

ʾABBA³ IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

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The issue before us is the Fatherhood of God in the OT and the NT. Because of the insistence of Joachim Jeremias that ʾAbba³ is one of the few *ipsissima verba* in the NT and because of his attractive exposition of God's relationship to us as "Daddy," it is not uncommon to see a wedge driven between the Testaments. It is out of concern for the integrity of the Biblical witness on the Fatherhood of God that I question Jeremias' methodology and conclusions. I have greatly benefited from his writings, but at this point I have had genuine difficulty at both an academic level and a practical level. The widespread effect is evident from the manner in which scholars and popular writers set the OT off from the NT in Reformed and non-Reformed circles. For example, J. I. Packer writes:

For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctly Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. "Father" is the Christian name for God. . . . New Testament believers deal with God as their Father. "Father" is the name by which they call Him. "Father" has now become His covenant name—for the covenant which binds Him to His people now stands revealed as a family covenant. Christians are His children, His own sons and heirs. And the stress of the New Testament is not on the difficulty and danger of drawing near to the holy God, but on the boldness and confidence with which believers may approach Him: a boldness that springs directly from faith in Christ, and from the knowledge of His saving work.¹

Jeremias has greatly confounded the relation between the Testaments by his teaching that Jesus' unique contribution is the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. It is out of concern for this tender balance between the OT and the NT that I propose to critically evaluate Jeremias, to look at the Fatherhood of God in the OT in the context of the world of the OT and to reconsider the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God in the NT.

I. JEREMIAS ON ʾABBA³

The term ʾAbba³ for Jeremias signifies "the ultimate mystery of the mission of Jesus." Jesus came to reveal the Father.² As he did so, he enlarged the circle of his relationship to the Father to include all those who are united to

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¹J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 182-184; cf. R. C. Sproul, *Effective Prayer* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1984) 25.

²J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1971) 68.

himself. Only Jesus can authorize the usage of *ʾAbbā* on the lips of his disciples. For Jeremias, then, the term signifies the coming in of the reign of God in due time.³ *ʾAbbā* also signifies the new manner by which one can turn to God in prayer with simplicity, intimacy and security.⁴ Jeremias repeatedly calls this the language of the child to the father. While he calls it "childlike," he wants it to be understood that it is not the chatter of a small child.⁵

Jeremias contends that in Palestinian Judaism *ʾAbbā* was only reluctantly applied to God.⁶ The Jews looked on God as imposing obligations on them,⁷ but Jesus invited the sons of the kingdom in fellowship and into a relationship with the King.

Thus Jeremias contrasts Jesus' God-language with that of his contemporaries in Palestinian Judaism.⁸ From the extant evidence he concludes that there was a formality in the prayers, particularly in the Jewish liturgy.⁹ Jews did not address God as "my Father"¹⁰ but as "our Father." Jeremias further observes that the use of *ʾAbbā* in familial relations made it inappropriate for liturgical use. It was a familial term that was too familiar a form of expression in speaking of or to a deity.¹¹ Therefore *ʾAbbā* was considered "disrespectful."¹² Jeremias concludes that for the Jewish mind "it would have been irreverent and therefore unthinkable to call God by this familiar word."¹³

In conclusion, Palestinian Judaism showed a reluctance in using the term *ʾAbbā* as a form of address in prayers. Its use was limited to the communal expression "our Father."¹⁴ "There is no evidence so far that in Palestinian Judaism of the first millennium anyone addressed God as 'my Father.'"¹⁵

Having restricted the available evidence to Palestinian Judaism, Jeremias argues that the usage of "Father" in the teachings of Jesus is a significant

³J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Naperville: Allenson, 1967) 78. "Yes, he goes so far as to say that it is this new relationship which first opens the doors to God's reign" (p. 97).

⁴Ibid. 97.

⁵Ibid. 62.

⁶Ibid. 17, 97.

⁷Ibid. 18.

⁸Ibid. 22. Jeremias purposely delimits his investigation to Palestinian Judaism.

⁹Ibid. 23-29.

¹⁰Ibid. 29.

¹¹Ibid. 58-60.

¹²Ibid. 62. "It would have seemed disrespectful, indeed unthinkable, to the sensibilities of Jesus' contemporaries to address God with this familiar word" (*Theology* 67).

