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JESUS AND THE FATHER

By Tim Bulkeley

In my previous two lectures, I stressed that the God of the Bible is not "a god"—that is, God is not one being among many (or even few) of a kind but is totally and completely unique. This is expressed in the Hebrew word *'echad*, meaning the one, the only. I then went through some of the Scripture passages that make use of motherly language or pictures to talk about God, suggesting this provides us with a resource to broaden the ways in which we think and talk about God.

Before we begin, it is important to state that I am not suggesting we should stop calling God "father." For Jesus called God "father," so naturally we should continue to do so. What I am suggesting, however, is that our talk about God would be fuller if we explored and used other ways of speaking about God to help fill out the picture so that our language and thought are closer to the truth.

Jesus named God as "Father"

Clearly, Jesus did use the name Father to speak about God. This seems indisputable. However, as always, when we read the Bible or are talking about things from the distant past, it is important that we put them in their context. A significant part of the context for thinking about the writers of the New Testament (NT) using "father" language so dominantly is to remember that the most important thing they were doing was seeking to make sense of *their* experience of Jesus.

Jesus came into the world as something that had never before been known. The NT writers had to try to understand what that meant. Thus, we see in the NT a number of ways in which they tried to grapple with the fact of Jesus. Some of those ways we have retained; others, like thinking of Jesus as the Wisdom of God, we have almost forgotten. Indeed, in the NT itself, this reference becomes less used in the later writings. The central thing the NT writers were doing was to try to articulate their experience of Jesus.

As part of that, one of their tasks was to make sense of their emerging understanding that Jesus was God. Getting a real hold on this idea was difficult for the earliest Christians because they were Jewish. For a people steeped in the Old Testament (OT), God was the one and only. It would have been easy for early Christians to grasp the fact that Jesus was God *if* they had been polytheists, for then they could just have added Jesus as one more god. However, for Jewish people, this was a problem since God is one, not many. They somehow had to understand that, if Jesus was God, God was also God, yet Jesus prayed to God. As part of that process, a core idea they used time and again was to talk about the relationship between Jesus and God as being like the relationship between a father and a son. This provided a way of talking about God-not-Jesus that made sense and, although difficult, worked well on several levels.[1] Over the centuries, we have confirmed that it works well indeed; and we have continued to use this language, taking our cue from the NT writers.

However, in modern talk about God as "father," a great deal has been made of the fact that Jesus called God *'abba*, which is claimed to be an equivalent of the English word 'daddy.' Some scholars have concluded from this argument that talk about God as "father" emerges because of Jesus' unique relationship with God. They claim this talk was something new that Jesus gave to the world; initially, it was his own usage, but later Christians borrowed this language.[2] I want to examine this idea critically because I do not think it is quite right.

It is correct that Jesus did call God *'abba*. The early Christians copied him; and father-language became one of their common ways to talk about God, not least because this made it easier to think of Jesus also as God. However, does the fact that Jesus called God *'abba* mean Jesus used this baby-talk or familiar form because his relationship with the Father was unique? Clearly not, for Paul speaks twice of *'abba* as a way all believers should address God (Rom 8:15 & Gal 4:6), while

[1]Of course, no picture-language works in every way.

[2]Joachim Jeremias is often cited, in particular his "The Prayers of Jesus," but an earlier German scholar Gerhard Kittel also supported the idea in his "πατήρ;" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testamen*t (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964). Jeremias is still cited in support of this claim, although he later retracted it saying, "One often reads (and I myself believed it at one time) that when Jesus spoke to his heavenly Father he took up the chatter of a small child. To assume this would be a piece of inadmissible naivety;" Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesu*s (Studies in Biblical Theology 2/6; London: SCM, 1977), 62; the original German edition of his paper was Joachim Jeremias, *Abba. Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

Jesus only used the term once in the gospel accounts of his teaching and praying (Mark 14:36). For Paul, the use of *'abba* was not an expression of Jesus' unique closeness to God nor was the usage special to Jesus. Already by the time of Paul, before the gospels were written, *'abba* was not a usage special to Jesus, but for all Christians.

