it is the time for favor with the Gentiles,” thereby changing the prayer of forgiveness for Jesus’ killers to a general word of absolution for the Gentiles. Even if one remains unconvinced by this interpretation of Pseudo-Hippolytus, the dominant mode of early Christian interpretations of Luke 23:34a remains clear.

<sup>30</sup> The *Epistle of Barnabas*, which claims that the Jews had never been the people of God, may be one of the most strident examples.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also Origen, *Cels* 4.22; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.6; Pseudo-Justin, *Quaest. et Responsiones ad Orthodoxos* (PG 6:1356).

admitting that the Jews may indeed have had the opportunity to be forgiven, but their subsequent recalcitrance demands that they be punished anyway. Chrysostom, for example, writes, “What then? Did he forgive them the sin? He did forgive them, if they wished to repent. For if he had not forgiven them the sin, Paul would not have become an apostle; if he had not forgiven them the sin, three thousand and five thousand and many myriads of Jews would not have believed” (*Cruc.* [PG 49:405]; cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 21:20).<sup>32</sup> The book of Acts furnishes many examples of Jews who believed and who, therefore, must have been forgiven, but this fact presupposes its opposite: those who did not respond favorably to the preaching of the apostles are not forgiven.

Chrysostom expands this argument in *In principium actorum*. Christ’s prayer secured not forgiveness but a forty-year period during which the Jews could have repented. After quoting Luke 23:34a, Chrysostom writes,

For he did not immediately bring the punishment and retribution on them, but he waited for longer than 40 years after the cross. For the Savior was crucified under Tiberius, but their city was taken under Vespasian and Titus. . . . He desired to give them time to repent . . . but since they remained incurable, he led the punishment and retribution to them. (PG 51:111)

Chrysostom thus situates Luke 23:34a within the broad sweep of salvation history. Yes, Christ prayed for forgiveness, and this prayer was answered by forty years of forbearance. History has moved on, however, and the Jews have remained disobedient. Jesus’ prayer no longer has any purchase.

Other commentators used intertextual exegesis to deal with the problem of the forgiveness of the Jews. By submerging the narrative of Luke 23 in new contexts, early Christians were able to produce more amenable results than could be wrung from the literal sense.<sup>33</sup> For example, in his *De Benedictionibus Isaaci et Jacobi*, Hippolytus reads Esau as a type of the Jews and Isaac as a type of Christ. In the Septuagintal version of Genesis 27, Isaac feels sorry for Esau when he loses his blessing to his younger brother Jacob. To be precise, Isaac is *pierced* (καταπυχθέντος) when he sees his son’s misfortune (PO 27:38). The word *κατανύσσομαι* was commonly used as a metaphor of sorrow, but Hippolytus plays on the literal and metaphorical senses of the word to find a prophecy of Christ’s prayer from the cross:

Isaac said this to Esau: “If I have made him your lord, and have made all his brothers his servants, and have strengthened him with corn and wine, what then shall I do for you, child?” Isaac was pierced, and Esau cried aloud and wept.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. a similar passage in *Ad Corinthios* (PG 61:57).

<sup>33</sup> I follow David Dawson in understanding “the literal sense” to mean “an honorific title given to a kind of meaning that is culturally expected and automatically recognized by readers” (*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992], 8). The literal meaning of Luke 23:34a in early Christianity was a prayer for the Jews.

(Gen 27:37–38) The piercing of Isaac is the compassion of the Logos regarding the transgression of the people [τοῦ λαοῦ], for after being bound the savior said on their behalf “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (PO 27:38)<sup>34</sup>

Hippolytus makes Isaac a type of the one who was pierced and felt sorrow, but, by submerging Jesus’ prayer in the narrative of Genesis 27, he transforms it from a word of absolution to a twinge of compassion for a rejected son; Jesus’ prayer for the Jews procures not forgiveness but the blessing that was withheld from Esau, namely, the opportunity to repent for killing Jesus (PO 27:40). Moreover, Isaac’s prediction that Esau will “live by the sword” signifies that the Jews “will never cease making war and being warred upon by the surrounding nations, as these scriptures themselves make clear” (PO 27:42). Thus, plaited together with the story of Esau’s misfortune, Luke 23:34a warns the Jews of their coming trials and offers them a chance to repent, but does not seek their forgiveness.

