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## Jesus' Abba

In the Bible we find two major images of God, one, monarchical, and the other, familial. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is most often imaged as “King”; whereas in the New Testament “Father” is dominant. Father has remained important for Christian understanding throughout history, and in languages that distinguish between an intimate “you” and a formal one, God is addressed with the intimate one. Although “thou” no longer has that connotation in English, its original selection did express the familial understanding of God rather than the royal one. Nevertheless, over time such ideas as divine sovereignty tended to play a larger role in Christian thought than the idea of paternal feelings. The latter introduces sentiment, and theologians rarely favor sentimentality. The shift began very early.

In the New Testament Jesus is never depicted as addressing God as King, and there is no indication that he spoke about God in that way. He always spoke to and of his, or our, Father. Nevertheless, in the Latin translation and in others derived from it, such as the English ones, we are told that his central message was a call to repentance, because the “kingdom of God” is at hand. It is all too natural to move

from the idea that God has a kingdom to the idea that we should image God as King.

Since I am writing this book to encourage a return of our piety and theology to familial understanding, I will begin by arguing that Jesus' formulation as represented in the original Greek did not require this monarchical interpretation. The Greek phrase that we translate as "kingdom of God" is *basileia theou*. A *basileia* is a politically defined region. It could be a kingdom, and indeed most of them were, but the term does not include that as part of its meaning. If you suppose in advance that God is like a king, then the *basileia* of God will certainly be a kingdom. But if God is like a father, then his region or land will not be a kingdom. We might describe a father's *basileia* better as the family estate. Depending on the kind of father we are talking about, that might be governed in various ways. When we consider how Jesus talked about God, the answer is that it would be managed for the sake of all who lived there with special concern for the weak and needy. We have no word for this, but my proposal is "commonwealth." Jesus' message is that the "divine commonwealth is at hand." Everyone should reverse directions and join in this new possibility. There is no reason to think of the God whose *basileia* this is, as a monarch!

If this had been understood in the church, the Lord's Prayer would have ended as it does in Matthew and Luke with "deliver us from evil." However, many of us are accustomed to an added line that makes it fit with much other prayer and praise in our liturgies. I am accustomed to the addition: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever." I have explained that the word translated "kingdom" is *basileia*, and this certainly belongs to the one to whom we are praying. By shifting here to "commonwealth," we could avoid distortion of Jesus' intention, but obviously this would not fit with the rest of the line. Early in the prayer we learn that

we are to hallow God's name, but climaxing the prayer with a celebration of "power" and "glory" reflects the shift away from Jesus to royal imagery and sensibility.

I grew up with the idea of the kingdom of God and the celebration of God's power and glory in the prayer Jesus' taught us. I combined it in some way with the fatherhood of God even though my father was not like that. But I was glad to learn from scholars that Jesus himself had not wanted to evoke the monarchical sensibility.

Nevertheless, I continued to assume that, at least in the Old Testament, God was thought to be omnipotent, an idea that bothered me much more than the kingly language as such. Philosophically, if God has all the power, then we creatures have none at all, and if creatures have no power, then God's role of making them do whatever he wants does not in fact express much power. The whole idea is self-destructive. If to avoid the emptiness of strict omnipotence theory, it is explained to mean that God can control whatever he wishes, but gives some power to us to obey or disobey, the consequences still seem very disturbing. It is amazing that God does not wish to end some of the horrors of history or the extreme suffering of individuals! It is hard to combine God's permitting so much misery with the idea of his paternal love. I would not think highly of a human father who dealt that way with his children.

It came to me as a great relief when I learned from biblical scholars that the idea of divine omnipotence is not in the Bible. I explained in the preface that it was introduced into the translation to replace one of the proper names for God, "*Shaddai*." There is nothing about the etymology of this name that suggests extraordinary power or control. I have been told by Jewish rabbis that the connotations might suggest "the breasted One." Accordingly, Jerome's assumption that "omnipotent" was an appropriate substitute for "*Shaddai*" clearly shows that by the end of the fourth century, the monarchical view

dominated reflection about God. Once God is seen as “king,” then to praise God is to praise God’s power, and it would seem that if we put any limit on that power, we would be praising God less. When I have argued for a different view of God, based on parental images, I have been told that my “God is a wimp.” For many, it seems, divinity is fundamentally characterized by the kind of power exercised by an absolute monarch, but this is not the way we evaluate fathers.

