GOD AS FATHER: TWO POPULAR THEORIES RECONSIDERED

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The prominence that the NT gives to the notion of God as Father and to the phrases "Son of God" and "children of God" has made it inevitable that these thoughts should receive considerable attention in theological formulations. Best known among those theories of the not-too-distant past was the conjecture of the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man that was popularized in the heyday of the old liberalism of the last century and the early years of this century.

More recently another theory has enjoyed great popularity in some circles, but now it also is being strongly challenged. It has been expressed in a variety of forms but generally includes the propositions (1) that there were many Hellenistic "sons of gods" and "divine men," (2) that there is little or no evidence of the use of the phrase "son of God" in pre-Christian Judaism, and therefore (3) that the NT description of Jesus as the "Son of God" is best explained as a development of the Hellenistic parallels within the sphere of the Gentile Church.[1] Today this theory is being rejected by more and more scholars. The Jewish antecedents of the title "Son of God" and the distinctiveness of Jesus' own person have been recognized more clearly and given a greater role in theory construction.[2]

The purpose of this paper is to direct attention to two other theories that continue to enjoy widespread acceptance. Their supporters come from both sides of the liberal/conservative debates, and there is much that is attractive in both of them. Nevertheless one theory must be rejected and the other significantly revised.

1. *"Jesus' use of the word* abba *was unique."* Jesus' use of the word *abba* has been regarded by many Christian scholars as a most important fact because it has been thought to have major implications for the understanding of Jesus' self-consciousness. That is, Jesus' use of *abba* has been seen by some as a key to his own perception of his relationship to the heavenly Father. In

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[1]For example R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1955), 1. 50, 128-133; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's, 1965) 31-33, 68-72, 192-197.

[2]M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); R. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Naperville: Allenson, 1970) 93-99; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 270-305; B. Byrne, *Sons of God—Seed of Abraham* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979).

general, Christian scholarship of this century has concluded that Jesus' usage was without parallel in the Judaism of his day. A. Lukyn Williams wrote: "Now what evidence is there in the Judaism of the first century or thereabouts of the individualistic apprehension of the fatherhood of God? . . . Frankly there is extraordinarily little of such evidence."[3] Similarly and more recently Joachim Jeremias spoke of "the complete novelty and uniqueness of *Abba* as an address to God in the prayers of Jesus."[4] Of a contrary opinion was the Jewish writer Claude Montefiore: "The characteristic note of Jewish piety in this [i.e. the NT] age is the thought of God as father—not the father of the people only, as in the Old Testament, but of individuals."[5]

It is difficult to understand how Williams and Jeremias could have come to the conclusion at which they arrived in the face of the evidence to the contrary. Two of the most frequently alleged instances of an individualistic apprehension of the fatherhood of God in Jewish literature of the period are the stories of (1) Honi the "circle drawer" and Simeon b. Shetach and (2) Hanan ha-Nehba (Honi's grandson) and the rabbis. Honi is described as "you who importune God and he accedes to your request as a son that importunes his father" (*Ta'an.* 19A). Hanan ha-Nehba prayed: "Master of the Universe, do it for the sake of these who are unable to distinguish between the Father who gives rain and the father who does not" (23B). Although Honi probably lived in the first century B.C. and his grandson may have been a contemporary of Jesus, the results of critical studies seem to indicate that the Talmudic stories themselves are of a later origin and may not attest to the first-century usage.[6]

The dating of materials is not a problem with other texts. In the Wisdom of Solomon (100-50 B.C.) the righteous man "calleth himself the child of the Lord" and "maketh his boast that God is his father."[7] In this passage and in others it is the individual righteous man who is the child of God. In the *Thanksgiving Hymns* of Qumran (discovered after Williams' work) God is extolled: "My father knoweth me not and my mother hath abandoned me unto Thee. But Thou art a father unto all Thy true (sons)."[8]

Recent Christian scholarship has acknowledged the existence of these instances but has still sought to maintain a distinction between them and Jesus' use of the idea. This is done by Jeremias by asserting a difference between someone proclaiming God as father of an individual and an indi-

[3]A. L. Williams, "'My Father' in Jewish Thought of the First Century," *JTS* 31 (October 1929) 43.

[4]J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1971) 67.

[5]C. G. Montefiore, *The Old Testament and After* (London: Macmillan, 1923) 203. See also "Fatherhood of God" in *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* 254.

[6]L. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman, 1973) 144. Talmudic examples from the third century A.D. and later can be multiplied; cf. e.g. *Ber.* 35B.

[7]Wis 2:16, 18; see also 5:5.