More than this, some scholars have argued that such father-language was rare or unknown in the Judaism of Jesus' day. It is certainly rare for such language to be used of an individual's relationship with God in the OT. So, was the use of "my father" or "our father" to speak of God something Jesus introduced? There is evidence for such individual usage well before the time of Jesus. Even already in the Apocrypha in Sirach 23:1, 4, an individual calls God father (and cf. Wisdom 14:3), and the "Joseph Prayer" in 4Q372 1:16f. addresses God as "my Father"). Turning to Rabbinic Judaism, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, in his study of God the Father, noted around a hundred rabbinic uses of the phrase "Father in Heaven" (that we know from Matthew's gospel). He concluded, "If Jesus had a realization of God to share with his Jewish audience, this was an experiential deepening of their own traditional understanding and obviously did not stand in conflict with it."[3]

Concerning this question, it is also interesting to look at where 'father' is used to speak of God in the gospels when they are quoting Jesus' speech; that is, not everywhere God is called "father" in the gospels, but only where Jesus uses this term. It turns out that it is rare in the gospels for Jesus to call God 'father,' except in John. Here are the figures:[4]

> In Mark[5]—5; in material common to Matthew and Luke—9; in material special to Luke—5; in material special to Matthew—18; and in John—117.

Noting that scholarship usually dates Mark as the earliest gospel and John as most theological and the latest, these figures suggest that the early church remembered Jesus as using "father" more often than he perhaps actually did.

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[3]Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studi*es 38, no. 4 (2001): 503.

[4]Hofius, O., "Father," ed. Brown, Colin, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theolo*gy (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 1986), 619–20.

[5]Mark 8:38; 11:25; 13:32; 14:36 (the last using both *pater* and *'abba* as synonyms).

So the rabbis of Jesus' day were not shocked by calling God "father"; and Jesus was remembered as using this term, which became so common in the early church, more than he, again, perhaps actually did. Talk of God as 'father' was not something strange and new that Jesus taught; it was more likely something he learned from his teachers.

Because we copy Jesus' usage and call God "father," it is important to notice these facts. What we should not do is exaggerate the extent to which calling God "father" was something Jesus taught that was unique or new to him. Rather, it seems it was the early church who found this father-son language helpful for understanding Jesus' relationship with God and who made it a dominant way of talking.

Fathers in the ancient world and Jesus' talk of God

Because we do want to continue to call God "father" as Jesus did, we need to ask: What did this language of God as father mean to Jesus? What was Jesus thinking when he used that picture-language? Picture-language needs more conscientious examination than the more careful language we sometimes use.[6] So to what passage would you turn if you wanted to know what Jesus meant when he talked of God as 'father?' One of the first suggestions would likely be—the 'prodigal son' (Luke 15:11-32).

It is interesting that we use the Western name for this story, for that name is misleading. Jesus' parable is not about a wasteful (prodigal) son but about a father with two sons or, perhaps better, about a lost son. Following two shorter parables about lost sheep and lost coins, in this story, first one son is lost and then at the end, when he is returned to the father, it's the other son who's revealed as "lost."

Before we look at how Jesus pictured God as father (and especially before looking at this particular story), we need to ask how fatherhood was understood in Jesus' culture. Although scholars may debate the details of Pilch's brief summary from the *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, its outlines would be widely accepted. He wrote, "Clearly, the father is viewed as severe, stern and authoritarian; the mother is viewed as loving and compassionate. Children respect and fear the father but love the mother affectionately even after they are married."[7]

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[6]We use picture-language much of the time and careful propositional language more rarely.

[7]Pilch, John J., "Father," ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 147.

We can see the stern punishing aspect (especially in the father's relationship with his son) clearly in Proverbs 13:24, 22:15, and 23:13-14. The evidence suggests that, in Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean, generally sons were expected to respect and even fear their fathers. At the same time, they were to have a warmer and more affectionate relationship with their mothers—even after marrying and starting their own homes, when they themselves had such a dignified, distant, and authoritative father. This picture of someone distant, authoritative and dignified seems to be what we should expect to have been in the minds of Jesus' hearers. But is it this cultural picture that Jesus teaches?

In his parable, there is a father with two sons. One is incredibly rude and demands his share of the inheritance even while his father is alive. He then goes off and wastes it. With the money gone, he is reduced to feeding pigs and envies what they get to eat. Recognizing that even his father's servants live better, he returns home with the intention of asking for a job. But his father, seeing him in the distance, runs to him and hugs and kisses him. He then orders fine clothes and a party to welcome the lost son home.[8]

Notice how the father in Jesus' story behaves. Just about everything he does breaks the cultural stereotypes:

- He goes to meet the son. (That's wrong—a son should come to meet the father. who is senior.)
- He runs to the son. (That's wrong—a father is to be dignified, honored, and respected; he is to walk with dignity, like a professor in a graduation ceremony.)
- He hugs the son. (That's wrong—this son insulted his father gravely by asking for his share of the inheritance then going off, so the father should wait for the son to first beg for forgiveness.