That the monarchical view of God has continued to be prominent is evident in the fact that so many prayers are addressed to Almighty God. When speakers do not want to repeat the word *God*, the most common replacement is “the Almighty.” The resulting understanding of God has led millions to assume that God is responsible for creaturely suffering. Many who pray for relief and find none become deeply angry with God. Nothing has destroyed the faith of so many as the disappointment of the expectation fed by this language.

### **1. “Pater” and “Abba”**

We have to wonder how Christians moved so easily from familial terms to monarchical images. It seems that the word *father* in English, and perhaps even more, *pater* in Greek, could have connotations that connect the two. In the Roman Empire, the “*pater*” had complete control of his household. He might be experienced by his children as a rather remote authority figure. In Western households through much of history the man has been the “lord of his home.” If the term *pater* was heard in this context, then the return to monarchical imagery is not hard to understand. But these connotations should not be attributed to Jesus.

The New Testament was written in Greek; so the word used for

father is *Pater*. Although Jesus probably knew some Greek, we can assume that he taught the common people in Galilee in Aramaic. Almost certainly his own life of prayer with God was in Aramaic. The Aramaic word for father was *abba*. Jesus spoke to God as “*Abba*” and taught the disciples to address God in that way. My judgment is that feelings that cluster around “*Abba*” are very different from the ones evoked by royal language.

“*Abba*” is, of course, baby talk. In many languages the first way we introduce infants to naming their fathers is by baby talk. Greek has such words, but they were not chosen for the translation. The translations from the Greek into Latin and later into European languages have used the more formal terms for the male parent. But in Aramaic *abba* was the only term for father. Jesus thought of God in a language whose earliest and primary connotations came from infancy. The normal relation of the father to the infant is one of tenderness and unconditional love. It was unconditional love rather than controlling power that dominated Jesus’ understanding of God.

Perhaps my sense of the importance of using baby talk comes from my own experience. “Papa” is the closest English word to “*abba*.” It happens that I called my father “Papa” not only as a child, but also as an adult. Of course, when I spoke about him to those who were not members of the family I sometimes said “my father,” but I cannot imagine addressing him in any way other than “Papa.” Now I have heard, and even said, “Father Almighty” often enough that it does not sound extremely discordant, but I cannot imagine speaking to, or of, God as “Papa Almighty.” Language does make a difference.

Fortunately, in considering the importance of Jesus’ calling God “*Abba*,” there is some additional evidence in the texts. The Greek New Testament very rarely includes Aramaic words, but *abba* appears three times. The first is in Mark. He normally translates *abba* as *pater*,

but on one occasion he keeps the Aramaic word alongside the Greek. Jesus is praying in anguish in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Mark writes: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for thee, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but thine, be done." Mark seems to have felt that Father (*Pater*) alone did not communicate the depth of Jesus' feeling.

The other two occasions are in Paul's letters: Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:4-7. The two passages are very similar. I quote Galatians:

When the time had come God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "*Abba*." So through God you are no longer a slave but a son.

It is striking that at the moment of realizing the believers' filial relationship to God, their freedom from any lawgiver, the cry of the Spirit of Jesus is not the familiar Greek "*Pater*," but the Aramaic "*Abba*." Most of the members of Paul's congregations did not know Aramaic, but in this supreme moment of liberation, it was "*Abba*" that was spoken through them. This was apparently the case in Rome as well, a congregation Paul had not visited. (Note: I have been italicizing "abba" as a foreign word. But at this point I am appropriating it as my way of thinking, and speaking, of God. I will not italicize in future.)

## 2. Who Is Jesus' Abba?

Jesus was a Jew. That left open diverse possibilities for imaging and understanding God, but all of them were derived from the Jewish heritage. That heritage was from Abraham. Even today we speak of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the Abrahamic traditions, for all three communities worship the God of Abraham. This means that for Jesus, Abba is the God of Abraham.