¹³J. Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1965) 21.

¹⁴Jeremias, *Theology* 63-64.

¹⁵Jeremias, *Central* 17.

advance beyond his contemporaries. He shows in contrast how much more extensive Jesus' usage is as recorded in the gospels: Mark, 4 times; Luke, 15; Matthew, 42; John, 109. Then he raises the question: "How are we to explain this extremely striking difference in the figures?"¹⁶

Jeremias discovers that Jesus' unique contribution lies in his teaching about God as *Abbā*³.¹⁷ This teaching is not derivative from the OT or from his Palestinian Jewish background. Instead it expresses his unique relationship to the Father. Jeremias argues from Matt 11:27 that the Father has granted Jesus the Son complete knowledge.¹⁸ This knowledge is the basis of the revelation of Jesus' mission and functions as its center.¹⁹ Because God has granted Jesus the revelation of his mission, Jesus' authority is derived from the Father.²⁰

Therefore Jesus could not be content with the liturgically prescribed prayers of Palestinian Judaism.²¹ He introduced a new way of speaking about God and to God. Jesus spoke to his Father "as naturally, as intimately, and with the same sense of security as a child talks to his father."²² The new way of praying to God is characterized in Jesus' example of simplicity, intimacy and security.²³

This new way of addressing God as Father is for Jeremias the sign of the new age, which celebrates the open door to God in Jesus whereby sinners may receive forgiveness and enjoy a new relationship with the Father through Christ. In all this Jeremias speaks about the historical Jesus of critical investigation:

We are confronted with something new and unheard of which breaks through the limits of Judaism. Here we see who the historical Jesus was: the man who had the power to address God as *Abba* and who included the sinners and the publicans in the kingdom by authorizing them to repeat this one word, "*Abba*, dear father."²⁴

In conclusion, for Jeremias the novelty of Jesus lies in his teaching on *Abbā*³.²⁵ Moreover the one word *Abbā*³ is definitely the word used by Jesus. It

¹⁶Jeremias, *Prayers* 29.

¹⁷Ibid. 43; *Central* 18-19.

¹⁸Jeremias, *Prayers* 63.

¹⁹Jeremias, *Theology* 68.

²⁰Jeremias, *Prayers* 63, 97.

²¹Ibid. 77.

²²Ibid. 78.

²³Ibid. 97.

²⁴Jeremias, *Central* 30.

²⁵Jeremias, *Theology* 67: "The complete novelty and uniqueness of *Abba* as an address to God in the prayers of Jesus shows that it expresses the heart of Jesus' relationship to God. He spoke to God as a child to its father: confidently and securely, and yet at the same time reverently and obediently."

is the *ipsissima vox Jesu* by which we still hear Jesus calling us to enter into an intimate relationship between the Father and the Son and to listen to the revelation of the Father. *ʾAbbā* marks the beginning of a new age in which we may address God as Father upon Jesus' authority.²⁶ By inviting us to address God as Father, Jesus authorizes his followers to receive his new revelation and the new relationship with God. Jeremias posits that Jesus even goes so far as to say that only he who can repeat the childlike *ʾAbbā* shall enter into the kingdom of God.²⁷

II. RESPONSE TO JEREMIAS

What shall we say in response to Jeremias' analysis?

First, throughout his writings his concern is with the *ipsissima vox Jesu*. His conclusions, however, are a result of a critical approach to the text. For example, in comparing the opening phrase of the Lord's prayer in Luke 11:2 ("Father," *patēr*)²⁸ and Matt 6:9 ("Our Father in heaven," *patēr hēmōn en tois ouranois*) he favors Luke because of the direct address of God as "Father," assuming that Matthew's phrase reflects Jewish usage.

Second, Jeremias is too much taken by the quest for the historical Jesus. And then, once he has found the *ipsissima vox Jesu*, he hangs the whole mission of Jesus on this one word. Is the phrase "our Father" less intimate than *ʾAbbā*? Jeremias' argument depends on the assumption of an underlying Aramaic word in Luke 11:2. He assumes that "our Father" is not authentic and that Jesus' teaching on the Fatherhood of God is a completely new revelation.