Similarly, Hippolytus’s near contemporary Archelaus compares Luke 23:34a to Moses’ prayer for Pharaoh: “There, Moses prayed that Pharaoh and his people might be spared the plagues; and here, our Lord Jesus prayed that the Pharisees might be pardoned, when He said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (*Disputation with Manes* 44 [ANF 6:220]). This comparison allows Archelaus to acknowledge the compassion of Moses and Jesus while simultaneously casting the Pharisees in the role of Pharaoh, someone who did not receive forgiveness in the end.

Centuries later, Ambrose (339–397) links Luke 23:34a and Job 9:5 through their common reference to ignorance.<sup>35</sup> By identifying the mountains that God makes old with the old Jewish letter, Ambrose is able to turn Jesus’ prayer into a declaration of the obsolescence of the Jews:

What are the mountains which God made to grow old? Moses, Aaron, Josue the son of Nun, Gideon, the prophets, all the books of the Old Testament. Jesus the Lord came; He brought the New Testament, and that which was, was made old. The Christian was made new, the Jew grew old; grace was renewed, the letter grew cold. God overturned the mountains and altered them. Yes, He overturned and subverted the understanding according to the letter and established the comprehension that is of the spirit. . . . And so Jesus made these mountains grow old, and the Jews know it not. Indeed, had they known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of majesty and would never still be pursuing their Jewish follies. They, then, are the ones who know not. For this reason also the Lord Jesus says

<sup>34</sup> In context it is clear that when Hippolytus uses the word ὁ λαός he is referring to the Jewish people; for Hippolytus, ὁ λαός are those whom Moses rebuked, from whom Jesus was begotten according to the flesh, to whom Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom, who nailed Jesus to a tree, to whom Peter preached in Acts 2, and who live under the yoke of the law (PO 27:38).

<sup>35</sup> “He who makes the mountains grow old and they do not know it, who overturns them in anger” (Job 9:5).

in the Gospel, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”  
But they are not excused by their lack of knowledge. (Job 5.12–13 [McHugh, FC])

Job 9:5 links ignorance with obsolescence, and, by placing Luke 23:34a in this context, Ambrose reads Jesus’ words as proof that the Jews had been superseded. This sort of argument will persuade few modern people, but in the early church figural exegesis was no whimsical pastime lacking real socioreligious consequences. The relevant question for our purposes is not the validity of such interpretations, but what these commentators were trying to do with their exegesis.

It appears that another strategy for avoiding the exculpation of the Jews was simply to change the wording of the prayer. Beginning during the fourth century with Epiphanius (*Pan.* 77.7.14) and stretching on into the twelfth, some commentators cite Luke 23:34a with *συγχώρησον* in place of *ἄφες*: “Father, yield to them, for they do not know what they are doing” (*πάτερ συγχώρησον αὐτοῖς οὐ γὰρ οἴδασι τί ποιοῦσι*). According to this form of the text, Jesus prays not for the forgiveness of the Jews but that God would yield or defer to them, allowing them to do their worst. In *De perfectione christiana*, for example, Gregory of Nyssa (335–394) catalogues various titles and attributes of Christ and the ways in which Christians ought to emulate them. When discussing Luke 23:34a, Gregory does not mention Christ’s forgiveness and the obligation for Christians to forgive, as one would expect.<sup>36</sup> For Gregory, Luke 23:34a demonstrates Christ’s patience:

If it is necessary to distinguish the individual colors through which the imitation comes about, one color is meekness, for he says: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt 11:29). Another color is patience [*μακροθυμία*] which appears quantitatively in “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). A sword, clubs, chains, whips . . . [etc.], and all of these terrible things were applied to him without cause, nay, rather, in return for innumerable good works! And how were those who did these things repaid? “Father, yield to them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Was it not possible for him to bring the sky down upon them, or to bury these insolent men in a chasm of the earth . . . [etc.]. Instead, he bore all these things in meekness and patience, legislating patience for your life through himself. (8.1.197 [Callahan, FC])

According to this form of the prayer, Jesus exhibits his *μακροθυμία* and refrains from smiting his killers, but does not pray for their forgiveness.