This does not imply that everyone in these three traditions thinks of God the way he is portrayed in the stories of Abraham, for all three traditions are shaped by later developments as well. For example, in the Abraham stories, morality is noticeably missing, whereas all three communities highlight it. But Abraham's God was distinctive in a way that is still fundamental. He (and this God is envisioned as male) stands above and beyond all earthly powers and calls for a loyalty that relativizes all of them. Giving your final loyalty to anything other than this God separates you from the Abrahamic tradition. This demand for supreme loyalty is not affected by location in time and space, since God is not limited in that respect.

Like other Jews of his time and of all times, Jesus took this for granted; it was not a topic of discussion. But this shared conviction raised questions whose answers had immense practical consequences. Those who are devoted to the God of Abraham cannot give ultimate loyalty to anything else. The Romans conquered the Jews and ruled them, but they could not gain their supreme loyalty as represented in emperor worship. Rome made compromises with the Jews to pacify them, but even so, they continued to be a problem. There was an uprising in Galilee in Jesus' youth and two major revolts after his death. That loyalty to God trumps loyalty to any earthly claimant was a conviction Jesus fully shared. But he did not support the revolts to which this primary loyalty often led.

All the Abrahamic traditions not only identify God as the one supreme object of devotion but also share a development associated with Moses. For Moses, God is righteous and demands righteousness from those who worship him, and righteousness became central to the understanding of the Abrahamic God. In Moses, the continuing call for total devotion to God is accompanied by commandments explaining what it means to live in obedience to God's will, and what is known as the Mosaic Law spells out in detail the kind of life God

calls for. Jesus' Abba is the Mosaic God of righteousness. For Jesus, as for all the other Jews, God is good and calls human beings to be good as well.

All views of the Abrahamic and Mosaic God attribute great power to him, but they differ in their understanding of this divine power. The differences have been sharpened for the modern world by the adoption of a mechanistic view of nature. If nature is mechanical, then God cannot be a factor within it. If God affects what happens, this can be understood only as a supernatural act that suspends the "laws of nature." If you approach the biblical stories in this way, you are forced to view them as full of the supernatural. And since the violation of the laws of nature is to most moderns a very unattractive idea, there is a strong tendency to dismiss the biblical accounts.

But, of course, it never occurred to the people of Israel that nature was like a watch and God like the watchmaker. On the contrary, they thought that God is involved in all worldly events, but for God to be active does not exclude other actors, so that the total explanation of the event includes both God and others. God is a factor in all that happens, but his role is often routine and easy to ignore, whereas in some events God's role is astonishing. Some of us today, who reject the mechanistic view, find this biblical approach intelligible.

Nevertheless, there is a tension within the Hebrew Scriptures between two ways of thinking. In one of these ways, nature in general—and human action in particular—is full of astounding occurrences. Alongside what we think of as ordinary creatures, various spiritual forces, of which some are demonic, play roles. In this ancient way of looking at things, events are products of the interaction of many factors, and sometimes the contribution of God leads to amazing results.

However, there are some passages that reflect another way of thinking, that is, that God sometimes displaces all other factors in the

event. Consider the exodus story. Most of it belongs to the first way I have described. Moses engages in truly extraordinary demonstrations, but the competition between Moses and the court magicians shows that many events we moderns treat as supernatural can be effected by skilled magicians. This suggests that they may be masters of illusion as well as having extraordinary parapsychological powers. God's role seems to have been to enable Moses to outdo the others. But that does not mean that turning a cane into a snake and back again involves divine suspension of natural laws.

We find in the story of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds also an account that fits the first way. The God of Abraham worked through a strong east wind that pushed the shallow water away far enough for pedestrians to cross. But the mud mired the chariots that pursued them and as the wind died down and the deeper water returned, the Egyptian army was devastated. Here, God is an important factor, but he is not acting on nature against its inherent characteristics.