Just about everything this father does is wrong by the cultural standards of the Eastern Mediterranean at that time.

This story "works" because the father's behavior is a surprise—as do many other of Jesus' stories, which surprise or even shock the

[8]In the story as Jesus tells it, the other son then reveals himself as "lost," and it seems clear from the context (Luke 15:1) that this was the point of the story. However, our interest is in how Jesus pictures God as father; and for this, we can perhaps stop at this point.

hearer.[9] Would it had worked as well (in almost any culture) if Jesus had told it of a mother? Would a mother welcoming home a lost, rebellious, son have had as much of an impact in helping people discover God's forgiveness and love in a new way? If Jesus had told the story of a mother with two sons, could this have surprised the Pharisees and so caused them to think about, and perhaps move from, their judgment of Jesus for welcoming sinners (Luke 15:1)? In most cultures, mothers are expected to be more loving and forgiving than fathers.[10]

I think that this story is so remembered because Jesus tells it of a father and not of a mother. Indeed, instead of becoming a favorite parable, the story of a mother with two sons might likely have been forgotten. Looking closer at the question of how Jesus thought of God using father pictures then gets more interesting, because one finds that Jesus makes a habit of describing Father-God as breaking cultural norms.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Father-God feeds and clothes (Matt 6:26-32, Luke 11:1-2, 13, Luke 12:30, John 6:32 cf. Luke 24:49, John 6:27); yet by the cultural expectations of the time, these were the mother's roles. Also, Father-God gives gifts to bad as well as good children (Matt 5:45). Culturally, this might be allowable (or at least understandable) for a mother); but for a father, it would be disapproved because he was failing his responsibility to discipline. Discipline was a central part of the father's job in raising children. (We get some feel for this in the way a child's submission and respect are criteria for respecting the father (I Tim 3:4, 12, Titus 1:6). There is even an echo in modern Western culture of this expectation that fathers discipline in the phrase, "Wait till your father gets home!" Father-God, however, consistently forgives rather than punishes in Matt 6:14-15, Matt 18:35, Mark 11:25, and in Luke 6:36 where the father does judge (5:45; 8:16 but cf. 5:22). So it is not true that Father-God does not judge or that he

[9]As an aside, I noticed that as well as "interesting" (a word with at least two possible senses in this context), another word some of the audience had begun to use about the topic of the lectureship was "shocking." If that leads one to a closer relationship with God, as the shock of Jesus' stories did for his hearers, then I am happy for my readers to be shocked by this topic! However, I pray that I have not given any other cause for shock.

[10]In Chinese culture, the story told of a mother might "work" if the context was upper-class, since upper-class women are supposed to be demanding of their sons' good behavior. In many other cultures, however, the story could only be told of a mother if the father were elsewhere; for if the father were around, the mother could not run to greet the son first.

fails to act like a father. But Jesus' Father-God acts like a mother as well.

Father-God also deals with infants and little children (Matt 11:25, Matt 18:14, Luke 10:21). The archetypical picture of a father and son is usually of a boy walking beside dad perhaps holding his dad's hand, or of the two collaborating as father teaches son; whereas the archetypical picture of a mother and son is usually the mother with a baby or toddler. Think, for example, of the images of Jesus with his mother in Catholic culture; for every Mary holding a crucified Christ, there are likely more of the Santo Niño, often on her knee.

Another example is the puzzling phrase, "Your father who is/sees in secret…" (Matt 6:4, 6, 18, cf. 6:1). Clearly, this might be a reference to God who sees everything, yet that does not seem to be what Jesus means here. In 6:4, it might be this sense; but in 6:6, we are to go into a closed room to meet our "father who sees in secret." In Eastern Mediterranean culture, the father's role was public and the mother's private. The woman's place was (literally) in the home, while the public face of the household was the man, as is still the case in Islamic culture.

In summary, although Jesus' picture of Father-God includes the fatherly attributes that the surrounding culture expects, it also includes key elements that would more naturally have been said of a mother.