There is no indication that Gregory himself intentionally altered Luke’s text. Despite the fact that there are no extant manuscripts with this reading, the appearance of this form of the prayer in fourth- through twelfth-century commentators suggests that manuscripts of Luke containing the alternative reading had begun

<sup>36</sup> This is particularly striking when one considers the ubiquity of the early Christian notion that Christians ought to forgive as God forgives; e.g., Matt 6:12–15; 18:23–35; Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; *1 Clem.* 13:2; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2. Gregory himself discusses the importance of forgiving as God forgives on many occasions, e.g. *In inscriptiones Psalmorum* 5.76.25.

circulating in the fourth century, if not earlier.<sup>37</sup> This version of the prayer would have been attractive to those who found the forgiveness of the Jews unpalatable, and it may be that *συγχώρησον* found its way into the text as a gloss of *ἄφες*. The standard verb for forgiving in the LXX, NT, and subsequent writings was *ἀφίημι*; *συγχωρέω* never describes forgiveness in Christian literature.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, however, there was considerable overlap in the semantic range of *ἀφίημι* and *συγχωρέω*; both words are used to describe leaving someone alone or permitting someone to do a thing (e.g., Matt 7:4). In all likelihood, then, *συγχώρησον* found its way into Luke 23:34a because it was suggested, perhaps in a marginal note, that *ἄφες αὐτοῖς* actually meant *συγχώρησον αὐτοῖς*, that is, “permit them” or “yield to them,” thereby avoiding the suggestion that the Jews were forgiven. At some point prior to the mid-fourth century this gloss came to replace *ἄφες* in some texts, and so we have Gregory praising Christ’s patience rather than his forgiveness.

One final and particularly vivid example should suffice to illustrate the consternation of early Christians who thought that Luke 23:34a absolved the Jews of killing Christ. Theodoret (393–460) read Ps 59:5 LXX as David’s attempt to dissuade God from forgiving the Jews. According to Theodoret, David “begs the Lord of hosts and God of Israel to leave the Jews to their own devices and transfer all his providence to the nations, illuminating them with the light of the knowledge of God” (*Int. in Ps.* 80.1308 [Hill, FC]). Having announced this future reality to the nations, David “predicts the Jews’ punishment: ‘Have pity on none of the workers of iniquity.’ Since with the eyes of inspiration he saw the cross, you see, he seemed also to hear the Lord of glory saying, ‘Father, forgive them their sin: they do not know what they are doing.’ Loathing the extraordinary degree of their impiety, he prays that they enjoy no pardon” (*ibid.*). Theodoret does not say whether he expects David’s prayer to countermand Jesus’ prayer successfully. Indeed, answering this question directly would doubtless produce an unsatisfactory result; surely Jesus’ prayer would trump David’s. Instead, Theodoret leaves the contradictory prayers suspended in their conflict, weakening the force of the prayer of the son of David by juxtaposing it to the prayer of David. Theodoret may not have been willing to expunge Luke 23:34a from his copy of Luke, but at least he knew that David himself loathed the extraordinary degree of the Jews’ impiety, and prayed they would receive no pardon.

### *Jesus’ Prayer Appeared to Have Gone Unanswered*

For some commentators, it seemed that God had ignored Jesus’ prayer. Hypatius, the archbishop of Ephesus in 532, stated the problem succinctly: if the Jews were not forgiven, then either “the Christ, though he prayed earnestly, did not

<sup>37</sup> According to James A. Brooks, Gregory’s text of Luke has closest affinities with the Byzantine text, but not by a wide margin (*The New Testament Text of Gregory of Nyssa* [New Testament in the Greek Fathers 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], 98).

<sup>38</sup> See BDAG.

receive an answer, or he did not really pray” (*Fr. in Luc.* 152). This problem may have been particularly acute because early Christians believed that Luke 23:34a was a prayer for the Jews, but they also believed that the siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. was divine retribution for Jesus’ death.<sup>39</sup> Hegesippus’s account of the martyrdom of James the Just may be an attempt to solve this problem. According to Eusebius (260–340), Hegesippus (ca. 110–180) wrote that James incessantly prayed for the forgiveness of the people, but the scribes and Pharisees attempted to kill him by throwing him from the pinnacle of the temple. James survived the fall, so they began to stone him. James responded by praying, “I entreat you, Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23 [NPNF2-01.126]).<sup>40</sup> Some who witnessed this objected, saying, “Stop! What are you doing? The just one prays for you,” but “[o]ne of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head. And thus he suffered martyrdom. . . . He became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ. And immediately Vespasian besieged them” (*ibid.*). Thus, the sacking of Jerusalem was punishment for the death of James, not Jesus, and it was James’s prayer for forgiveness that was ignored by God, not Jesus’.