Third, Jeremias does not explain why the Jews did not object to Jesus' usage of *ʾAbbā*, "Father" or "my Father." If the direct, personal address were "disrespectful" and "irreverent," why is it that none of the gospels record the reaction of the Jews or of his disciples? Certainly Jews were circumspect in their speech in reference to deity. But Jesus' teaching about the Father conforms to the OT, is in essence a return to OT piety, and is an intensification in that Jesus himself spoke to God as "my Father."

Fourth, Jeremias argues that Jesus' prayers are characterized by simplicity, intimacy and security. But a study of the prayers of the OT also reveals these qualities, and another characteristic may be added: boldness. The Psalms exemplify a spirit of boldness, which permits the one praying to call on Yahweh to act.

Fifth, Jeremias is too concerned with a particular form of address. In the OT and in QL, as well as in rabbinic Judaism, there were many forms of addressing God in prayer. The form of address is not always as important as the frame of reference in which God is approached. The contents and the spirit of prayer also reveal closeness.

²⁶Jeremias, *Prayers* 63, 97.

²⁷Jeremias, *Central* 28-29.

²⁸Some MSS read "Our Father" or "Our Father in heaven."

Sixth, Jeremias' argument only holds up if one accepts his definition of the field of investigation: the forms of individual address to God in extant literature of Palestinian Judaism in contradistinction to the underlying (!) Aramaic usage by Jesus as reflected in the gospels. He dismisses offhand the way in which people spoke about God as Father, and also their prayers that address God as "our Father," as a community address. Jeremias thus limits himself to the evidence that comes from Palestinian Judaism, is extant, addresses God in prayer, and reflects a personal address to God. He rigidly applies this grid to all prayers in Palestinian Judaism and to the OT and then concludes that Jesus' teaching on the Fatherhood of God is unique. He dismisses Matthew's use of "our Father" as Jewish and unauthentic, but he assumes that Luke's version has an underlying Aramaic form *ʾAbba*³ (Luke 11:2). Others use the same approach as well:

In Aramaic, *ʾabba*³ (the word reproduced in Mk. 14:36) stood in all likelihood throughout. This form of address was so significant for the disciples that it was still retained in its Aramaic original even in the Hellenistic Church. . . . Jesus also made this relationship to God possible for his disciples; the Lord's Prayer originally began with this address.²⁹

The very nature of the extant prayers from Palestinian Judaism is that of communal prayers. Even today God is rarely addressed as "my Father" in public prayer. No record is kept of private prayer except in heaven.³⁰

Seventh, even Jeremias has to admit that the OT recognized adoption to sonship as he discusses the quote of 2 Sam 7:8, 14 in 2 Cor 6:18:

For them, the privilege of repeating Jesus' "Abba" amounted to an anticipation of the fulfillment of the promise: "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters" (II Cor. 6:18 = II Sa. 7:14, free quotation).³¹

The OT quote is part of a series of quotations (2 Cor 6:16-18), forming "an artistic mosaic"³² in which the exhortation toward holiness (v 17) is set between the statements that God has promised to be the God and the Father of his people (vv 16, 18). The apostle quotes loosely from Lev 26:12; Ezek 37:27; 43:9b; Zech 2:10 (in v 16b); Isa 52:11-12; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; Zech 10:8 (in v 17); 2 Sam 7:8, 14; Isa 43:6; Jer 31:9 (in v 18). Paul applies the OT expectation of holiness together with the OT promises to the NT people of God, thus establishing the continuity between OT and NT. Grosheide comments on the reference

²⁹L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1. 202 (italics mine).

³⁰I agree with Samuel Sandmel's criticism of Jeremias: "(He) argues that the only use of this term for God is that by Jesus. On the one hand, this is largely an argument from silence; on the other hand, the appellation by Jews of God as 'father' in Hebrew is so broad that the focusing on the Aramaic instance as determinative is preposterous. But even if one were to grant that only Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, the denotation which Jeremias puts into the term is totally without restraint or credibility." S. Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties* (New York: Oxford, 1979).

³¹Jeremias, *Prayers* 65.