[8]1QH 9:35. See translation and commentary in M. Mansoor, *The Thanksgiving Hymns* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 39, 162. Note also Sir 4:10.

vidual addressing God as father.[9] Thus the disclaimer is not "No one except Jesus claimed God was his Father." Rather, it is "No one except Jesus addressed God as 'Father.'" Yet even with this modified affirmation there are difficulties. Eleazar, an old priest, is reported to have addressed God in prayer: "O Father, thou didst destroy Pharaoh."[10] But Jeremias dismisses this passage as being of Hellenistic origin and therefore "due to Greek influence."[11]

Thus another criterion is established. The example of *abba* used in direct address by an individual must be not only from early Judaism but also from Palestinian Judaism. Even this qualification, however, does not put an end to examples. In Sir 23:4 God is addressed as "Lord, Father, and God of my life." Jeremias acknowledges the Palestinian origin of this document, but on the basis of one late manuscript (which he himself calls "a prosodic Hebrew paraphrase") he concludes that the original must have been "Lord, God of my father."[12] Even if Jeremias is correct that in this later Hebrew text *ʾēl ʾābî* must be translated "God of my father" and not "God, my father" (vocative), the use of this late paraphrase to determine the text of the nonextant original contrary to the extant Greek (which clearly has the vocative) is at best dubious. It appears that the evidence is being forced to fit the theory. Even if Jeremias' argumentation be accepted, however, his claims must still be clearly understood. He does not deny that Palestinian Jewish literature expressed an individualistic apprehension of God's fatherhood. Nor does he deny that the Jews collectively addressed God as their father. Nor does he deny that Jewish works such as the Wisdom of Solomon quote individuals who address God in prayer as "Father." "But thy providence, O Father, governs because you also in the sea made a way and in the waves made a safe path" (Wis 14:3). He rejects this passage as irrelevant because in the Wisdom of Solomon there are evidences of Hellenistic influence. By what means, however, can one be sure that the address of God as "Father" is due to Greek influence? Could this not be explained just as easily as being the combination of the very Jewish collective address of God as father and the equally Jewish recognition of individuals that God was their father? This is particularly feasible if Israel Abrahams is correct that liturgical prayers characteristically pluralize that which has been used in individual prayers.[13] It is precisely this possibility of combination of Jewish themes that Jeremias denies. He denies that all three of his requirements are met by any passage: individual, Palestinian, and direct address. His purpose of course is to show that Jesus' address of God as *abba* was unique. Even if the exact verbal parallel is missing (and that is only

[9]Jeremias, *Theology* 63.

[10]3 Macc 6:4; so also 6:8; cf. 5:7; 7:6.

[11]Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1965) 16. He similarly objects to the citing of Wis 14:3.

[12]Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (SBT 6; Naperville: Allenson, 1967) 28.

[13]I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1944) 104-105.

being granted for the sake of argumentation) how different is a vocative address from a declaration? Is the apprehension of God's fatherhood any greater if one prays, "Father, I thank you," than if he prays, "I thank you. You are my father"? There is a real linguistic difference, but that the linguistic difference is indicative of any difference in the religious experience of God as father is very doubtful. Overall, the evidence indicates that building upon OT texts such as Prov 3:12; Ps 68:5; 103:13 there was a developing individualistic perception of the fatherhood of God in Judaism around the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. This does not mean that Jesus did not have a unique sense of sonship. It does mean that the exegete may not infer that uniqueness from Jesus' use of *abba* but must develop this conclusion from a more broadly and solidly based exegesis of the gospel texts.

One further set of observations may help to place these considerations in the larger context of the issue of theological methodology. In Jeremias' *New Testament Theology* his discussion of *abba* occupies a place of methodological importance. Although it is in chap. 7[14] that the meaning of *abba* is explained, it is first mentioned and its methodological significance indicated at the end of chap. 3, "Characteristics of the *ipsissima vox*."[15] This is the climax of the first division of the book, "How Reliable is the Tradition of the Sayings of Jesus?" Jesus' use of *abba* is a major piece (in light of chap. 7, one is inclined to say *the* major piece) of linguistic and stylistic evidence upon which Jeremias bases his methodological principle: "In the synoptic tradition it is the inauthenticity, and not the authenticity, of the sayings of Jesus that must be demonstrated."[16] Of course one who affirms the inerrancy of Scripture is pleased with Jeremias' conclusion that authenticity is assumed until proven unacceptable. This was a clear rejection of the methods prevalent in Germany then and now. One laments, however, that Jeremias did concede that inauthenticity could be proven in many cases.