To be sure, this account makes no explicit reference to Luke, and, if Eusebius accurately records Hegesippus’s words, then this is one of the earliest attestations of the prayer. On the hypothesis that Luke 23:34a was added to Luke sometime in the second century, it is possible that in Hegesippus’s day this prayer was a free-floating saying that was assigned to James and eventually also to Jesus. Nevertheless, there is good reason to suppose that this account is not merely a description of James’s death but also an attempt to solve the problems created by Luke 23:34a. Given the widespread assumption that Jesus’ death precipitated the events of 66–70, it is odd that Hegesippus suggests that James’s martyrdom was the cause, making no mention of the death of Jesus. Commenting on the material from Hegesippus, Eusebius goes on to emphasize that it was James’s death and James’s death alone that caused the siege of Jerusalem:

These things are related at length by Hegesippus, who is in agreement with Clement. James was so admirable a man and so celebrated among all for his justice, that the more sensible even of the Jews were of the opinion that this was the cause of the siege of Jerusalem, which happened to them immediately after his martyrdom *for no other reason* than their brash [τολμηθῆν] act against him. (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23 [NPNF2-01.126 alt.])

There is good reason to suppose that Eusebius is being somewhat disingenuous here; in an earlier section of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius describes “the mis-

<sup>39</sup> E.g., Melito of Sardis, *Hom. on Passover* 99; Origen, *Cels* 4.22; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.6; Pseudo-Justin, *Quaest. et Responsiones ad Orthodoxos* (PG 6:1356).

<sup>40</sup> Online at <http://www.ccel.org>. Note the absence of the characteristically Lukan unmodified vocative πάτερ: παρακαλῶ κύριε θεε πάτερ ἄφες αὐτοῖς οὐ γὰρ ὕδασι τί ποιοῦσιν.

fortunes which overwhelmed the Jews after their presumption against Christ,” arguing that “the misfortunes of the whole [Jewish] nation began with the time of Pilate, and with their daring [τετολμημένων] crimes against the Savior” (*Hist. eccl.* 2.6 [NPNF2-01.110]). Eusebius concludes:

In addition to these the same author [i.e., Josephus] records many other tumults which were stirred up in Jerusalem itself, and shows that from that time seditions and wars and mischievous plots followed each other in quick succession, and never ceased in the city and in all Judea until finally the siege of Vespasian overwhelmed them. Thus the divine vengeance overtook the Jews for the crimes which they dared [τετολμήσασιν<sup>41</sup>] to commit against Christ. (*Hist. eccl.* 2.6 [NPNF2-01.110])

Having recorded this common early Christian explanation for the siege of Jerusalem, what led Eusebius subsequently to name the murder of James as the sole inciting incident? In light of the fact that (a) we know Eusebius did not actually believe that James’s death alone precipitated the siege and (b) James is shown dying with a prayer widely attributed to Jesus on his lips, it is possible that the account of the death of James is yet another example of early Christians attempting to explain why Jerusalem was sacked despite Jesus’ prayer for the Jews.

### *Unfairness to the Jews*

Other commentators worried that Luke 23:34a indicated that the Jews had been treated unfairly. Why did God punish the Jews for a crime they committed in ignorance? Moreover, if the Jews were ignorant of Jesus’ identity, then Jesus must have failed to reveal himself to them adequately. For example, in his commentary on the *Diatessaron*, Ephrem of Syria (ca. 306–373) warns against allowing Luke 23:34a to lead one to “be presumptuous in relation to his justice or blaspheme his grace [by saying], ‘Why did he come if they did not recognize him, and what was it [to them] if they did not discern [who] he was, and why did he hide himself from the [Jewish] people and reveal [himself] to the Gentiles?’” (21.18–19).<sup>42</sup> Ephrem goes on to respond to this objection by arguing that the parable of the tenants shows that the Jews actually did know who Jesus was. Whether Ephrem is responding to an actual “presumptuous” opponent or merely shadowboxing, he fears that Jesus’ prayer will be read as proof that the unbelief of the Jewish people was Jesus’ fault; if the Jews did not know who Jesus was, then surely no one can be blamed but Jesus himself.

<sup>41</sup> Note the recurrence of cognates of *τολμάω* in Eusebius’s descriptions of Jesus’ and James’s killers.

<sup>42</sup> Carmel McCarthy, trans., *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes* (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2; Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 1993), 326 (brackets McCarthy’s).