On the other hand, a second account is added that seems intentionally to emphasize the second way of thinking about God's actions. It is said that the waters of the Sea of Reeds stood like walls on either side of the Hebrews as they crossed (Exodus 14:22) and then crashed down on the Egyptians (as visually depicted by Cecil B. DeMille: Exodus 14:28).

My claim is that the dominant biblical view of God's working in the world is that he works in and through natural things and especially in and through human beings. God is very powerful but not the unilateral actor. I recognize that there are texts, and have cited one, that treat God's action as setting aside all other actors, but to call theirs *the* biblical view expresses a very unfortunate bias.

Advocates of divine omnipotence sometimes point to miracle stories of the second type as showing biblical support for their doctrine, but obviously between a supernatural act and omnipotence

there is still a gap. Recognizing this, the advocates of divine omnipotence often assert that it is implied in the doctrine of “creation out of nothing.” They are correct that creation-out-of-nothing would clearly be a unilateral act and is congenial to the idea of divine omnipotence, but in fact the idea of creation out of nothing is not found in the Bible.

The opening passage in Genesis asserts that all God had to work with was chaos. Genesis 1:2 says the “earth was without form and void.” The clear implication is that the biblical author thought of God’s creation more in terms of “order out of chaos” than as “creation out of nothing.” Rather than finding its basis in the first verses of Genesis, the doctrine of creation out of nothing imposes on the biblical text ideas from other sources. The Bible does not support this doctrine.

The more general view in the Bible is that God is involved in every event but the sole actor in none. This view is consistent with most biblical passages speaking of God’s action. It fits well with what we can reasonably judge to have been Jesus’ understanding.

The shared acceptance by all the Abrahamic traditions of the Mosaic emphasis on the righteousness of God also allowed a great range of views of God and God’s will for us. Out of the vast corpus of the law, some could emphasize the ceremonial obligations or the dietary laws. Others emphasized the Ten Commandments, which are silent on those topics.

Jesus stood in the tradition of the prophets. Beginning with Amos they denounced the focus on obeying rules and called instead for behaving justly. They were appalled that people would gather for religious feasts and ceremonies and continue to deal unjustly with the poor. True obedience to God was expressed in viewing matters from the perspective of the most oppressed. The widows and orphans were

those who had the least status or security in the social system, and these are mentioned repeatedly in the prophetic literature.

That Jesus' spiritual Abba is the God of the prophets is clear in all his deeds and sayings. Further, his special choice from the great library of Hebrew sacred writings was the Isaiah scroll. In Luke the poem recited by Mary on the announcement of her pregnancy is a powerful prophetic utterance, the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–55). Whether Mary is the actual source is anyone's guess, but it is not unlikely that Jesus imbibed much of his understanding of God from his mother. Certainly, prophetic ideas were prominent in Galilee.

The prophetic God whose concerns focused on the poor and oppressed could be represented in a variety of ways. The prophetic word was often harshly judgmental, and sometimes the announcement of a well-deserved punishment and the call to repentance could be associated with a frightening threat. But sometimes the emphasis was on God's mercy and the assurance of eventual relief. Sometimes the justice that was demanded was primarily an outward act, a way of structuring society. Sometimes the focus was on the heart, the inner life, and the motives of action.

Generally, the image of God's power is of control. I have argued that the texts rarely make God the sole actor in nature or history, but God's role typically appears to be to push in a particular direction, often decisively. On the other hand, sometimes we find expressions of divine intimacy and tenderness. Occasionally the language is drawn from relations in the family. Hence, Jesus' understanding has roots in the scriptures he studied. But nowhere in his sources do we find this intimacy and tenderness the central theme in the understanding of God. This was the revolutionary insight of Jesus: seeing God as Abba and understanding Abba's love as intimate and tender. Jesus' Abba is the God of the prophets qualified as love.

The word *love*, in turn, has multiple meanings. A king may

demand the “love” of his subjects, and while all Jews recognized the Mosaic command to love God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength, that love was often understood to be fully expressed in obedience. The move from monarchical to familial language about God cut against this somewhat. But *pater* could still be understood primarily as one who expects from his children respect and obedience. *Pater* might be understood as one who always loves his children, but that love might be expressed in stern discipline accompanied by rewards and punishments. As I noted in section 1, the use of *pater* does not protect us from a move toward king and lawgiver.