One laments even more the fact that the foundation of Jeremias' affirmations of authenticity consist of linguistic and stylistic conclusions that will not support the edifice of his theology. This study has focused upon the weakness of his treatment of *abba*. Studies of other linguistic and stylistic elements that Jeremias cites lead to similar conclusions. If this is the foundation upon which confidence in the authenticity of the gospel accounts rests, surely the building is upon a scholarship of sand and subjectivity.

2. "*For the Christian to call God 'Father' is to emphasize his immediate, intimate, comforting, loving relationship to God.*" This theory is certainly more plausible than the former. In fact it is certainly true, as far as it goes. It does, however, need to be revised because it tells a glorious half-truth. And, by omitting the other half, it runs the risk of misleading the children of God.

First, it is clear that Christian sonship is a most immediate, intimate, comforting and loving relationship. That is the main point of Paul's use of the

[14]Jeremias, *Theology* 61-68.

[15]Ibid., pp. 36-37.

[16]Ibid., p. 37.

imagery in Gal 3:23-4:7. The slave is in bondage under law, and that law mediates to him the will of the Father. The nature of his freedom is not left undefined by the apostle. It is a freedom guided by the Spirit of the Son who cries *Abba ho patēr*. The verb *krazō* ("I cry out") is much stronger than verbs such as *legō* ("I speak"). It is typically used to denote a loud cry (Mark 5:7) or a vigorous public proclamation of the gospel (John 7:28). In the LXX *krazō* is used to express the deep groans and heightened joy of the psalmist in prayer (Ps 54:16; 21:2). Such prayer is made with the assurance that God hears the one who cries out to him (4:3). (The sense of assurance is evident in the Galatians context, as is the element of joy. These ideas are not themselves denoted by *krazō* but are communicated in the larger semantic field.) This great assurance results from the intensity and the immediacy of the adoption relationship that has replaced the burdensome weight of slavery. The man of faith approaches God not as coming to a lawgiver who must be feared but as coming to a father with whom he fellowships.

This Father is called *Abba ho patēr*. The Greek *patēr* is probably used to make the Aramaic *ʾabbāʾ* comprehensible to those who do not know Aramaic.[17] The use of the Aramaic form itself is most likely due to liturgical influences, possibly deriving from its use in the so-called Lord's Prayer.[18] *ʾAbbāʾ* was a word used in the intimate settings of the home, even by a young child of his father. Its use in prayer with *krazō* was most natural. Together they emphasize an openness and freedom of access that gives great assurance to the believer. This emphasis is intensified by Paul's use of the first person plural pronoun *hēmōn*. He thus personalizes his message and unites himself with the Galatians. Similarly the use of *kardia*, the center of religious and moral life, intensifies the personal religious intimacy in view. All these forms of expression join together to create a most impressive description of the immediacy and intensity of the experience of the filial liberty of the man of faith.

A similar picture emerges from the study of Rom 8:12-30 where Paul describes the one who is justified by faith as an adopted son of God. Paul treats the situation of Christians who are struggling with sin (8:12-17) and Christians who are struggling with suffering (8:18-30). In both cases he ministers to them by reminding them that they are sons of God. The blessed assurance of the adopted son is the assurance that his sin has been dealt with and that he rests close to the heart of his heavenly Father.

In his inimitable style Martin Luther summed up many of these thoughts in his comments on the word *abba*:

> Small as this word is, it says ever so much. It says: "My Father, I am in great trouble and you seem so far away. But I know I am your child, because you are my Father for Christ's sake. I am loved by you because of the Beloved."[19]

[17]*Abba ho patēr* also occurs in Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15.

[18]H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 158; *TDNT* 3 (1965) 903.

[19]M. Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 181.

It is clear that the second theory is true—as far as it goes. Not only does the NT evidence make this clear; the Jewish literature of the period supplies many parallels. Early in the second century after losing a rebellion against Rome, when the nation was in a state of depression, R. Eliezer the Great told of the degeneration, corruption and despair of the times, and at two points in his description he cried out: "Upon whom is it for us to rely?" He answered his own question: "Upon our Father who is in heaven."[20] The same confidence in God's care for his son Israel was expressed at an earlier date in the book of Jubilees where God was portrayed as saying that it will be known "that I am their Father in constancy and righteousness, and that I love them" (*Jub.* 1:24). Similar is one reading of Sir 4:10: "Then God will call thee 'son,' and will be gracious to thee, and deliver thee from the Pit."[21]

Furthermore God is not only the father in the sense of protector but also the father who forgives the iniquity of his children and cleanses them from impurity. Gerald Blidstein refers to the divine model of fatherhood:

> It is also most significant that the forgiveness of God is consistently described—from Biblical times on—as the forgiveness of a father toward his children. "As a father has mercy on his children—so have mercy on us, O Lord" is a frequent liturgical refrain modeled on Ps 103:13. This pervasive recognition that God's forgiveness is an expression of fatherhood is surely representative of the Jewish ethos of parenthood, and helped mold it.[22]

The assurance of God's protection, care and forgiveness was the basis of the confident approach to him in prayer. This is indicated by the liturgy of the synagogue, which included prayer formulae such as *ʾābînû malkēnû* ("our father, our king").[23] The use of the word "father" as an address to God in prayer stressed his approachability, his immanence. In the literature of early Judaism in general, and in the rabbinic literature in particular, the conception of God was an exalted one—that is, there was a strong consciousness of his transcendence. The anthropomorphic description of God as "father" created the danger of minimizing that distance between God and man. The use of the appellation "our king" alongside "our father" served to guard that transcendence. Another attempt to maintain this difficult tension between transcendence and immanence was the use of the expression "father in heaven" or "heavenly father." These occur frequently in the Talmud.[24] This frequency represents a distinct development beyond the OT where God was only occa-

[20]*Soṭa* 49A, 49B. In the Mishna the same passage is found in *Ṣota* 9:15.

[21]See *APOT*, 1. 328-329, for the other variants, which also speak of God's care in different terms.

[22]G. Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics* (New York: Ktav, 1975) 130. Cf. *Yoma* 85B. Note also the sixth of Judaism's famous Eighteen Benedictions as quoted in "Prayer" in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 865.

[23]*Taʿan.* 25B.

[24]*Roš. Haš.* 29A; *Šabb.* 116A; *Soṭa* 49A, 49B; *et al.* That the Jewish use of divine fatherhood denotes immanence and not transcendence distinguishes it from the Greek cosmology in which an expression such as "father of the world" would denote cosmic lordship; *TDNT* 5 (1967) 978.

sionally called "father." The addition of "heavenly" is, however, in keeping with the OT concern for the transcendence of God.

This confidence and boldness in approaching God as father in prayer is seen not only in the corporate prayers of the synagogue but also in the prayers of individuals. The already mentioned story of Honi best illustrates this. He prayed for rain:

> Rain then began to drip, and thereupon he exclaimed: It is not for this that I have prayed but for rain to fill cisterns, ditches and caves. The rain then began to come down with great force, and thereupon he exclaimed: It is not for this that I have prayed but for rain of benevolence, blessing and bounty. Rain then fell in the normal way.[25]

Here is a boldness in coming into God's presence that seems almost blasphemous. It is in the intercessory spirit of Abraham (Gen 18:22-31) and Moses (Exod 32:7-14, 31-35; 33:1-3, 12-24). These texts and the many others that could be cited make it clear that in both Judaism and the early Church the thought of God's fatherhood implied that his people could confidently draw near to him.

There is, however, another strand of thought in the Jewish literature of that period. It picked up another OT theme: The fatherhood of God implied the responsibility of the son. Judah b. Tema (mid-second century) is reported to have said, "Be bold as a leopard and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a hart and strong as a lion to do the will of thy father who is in heaven."[26] It is the will of the father that this is the standard for obedience. The similar association of the commandments of God with the sonship of Israel is seen in the earlier book of Jubilees: "And their soul will cleave to me and to all My commandments, and they will fulfill My commandments, and I will be their Father and they shall be My children" (*Jub.* 1:24). For God to call Israel his son is to direct attention to Sinai and the giving of the law when Israel was constituted as God's son.[27] This represents a slight but significant shift in focus from the stress of the OT. In the OT, Israel was regarded as Yahweh's son by virtue of Yahweh's mighty acts of deliverance from Egypt and his declaration of lordship at Sinai.[28] In subsequent Judaism God is less frequently called "father" in the sense of the electing deliverer (although this idea does continue to find expression) and is more often called "father" in the sense of the lawgiver. It must be noted that this later idea was also expressed in the OT (e.g. Mal 1:6; 2:10) and that the shift is one of proportion and emphasis and not the introduction of a totally new theme. Nevertheless it is a significant

[25] *Ta'an.* 19A. Examples such as this make it clear that R. Bultmann certainly overstated his case when he claimed that in the Judaism of Jesus' day "God has retreated far off into the distance as the transcendent heavenly King, and his sway over the present could barely still be made out"; *New Testament Theology*, 1. 23.

[26] *'Abot* 5:20. See A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, vol. 1, *The Names and Attributes of God* (New York: Ktav, reprint 1968) 203.

[27] See *TDNT* 8 (1972) 359-360; Str-B, 1. 17-19.

