My review of this book is shaped by recent community-based Bible studies in which groups of poor, working-class, and marginalized black South Africans have been rereading the Lord’s Prayer in an attempt to hear this text speak to our present context of chronic unemployment, a moribund land-redistribution process, rampant global capitalism, and the unrelenting presence of HIV and AIDS. Given hope by the Lord’s Prayer that God’s will be done and God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven, we have struggled to read this prayer in a way that wrests the Lord’s Prayer from its other-worldly appropriations so prevalent in our context.

So a book on North African appropriations of the Lord’s Prayer offered much promise. Michael Joseph Brown’s careful reconstruction of how particular ancient communities (Greco-Roman, Roman Alexandria, Roman Carthage) have appropriated this prayer has many resonances with our own project of trying “to hear” this text in our context. Like him, we have concentrated on Matthew’s version.

We have not been disappointed. Unlike much sociohistorical biblical scholarship, Brown provides a thicker than usual analysis, delving into how different social sectors might have engaged with various petitions. He notes, for example, drawing on the work of Hans
Dieter Betz, that the petition about “daily bread” demonstrates that not only was food “still a basic concern in the first century” but that “the poor would be more susceptible to the problems of food distribution than the wealthy; thus, the request for bread could be more reflective of their concerns” (19). Having hinted at—though his purpose is not to explore the “original” meaning or form of the Lord’s Prayer—the kind of community Jesus(Matthew might have envisaged in this prayer, Brown goes on to note, importantly, that modern interpreters are at a disadvantage in their efforts to understand how the ordinary person would have understood this petition. The writings of the early Christians that we do possess are biased because they reflect the interests of better-educated and higher-status individuals. Being somewhat insulated from the vagaries of the production and distribution of food, it is understandable that high-status Christians would be somewhat disinclined to further the idea that a thoroughly benevolent God should be asked for something as necessary to survive as food. They advanced various interpretations of this petition that moved the request away from the obvious to the spiritual. (19)

Through his careful and detailed historical and hermeneutical scholarship, Brown assists us to understand how we have come to the kinds of interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer that dominate our churches.

Brown shows a similar sensitivity to how different social sectors might have appropriated the petition on the release of debts, arguing that, “Generally, because of the class system imposed by the empire, the wealthy were able to borrow at reasonable rates and with rather generous provisions regarding repayment. This is because they tended to borrow from one another…. By contrast, the poor were often subjected to borrowing from the wealthy at much higher rates of interest” (21). While release from one’s debt would thus have meant different things to these social sectors, given Brown’s analysis, Brown also explains why Matthew’s version retains a reference to “debts”—indebtedness was a common occurrence in antiquity and cut across classes. But Brown does explain how the concept of debt was “expanded into a metaphor regarding human social relations” (23). That we hear “sins” and not “debts,” even when we read Matthew’s version, is an indication of the power of this metaphorical process. Brown’s analysis illuminates the emergence of the metaphor.

Although the focus of the book is on understanding the contributions of Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of Carthage to “a postbiblical Christian analysis of prayer” (75), the richly textured sociohistorical account of their contexts and some sensitivity to power relations in these contexts makes Brown’s book of value beyond the confines of
these people and periods. We in South Africa can draw from these resources in our quest for a Lord’s Prayer that speaks into our current context.