The Issue of God's Gender

Many people have argued from the fact that, since Jesus was male, in some sense God is more male than female, although most are careful to not say that God is male. For to say that would not be orthodox Christian theology. This thinking often appears in the discussions of women preachers or ministers. The great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis argued that women should not be Anglicans clergy, claiming that there is a sense in which God is more male than female, thus a woman is not as appropriate as a representative of God.[11]

One of the most respected Christian thinkers and apologists of the 20th century, Lewis is almost always quite clear in what he says and means. In this case, that "clarity of thought," it seems to me, reveals where Lewis is wrong; for since about 300 AD (at the latest), Christian theology has not limited God to one gender or the other. God is beyond such categories—God is spirit.

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[11]C.S. Lewis, *Undeceptions: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (ed. Walter Hooper; London: Bles, 1971), 193.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, another Christian thinker whom I also greatly respect, made similar arguments more recently in a series of publications.[12] As a biblical scholar, I think she should have known better. It seems clear from Scripture, as well as later Christian theology, that once we make God part of some "group" and not of others or sharing a category with some class of beings but not another class of beings, we have reduced God to a "god." Such a reduction of the Godhead to merely a member of some class of beings rather than clearly the One and only is simply idolatry. It reduces God to part of the world.

I respect both these thinkers enormously and recommend their works to you, but on this issue they are dangerously wrong—for God has no gender!

In thinking about this issue of whether Jesus' maleness makes the Godhead in some sense male, one can consider the relationship of Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, to the entire Trinity. The argument is advanced as follows: Since Jesus was male then the entire Trinity must be, in some sense, at least more male than female, for the three persons are of the same *ousia*, distinguished by their relationship not by their natures. This argument seems strange, since we do not take any other of Jesus' physical characteristics and apply them to God. God does not have particular hair color, eye color, height, etc., for God is spirit. In technical language, this argument confounds *oikonomia* (the working of God) with *theologia* (the being of God), or the *logos ensarkos* (the Word Incarnate) with the *logos endiathetos* (the Word of God in the being of God from all eternity).

In this connection, although many people would love to know what Jesus looked like, we have no eyewitness pictures or descriptions to confirm our images. When the BBC wanted to show how Jesus might have looked, it required a lot of money, clever archaeologists, and technology to invent a reconstruction. If Jesus' physical characteristics belonged to his divine nature, would the disciples not have described

[12]Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?," *Transformation* 4,2 (1987): 24-30; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Why God Is Not Mother," *Christianity Today* 37,9 (1993): 17-23; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God," in *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel; Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 1-16; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?," in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. James Mays; Allison Park, PA.: Pickwick, 1986), 97-114; see also other authors collected in Alvin F. Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

him? Jesus' claim that "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and the statement in Genesis that we are created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27) do not mean that either our or Jesus' physical appearance or characteristics are properties of the Godhead. Jesus and the Father are of one "essence," not of one appearance.

Note that this argument is not concerned with aspects of Jesus' character or actions but merely with his physical characteristics. Because we do not ever transfer any other of these characteristics of the incarnate Jesus to the Godhead, except his sex, it seems to me the people who make this claim are the ones who need to establish their case. A brown-eyed "god" is not God. Thus, the early theologians stated it clearly: "God has no gender."[13]

The understanding that God, the One and only, is not a member of any class of beings is not something new; it was known and taught by the earliest Christian theologians and pastors. Nor did this idea have to wait for the working out of complex Christian doctrines; it was already implied in Scripture—"God is spirit," Jesus taught (John 4:24); and "In Christ there is neither male nor female," Paul affirmed (Gal 3:28).

Language

The claim that God is not a member of any class or group of beings, neither human nor gods, means that all our word-pictures of God are wrong as well as right. They may be true in some ways and untrue in others. We are all tempted to want to think that our pictures of God are perfect, but this can never be. No human language about God can ever be a perfect description of God. All we can do is to try getting closer and closer to the indescribable greatness of God, which is more than we can begin to imagine. So, all of our pictures of God are both right and wrong, true in some ways and false in others.

One of the ways in which Scripture itself seeks to correct the wrong in its pictures of God is to put two strikingly different pictures together—for two together say more than one on its own. I gave an example of this, which has nothing to do with mothers and fathers in an earlier lecture. In Isaiah 40:10-11, we have the picture of God as victorious conquering hero-king bringing home the spoils of war and the picture of God as a tender shepherd cuddling a little lamb. By

[13]Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily VII In Cantica Canticorum* (PG 44: 916B)—"God is not either male or female;" in Greek, the quotation reads: *epeide gar oute arren, oute thelu to theion esti*;. Jerome, *In Esaiam* (CCSL 73: 459, 1.82-83)—"There is no sexuality in the Godhead;" in Latin, the quotation reads: *In divinitate enim nullus est sexus.*

bringing these two different images together, the prophet leads us closer to a fuller richness of God than either picture alone could do. God is indeed a powerful conquering king; but God is, at the same time, tender and gentle, like someone cuddling a lamb.