³²F. W. Grosheide, *De Tweede Brief aan de Kerk te Korinthe* (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 192.

to a full acceptance as the people of God, which may therefore be enlarged in parallel fashion through the relation of father and sons. . . . Already the OT names God continually as the Father of his people and we see that name through the work of Christ in its full glory.³³

This interpretation is consistent with Paul's argument to the Galatians that the Jews under the Sinaitic covenant were God's children. Their status was that of immature children who needed a pedagogue: "What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father" (Gal 4:1-2). In Romans he writes of adoption to sonship as a privilege enjoyed by Israel (9:4-5).

In conclusion, the issue is not whether Jesus enjoyed a unique relationship or whether he introduced the new era, but whether the word *ʾAbbā* expresses all that. Hugh Anderson rightly warns us of not projecting our own theology into Jesus' ministry as he criticizes Jeremias for limiting the self-revelation of God "only in the *earthly* ministry of Jesus."³⁴

III. THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE OT

The OT revelation was given in historically conditioned contexts. God's revelation of himself and of the ways in which he was to be addressed was also culturally conditioned. The OT expressions for God and relationships with God freely shared metaphors, mythopoeic language, and concepts with its cultural milieu. The student of the OT is struck time and again concerning how extensively the OT authors were culturally indebted. But the uniqueness of Israel's revelation-faith is unaffected. On the contrary, it is heightened. The God who reveals himself accommodates himself to our language and permits us to address him and to write about him in our language.

The OT witnesses to Yahweh as the wholly other God in relation to the Baal-El cult. He is the Creator-Redeemer-King who alone acts on behalf of Israel and needs no other gods. He alone is "Master" (*Ba'al*). The polemical outlook on the Baal cult is commonly recognized and is evidenced by the purposeful restraint of the Biblical authors not to refer to Yahweh as "Baal." Nevertheless Hos 2:16 breaks with the convention in predicting that after Israel's exile, because of idolatrous practices, the people will return to God's favor and refer to him as "my husband" (Hebrew "my Baal"). But the poets and prophets of Israel did not refrain from mythopoeic language and imagery derived from the literary expressions associated with the Baal cult.³⁵ Ever since the discovery of the Ugaritic materials it has become increasingly more

³³Ibid. 193.

³⁴H. Anderson, *Jesus and Christian Origins: A Commentary on Modern Viewpoints* (New York: Oxford, 1964) 117.

³⁵E. B. Smick concludes: "We have seen that the mythopoeic language of the Old Testament conforms remarkably well with the god-language from pagan sources, but we have also seen that this does not mean that the Old Testament writers were committed to any low view of Yahweh—whether as storm-god, war-god or whatever"; "Mythopoeic Language in the Psalms," *WTJ* 44 (1982) 88-98.

clear that the OT literature shared in common a literary heritage that it freely used and adapted to the end of proclaiming that Yahweh alone is Creator, Redeemer and King. The king-language of the OT fits remarkably well with the ancient Near Eastern background.³⁶

Finally, and most important for our consideration, the revelation of God's Fatherhood must also be understood from within the historical-cultural milieu in which Israel lived. The nations around Israel addressed their gods as "father." The concept of the fatherhood of God is not original with Israel. It was a basic religious tenet in the world around Israel.³⁷ The designation "father," in addressing a particular god in Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt, signified a fatherhood of gods and mankind. He was the supreme being or the "all-father."³⁸

This raises several interesting questions. Did the ancients really believe that they were the physical descendants of the gods? Or did they look at the fatherhood of the gods metaphorically? Marchel makes a convincing case for the metaphorical understanding. He argues that these nations transferred familiar familial relationships into describing the relations between gods and men.³⁹ Several examples illustrate the role of the gods as "father." Mursilis king of the Hittites prayed to Telepinus as the father of all nations: "In the orbit of heaven and earth thou, Telepinus, art the (source of) light; throughout the lands art thou a god who is celebrated. Of every land thou art father (and) mother."⁴⁰

In a psalm to Marduk, Anu is proclaimed as "the great father of the gods."⁴¹

The moon-god Sin is addressed as "father" Nanna. His role is that of father-mother as he fathers and "gives birth to" all gods, living beings, and even the earth:

O Lord, hero of the gods, who is in heaven and earth, is exalted in his uniqueness,
 Father Nanna, lord Anshar, hero of the gods,
 Father Nanna, great lord Anu, hero of the gods. . .
 Offspring which is self-created, fullgrown in form, pleasant to the signet, whose exuberance is unrestrained,
 Womb that gives birth to everything, which dwells in a holy habitation with living creatures,
 Begetter, merciful in his disposing, who holds in his hand the life of the whole land. . .