Chrysostom also addressed this problem by arguing that the Jews did indeed know they were killing the Christ:

For in that passage also he said not, "They know not me," but, "They know not what they do." What they did not know, then, was the thing they were accomplishing, the dispensation hidden in that event [περὶ αὐτῆς τοῦ πράγματος τῆς οἰκονομίας]. The dispensation which is being accomplished, and the mystery, they are ignorant of. For they knew not that the cross is to shine forth so brightly; that it is made the salvation of the world, and the reconciliation of God unto men; that their city should be taken; and that they should suffer the extreme of wretchedness. (*Ad Cor. Hom. 7* [NPNF1-12.36 alt.])

In other words, Jesus prayed that the Jews would be forgiven because of their ignorance of the punishment they would receive at the hands of Titus. Thus, the Jews remain guilty of killing the Christ, and—with apparently unperceived irony—Luke 23:34a is made to establish the fairness of the siege of Jerusalem rather than questioning it.

Similarly, in *Quaestiones et Responsiones ad Orthodoxos*, a work that has been attributed to Justin Martyr but probably originated in fifth-century Antioch, Pseudo-Justin responds to basic apologetic queries such as "How could there have been three days before the sun was created on the fourth?" and "What happens to babies who die unbaptized?"<sup>43</sup> One question concerns the unfairness of God's punishment of the Jews in 70. Quoting Luke 23:34a, Pseudo-Justin asks why the Jews have been "driven away from their fatherland and scattered into all the earth, and given up to the Gentiles for dishonorable slavery" if Christ prayed that their sin was committed in ignorance: "If ignorance necessitates forbearance, as we are taught by scripture, why were the old Jews, who crucified the Christ out of ignorance, tested by many irresistible and terrible things as Josephus testifies?" (*PG* 6:1356). Pseudo-Justin answers that the resurrection eliminated any excuse the Jews may have had, but, as Harnack noted, the fact that this question was included in a series of introductory apologetic queries indicates that "der Text gab damals einen schweren Anstoss."<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The external evidence for Luke 23:34a is far from conclusive. Both the short and the long reading are found in every text type, including important Alexandrian witnesses. The short reading is supported by an important late-second- or early-third-century papyrus, but a good number of second- and third-century church

<sup>43</sup> Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>44</sup> Harnack, "Probleme im Texte," 260.

fathers testify to the long reading. Moreover, intrinsic probability suggests that the prayer belongs in the text of Luke: the prayer matches Luke's preferred way of addressing God; its structure resembles that of the Lukan Lord's Prayer; it resembles Stephen's prayer for his killers without having a single word in common; and the link between ignorance and mitigated culpability matches a motif running throughout Luke-Acts.

Regarding transcriptional probability, it is now clear that Luke 23:34a was a problem passage in early Christianity. We may, therefore, conclude that Harnack and others who suggested that the prayer was omitted for anti-Jewish reasons were on the right track. Note, however, that early Christian consternation with Luke 23:34a stemmed not from anti-Judaism alone but also from the fact that Jesus' prayer seemed to have gone unanswered, and from a sense that the Jews had been punished unjustly. The discomfort with the prayer explains why the external evidence for both readings is early and widespread; in all likelihood, Luke 23:34a was omitted fairly early, possibly by multiple scribes, while other scribes corrupted the text by changing ἄφεσις to συγχώρησον.

Finally, a word should be said about the relevance of early Christian exegesis of Scripture for textual criticism. Hort warned that in making use of transcriptional probability, "we have to do with readings only as they are likely to have appeared to transcribers, not as they appear to us."<sup>45</sup> Yet Hort's own confidence that no scribe would have omitted something as sublime as Luke 23:34a illustrates the tenuousness of arguments based on one's general knowledge of early Christianity, rather than on actual early Christian interpretations of the reading in question.<sup>46</sup> The growing awareness of the influence of the social realities of early Christianity on the text of the NT has enriched our understanding of scribal proclivities, but this approach can only be enhanced by more careful attention to ancient exegesis. An example may illuminate the point: as noted above, it has been suggested that early Christians read Luke 23:34a as a prayer for the soldiers who crucified Jesus and that early Christians inserted this prayer into Luke to increase the guilt of the Jews by exonerating the Romans.<sup>47</sup> This hypothesis rightly assumes that anti-Judaism could have played a role in the transmission of the prayer, but it ignores a whole class of evidence that suggests that no early Christians understood the prayer to be on behalf of the soldiers. This point need not be controversial; if the goal of transcriptional probability is to determine what a scribe is most likely to have written, it would seem prudent to examine what the scribe's near contemporaries wrote about the passage in question.

<sup>45</sup> Westcott and Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>47</sup> Petzer, "Anti-Judaism and the Textual Problem of Luke 23:34a," 199–204.