It is similar with the picture of "father." Father is a wonderful picture of God. For many of us, it is a favorite way of describing God's love, care, and even discipline; yet it is limited. Our cultural expectations tend to limit it is some ways, while our actual experience of human fathers may limit it in others. Although when we are small, we may think our fathers are perfect; but in fact, they are broken human beings as we are.

When I was nineteen years old, I learned firmly of my father's brokenness and weakness. On a holiday, he, my younger brother, and I were driving through France, while my mother was home in England with our youngest brother. During that trip, dad had a severe nervous breakdown, the result of a flashback from WWII as an ambulance driver. (He was a pacifist who refused to fight, so had to pick up the broken pieces and shattered human beings during the fighting.) During his breakdown, he became incapable of caring for us; rather we had to care for him. He said strange and bizarre things, hearing voices "by radio" in his head. That aspect of my father is simply not true of God, who is absolutely dependable.

In many ways, my father was a wonderful picture of God. I do not know of a man who was more loving, caring, and gentle than he, but dad was not the best picture of God's discipline. Of my parents, he was the gentler and the more apt to let wrongdoing pass with just a “Don't do it again.” It was my mother who taught us discipline. For other people, it would be different; and in cultural stereotypes, it is different. But for all of us, if we have two "good parents," they will each be good parents in different ways. Of course, if we have one good and one bad parent, the problem this poses for picturing God becomes much more difficult.

Just as for human babies it is better to have both a mum and a dad, it is better also for our picturing of God if we can view him as both like a dad and a mum. I think this is one of the things Jesus was doing in his talk of God as "father." He talks about a father who is a motherly father.

The Father and the Son

A question often raised about this material is whether what I am saying means that we could as well talk about the relationship of the first and second persons of the Trinity as Mother and Daughter or as Father and Daughter or as Mother and Son—i.e., is there something special about the Father-Son language that is needed for orthodox theology? This is a question about which I am still unclear. On the one hand, Father and Son are, in fact, the names revealed to us in Scripture, so they are the ones I am happy to use. While I do not know if these other pictures would be possible, what I do know is that no human father-son relationship matches that between Father-God and Jesus. They are, at best, pale echoes of that reality. The relationship between Father and Son is not the same as that between a father and a son—it is way beyond. The Father-Son picture is only a picture, not in some magical way "language." Although it sounds like picture-language, it somehow escapes the limitations of picture-language. It is not the careful, cautious language of philosophy but rather the picture-language of poetry, song, and worship. Although using Father and Son as names sounds different from mere picture language, it does not escape the limitations that come with the usage of such language. It is not the careful language of philosophy but rather the picture language of poetry, song and worship

The language of the Bible is holy; it should not be touched. Therefore, I think the discussions among missiologists and Bible translators about amending the Father-Son language of the Bible to avoid offending Muslim readers was resolved the right way. It was not an issue like that raised by gender-neutral Bible translations that, for example, avoid using "brothers" to represent the Greek *adelphoi* in places where the Bible writers clearly did not intend to exclude women. That debate is about the intent of the Bible writers and the meaning of words being subject to change over time in all languages.

Yet all language is "dangerous." Even careful philosophical or systematic theological language, but specifically everyday language, is dangerous. Just think how often what we say is misunderstood. Picture language expresses feelings as well as ideas and so is extra dangerous. As people who use language to talk about God, we have a responsibility to try to minimize the dangers. (Notice how often sects develop by taking language from Scripture by careless use that does not minimize the dangers of picture language, with the result that they are led way off track.)

Conclusion

Jesus showed us one way to minimize the danger of calling God "father"—by describing a father who shares some motherly characteristics. There are also other ways. For example, if we are careful to broaden our experience of God, we will be more likely to use greater variety in our images and our words. If we are not to think that God is merely a father, we need to, in some ways, experience God as mother. As pastors, teachers, and people who preach or lead worship, we have a responsibility to help others broaden their experience of God too. All of us have limited experience of God, none even coming close to the reality; so we should always try to give people a richer, fuller understanding of God.