³⁶G. V. Smith, "The Concept of God/The Gods as King in the Ancient Near East and the Bible," *Trinity Journal* 3 (1982) 18-38; cf. also J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953); J. Gray, "The Kingdom of God in the Prophets and Psalms," *VT* 11 (1961).

³⁷W. Marchel, *Abba, Père!* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 33.

³⁸*Ibid.* 34.

³⁹*Ibid.* 51.

⁴⁰*ANET* 397.

⁴¹*ANET* 390.

O progenitor of the land, who has founded temples, thou likewise dost give them names.

O father begetter of gods and men, who founds shrines and establishes offerings. . . .

Father begetter, who looks favorably upon all living creatures.⁴²

In Egypt, Amun-Re was given the title "the Lord of truth and father of the gods, who made mankind and created the beasts."⁴³ In Canaan, El was the father of gods and men: "Wilt thou not bless him, O Bull El, my father, beatify him, O Creator of creatures?"

Clearly Israel was surrounded by nations who held to a mythological understanding of a relationship between the worlds of the gods and men. In this context the writers of the OT cautiously referred to Yahweh as "Father." Yahweh is not El, the father of "the gods." He is not Baal, the god of fertility. Yahweh is the Creator of everything and is sovereign (Lord, King, Ruler) over the nations. He is "holy," in that he cannot be limited to human conceptions nor to material representations or abstractions. Regrettably some have misunderstood the teaching of God's "holiness" in the OT, not understanding that Yahweh consecrated a people to himself. As Childs has demonstrated, Yahweh's presence and covenant coexist with a rebellious people.⁴⁴

As Elohim, God is the Creator of heaven and earth (Ps 146:6). He is the Lord, King and Ruler over all of his creation (Isa 6:1-5; Ps 66:1-4; 98:6-9). His rule is characterized by holiness and glory (Isa 6:3). By these titles the OT signifies that the God of Israel is not limited to the nation of Israel or to the land of promise. Rather, his rule extends to all the world. He is the Creator-God who, by virtue of his existence and his creative fiat, is king over all his creation (Mal 1:14b).

IV. SONSHIP IN THE OT

1. *Yahweh is Father.* The OT cautiously attributes Fatherhood to Yahweh. He is the Creator and Redeemer and is hence the Father of his creation and the Father of his redeemed people. But the OT sets the doctrine of Yahweh's Fatherhood clearly off against the pagan understanding of generation of being.⁴⁵ The occurrences in which God is known as "Father" are relatively few (Deut 32:6; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 68:5; 89:26; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Jer 3:4, 19; 31:9; Mal 1:6; 2:10). Yahweh is Father in his acts of electing, providing (Deut 32:6; cf. vv 9-14; Mal 1:6), redeeming (Isa 63:16), compassion (Ps 103:13-14), protecting his people (68:5, where "Father" is synonymous with "Judge"), restoring broken relationships with Israel (Jer 3:4, 19) and special covenantal relationship with David and his descendants (2 Sam 7:14; cf. 1 Chr

⁴²ANET 385-386.

⁴³ANET 365.

⁴⁴B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 531-552.

⁴⁵C. Geffré, "'Father' as the Proper Name of God," in *God as Father* (ed. J.-B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1981) 44. He also remarks: "But what is striking is the hesitation biblical thinking shows in designating God as Father even though this designation is current to the point of being commonplace in the ancient East."

17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 2:7; 89:26). Israel confessed that Yahweh is their Father while maintaining the radical contrast between him and the gods of the nations.