The love of Jesus’ Abba is not like that. The term leads us to think of the father of the newborn baby. Respect and obedience are irrelevant, as are discipline, rewards, and punishments. Abba’s love is a deep feeling of unconditional commitment. It longs for reciprocal love. Of course it hopes for the future of the child to include virtue, but it is not lessened by misbehavior. Sometimes it seems to deepen when the child goes wrong. Jesus’ story of the prodigal son expresses just this point.

Today many find the word *love* too hackneyed and vague; so they want something more specific, and the word *compassion* has come to the fore. It is an excellent word. Jesus’ Abba is certainly compassionate, and Jesus embodied compassion. Allowing ourselves to feel the feelings of others is immensely important, and the new father will certainly be sensitive to the feelings of the baby. Abba’s feeling the feelings of people is so complete that what we do to other people we are doing also to Abba.

But to describe the feeling of the new father primarily as compassion is not adequate, for there is a passion that goes beyond feeling the baby’s feelings. It creates a bond that is life-determining. It includes the longing to nurture and protect. It is deeply personal and

it includes commitment to the child and her or his future. It has what is now often described as “warmth.” We need to affirm compassion, but we need to keep the more inclusive word *love*, remembering that for Jesus this is the father’s love for the new baby.

The more we reflect on Jesus’ understanding of his Abba, the more it can seem to us that he should have spoken of God, not as his father but as his mother. Mary seems to have played a much larger role in his life than Joseph. Certainly she has played a much larger role among his followers over the centuries. Was it not maternal characteristics more than paternal ones that shaped Jesus’ understanding of God?

It may well be that, if the question had arisen in Jesus’ day, he would have agreed, and one solution to the problem of gender language today would be to make the shift. One day, perhaps even soon, that shift may be possible for us. Already, we can pray, without offense, to the One who is Mother and Father of us all. But it was not possible in Jesus’ day for him to call God “Mother,” because that would have made people think that he was calling them to worship a female deity alongside the Abrahamic one.

Despite much recent experimentation with God terminology that is not masculine, there has been no real effort to replace “Father” with “Mother.” Instead the move has been away from gendered language. In support of the important work of feminists, I have participated in this process. I have avoided pronouns for God altogether. I have supported the extensive work in removing masculine language from the hymns and prayers of the church.

However, I am not pleased with the result. This process has certainly raised the consciousness of millions of people about the fact that God is not a male and that males have no closer connection to God than females. It has had less effect on removing from the connotations of “God” the stereotypically masculine traits of laying down the law and controlling others. It has tended to depersonalize

the individual's relationship to God; a neutered God feels less intimate. In short the admirable, and partially successful, efforts to overcome patriarchy have also blocked the expansion of the gains made by Jesus in shifting from monarchical to familial language.

After many years of neutering God in my language in support of feminist interests, I have decided in this book to re-gender God. When we talk about the effects of belief in God over the years, we communicate this more realistically when we make clear that in the Western imagination, God was male. For good and for ill, the God of Abraham, of Moses, and of the literary prophets was male. It is precisely feminists who have heightened our consciousness of this fact. I have decided not to conceal it by avoiding masculine pronouns.

Jesus' Abba was obviously also male, but Abba's character (in stereotypical terms) is more feminine than masculine. Perhaps if Jesus' description of God gains currency, the issue of Abba's gender will fade and pronouns of both types will become natural references.

### **3. What Did Abba Call Jesus to Do?**

Jesus' deep intimacy with Abba was accompanied by a strong sense of Abba's call to do what needed to be done in his particular place and circumstance. The Jewish people, like most people everywhere, were absorbed in their day-to-day activities, but they were also torn between their devotion to God, largely expressed in following the Mosaic Law, and their desire to succeed in social and economic terms. They also felt a great tension between avoiding trouble with the Roman authorities and their Jewish commitment to put God first.

Jesus was clear that God must come first. That meant that the effort to succeed in a world that prized wealth and power must be put aside. For him that was not in question. He was also clear that the Roman