[28] See particularly Hos 11:1, 3.

shift in stress away from the redemptive-historical basis of sonship in the OT to a legal basis. This was in keeping with the growing tendency in Judaism as it became more and more a religion of the Torah. This tendency to define the responsibility of sons in terms of obedience to the law was a movement toward what Gottlob Schrenk has called "an ethics of merit."[29] Probably the strongest expression of this view comes from Rabbi Judah (late first century) who saw such a close correlation between sonship and obedience that he said, "When you behave as sons you are designated sons; if you do not behave as sons you are not designated sons" (*Qidd.* 36A).

The teaching of Rabbi Judah is completely incompatible with the NT view of the sonship of Christians. One of the major themes of Rom 8:12-30 is that struggle with sin does not separate the believer from the Father's embrace. This is not to say, however, that sonship and sin, fatherhood and ethics are unrelated in the NT. To be sure, they are not related in the fashion suggested by Rabbi Judah—but they are closely related. We have already noted that in Rom 8:12-17 Paul uses the concept of adoption as sons to minister to those struggling with sin. This pairing of themes is not accidental. In fact the writers of the NT repeatedly develop the ethical responsibilities of the Christian in the context of his sonship. For example, in Eph 1:4-5 Paul expresses the Christian's holiness and blamelessness as the goal or purpose of his election and predestination to sonship.[30] Later in the epistle Paul develops the ethical dimension of sonship. In contrast to those adopted as sons of God, Paul refers to the "sons of disobedience" (2:2) and "children of wrath" (2:3). The opposite of access to the heavenly Father (3:12-14) is punishment (wrath) for disobedience (2:2-3). That is, the son of disobedience may hide from God in fear, but the son of God draws near to the Father. Paul explicitly builds on this foundation in his subsequent exhortations. "Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children" (5:1). Similarly, when laying the groundwork for his plea for Christian service in love Paul reminds the Ephesians that there is (among other things) "one God and Father of us all" (4:6).[31]

Why could Paul[32] use the Father/son motif in these ethical contexts? Because for the Christian to call God "Father" is not only to emphasize his immediate, intimate, comforting, loving relationship to God. *Abba* is not only a term of endearment. In ancient Palestine it was not only a word used by little children; it was also a word used by grown children. It gave expression to the relationship of both young and adult children to their father. It had connotations of the entire breadth of those fatherly relationships. The breadth of its meaning must not be stripped away in favor of a simpler denotation of

[29]*TDNT* 5 (1967) 980 n. 222.

[30]The *proorisas* ("having predestined") is modal in force describing the "how" of *exelexato* ("he chose").

[31]See W. P. De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul* (Kampen: Kok, 1962) 77 ff.

[32]That this ethical use of the motif is not limited to Paul is made clear by a quick glance at NT texts such as Matt 5:16, 44, 45, 48; 7:21; 1 Pet 1:14-17; Jas 1:27; 3:9-10; 1 John 2:16; 2 John 4; Heb 12:4-10.

only "endearment."[33] Sonship involves obligations. It is a highly ethical category. This was recognized by Christians at an early date. For example, Tertullian commenting on the address of God writes: "In saying 'Father' we also call him 'God.' That appellation is one both of filial duty and of power."[34] In the one name "Father" Tertullian finds both "power" and "duty." Undoubtedly he could do so because of texts such as those at which we have already looked. Adoption as sons means both encouragement and obligation. In fact both of these flow from the single notion of intimacy. Paul's thought moves easily from ethical obligation to sonship to absence of fear to the fatherly presence of God through the Spirit. It can do so because this intimacy with Paul's God is both a demanding and encouraging relationship.[35] Such intimacy is not limited to the cradle. The believer does not live his life as a perpetual infant. Intimacy grows as the son matures and comes to know his Father ever more closely, as the son's heart becomes more in tune with the Father's, as the son comes to appreciate his Father more and more, and as the son comes to think and act more like his Father. Sonship means blessings and responsibilities. This kind of a Father/son relationship is an immediate, intimate, encouraging and loving one. It is also much more than that—and the man who does not perceive it as more than that can never know the fullness of immediacy, intimacy, encouragement and love with his heavenly Father.

[33]Cf. J. M. Oesterreicher, "'Abba, Father!' On the Humanity of Jesus," in *The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy* (ed. J. J. Petuchowski and M. Brocke; New York: Seabury, 1978) 122-134. Oesterreicher vigorously critiques Jeremias' one-sided emphasis on the intimacy of relationship denoted by *abba*.

[34]Tertullian *On Prayer* 2.

[35]Note the comment of P. A. H. De Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 25: "Father" when used of God "is no term of the nursery."