The names of individual Israelites also attribute Fatherhood to God. Theophoric names were prominent in the world of the ancient Near East, and a study of the Israelite onomasticon reveals expressions of personal piety. While the OT authors may have been guarded in their designations of Yahweh as “Father,” given the cultural milieu of ancient Israel the individual Israelites more freely expressed their close relationship with Yahweh in the giving of names to their children. The words “Yahweh,” “father,” “brother” and “relative” are interchangeable as is evident in the following examples: Jonadab, “Yahweh Is Generous” (2 Sam 13:3, 5); Abinadab, “(My) Father Is Generous” (1 Sam 7:1; 16:8); Ahinadab, “(My) Brother Is Generous” (1 Kgs 4:14); Amminadab, “(My) Relative Is Generous” (Num 1:7; 7:12); Abiezer, “(My) Father Is a Help” (2 Sam 23:27); Eliezer, “(My) God Is a Help” (Exod 18:4); Ahiezer, “(My) Brother Is a Help” (1 Chr 12:3); Joel, “Yahweh Is God” (1 Sam 8:2); Abiel, “(My) Father Is God” (9:1); Ammiel, “(My) Relative Is God” (Num 13:12); Joel, “Yahweh Is God” (1 Sam 8:2); Joab, “Yahweh Is Father” (2 Sam 8:2); Joah, “Yahweh Is Brother” (2 Chr 29:12); Abijah, “(My) Father Is Yahweh” (1 Sam 8:2); Ahijah, “(My) Brother Is Yahweh” (14:3); Elijah, “(My) God Is Yahweh” (2 Kgs 1:3, 4, 8, 12).

The designation “Father” is frequent in theophoric names: Abitub, Abihud, Abiezer, Abinadab, Abimelech, Abiel, Abijah, Joab, Eliab.

Yahweh is also likened to a human parent in his expressions of compassion and care as well as in the discipline of his people. During the deliverance from Egypt and in the desert, Yahweh cared for Israel as a Father: “There you saw how the Lord your God carried (*nāsā*) you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place” (Deut 1:31). The verb *nāsā* signifies here the fatherly activity of lifting up and bringing one’s child closer to oneself, as in Exod 19:4b: “I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Isaiah uses the same verb to liken Yahweh’s care for his children to that of a mother’s care: “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth” (Isa 46:3; cf. 63:9b).

The significance of God’s Fatherhood lies in a twofold context: provision and revelation. Yahweh provided for his people as a father: “During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet” (Deut 29:4–5; cf. 8:14–16). Yahweh’s acts (vv 4–7) of feeding, clothing and protecting his people were expressions of his parental love and were to be remembered as signs of his fidelity, guaranteed by his covenant name Yahweh, “that you might know that I am the Lord your God” (26:6b). He revealed his will to Israel and instructed them as a father instructs a son: “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you” (8:5; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Prov 3:11–12; Heb 12:5–11). Yet he is always ready to renew his compassion and to forgive his erring children: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps 103:13).

In reflecting on the desert experience, Hosea charges Israel with unfaithfulness to Yahweh’s acts of tender love. He reminds the people that Yahweh brought Israel his son out of Egypt, loved him tenderly, trained him in a most

gentle way: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them" (Hos 11:1-4; cf. Deut 32:10-18). If they had only responded to their Father, they would have entered into the maturity of sonship and into an era of unparalleled blessing: "This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be cut off nor destroyed from before me'" (Isa 48:17-19). The exodus and desert wanderings are thus a prologue to the great future that Israel could have enjoyed. The prophet Isaiah pronounces Yahweh's judgment against Judah as his sons: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me" (Isa 1:2b).

2. *Yahweh is mother.* Yahweh's love for his people also finds expression in the analogy of the mother's love for her child. The word that best expresses his tender expressions of love is "mercy" or "compassion" (*rahm*). The noun *rehem* ("womb") is related to the verb and expresses in Hebraic terms that the beginning of motherly love and concern for her unborn child begins while the child is still in the womb. "Compassion" (*rahāmim*) is the expression of the emotions of tenderness and love. Even though it is possible to speak about a man as having *rahāmim*, it is nevertheless a term that best expresses the emotions of a mother for her children. After Jeremiah has described Rachel's mourning over her children he expresses how Yahweh will renew his love for his people because he longs for them. His longing is expressed in acts of tender love: "Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him" (Jer 31:20).

The language of Yahweh's compassion (mercy, tender love) is even brought out more clearly when we consider the analogy of him as a mother. The OT freely speaks about Yahweh's care for his people as a mother in her experience of conception, bearing and care. Moses' disputation with Yahweh charged that Yahweh is responsible for Israel as a mother should care for the child she has conceived and borne: "Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant?" (Num 11:12a). The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) speaks metaphorically of God's giving birth to Israel (32:18). Isaiah elaborates on this metaphor in describing how Yahweh is like a woman in labor: "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant" (Isa 42:14). He "labors" in working out redemption for those in exile. He is like a mother who makes sure that her children receive enough milk and love (66:11-12). Yahweh's motherly concern for his children is the guarantee of the redemption of God's people: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be

comforted over Jerusalem" (66:13). The psalmist also speaks about closeness to Yahweh in the metaphorical language of mother and child: "I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps 131:2).⁴⁶ Truly Yahweh is the spiritual "mother" of his children: "From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God" (22:10).⁴⁷

3. *Adoption.* Yahweh's relationship to Israel may be compared to that of a father or mother. The OT distinguishes between the ethical, sociological and spiritual significance of Yahweh as the divine parent. In the ethical usage Israel as Yahweh's sons have a responsibility to their Father (Deut 14:1; Isa 1:2). God as Father is the authority who teaches his children, by means of laws and by reproof, how they should be living.⁴⁸ From a socio-political perspective Yahweh is the *paterfamilias* (Deut 32:6, 19), and one could even speak of him as the *paterpatriae*.⁴⁹ He loved them more than any of the nations (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4). Yahweh as the father-mother established a special relationship with Israel as a nation. They are his firstborn: "Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son'" (Exod 4:22). The children of God in the OT were not as yet emancipated. He relates to them as a patriarch, requiring them to observe his "house rules." In the spiritual sense the true sons of God are only those who respond to love with love, those who are circumcised in their hearts, those who are disciplined by Yahweh (Deut 6:5; 8:5; 11:13; 30:6, 20; Prov 3:11-12 [cited in Heb 12:5-6]). The OT saints who walked with the Lord found joy in their relationship and enjoyed a sense of emancipation in the freedom of that relationship.

It is apparent that the pious in ancient Israel⁵⁰ knew of adoption to sonship. In Psalm 27 the psalmist speaks of the Lord as his light and salvation (v 1). He is confident that, regardless of what may happen, the Lord will be with him. He is even so confident as to write that his father and mother may forsake him but that Yahweh will always be with him (v 10). The relationship of the piety of the psalmist to Yahweh is not that of a sovereign and a subject but rather of a father and a son. It is for that reason that the Psalms encourage us to join ancient Israel in waiting upon Yahweh, who has

⁴⁶The age of the child is not as important as is his contentment. See W. A. VanGemeren, "Psalm 131:2—*kegamul*: The Problems of Meaning and Metaphor," *Hebrew Studies* 23 (1982) 51-57.

⁴⁷The spirit of this metaphor is caught by Anselm of Canterbury: "Then both of you (Jesus and Paul) are mothers. Even if you are fathers, you are also mothers . . . Fathers by your authority, mothers by your kindness; fathers by your teaching, mothers by your mercy" (cited by W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982] 133).

⁴⁸Paul speaks of Israel as a young "child" (*nēpios*, Gal 4:10) in that they were subject to "guardians and trustees." The *nēpios* is a minor, whom the father treats in a patriarchal manner (paternalistically).

⁴⁹J. Moltmann, "The Motherly Father. Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?", in *God as Father* (ed. Metz and Schillebeeckx) 52.

⁵⁰The Psalms contain various genres encouraging God's people to boldly enter into the presence of their heavenly Father; see my commentary on the Psalms (to be published in volume 8 of the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan]).

promised to take care of his children (v 14). This spirit is also expressed by the Essenes at Qumran. In one of the songs of thanksgiving they expressed faith in God as Father:

My father knoweth me not, and my mother hath abandoned me unto Thee. But Thou art a father unto all Thy true [sons]. And Thou rejoicest over them as [a mother] who hath compassion upon her babe and as a nursing-father in the bosom, Thou nourishest all Thy works (ix. 35-36).⁵¹

Moses' ministry consisted, among others, in calling out the "sons of God" (i.e. spiritual sonship) from "the sons of God" (i.e. sociological sonship). The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' final appeal to Israel to love Yahweh, to be circumcised of heart, to cling to him, and to respond to him as a son to a father (Deut 30:6, 20). The prophets followed Moses' lead in calling out a remnant of true sons. Hosea prophesies that after the exile God will transform those who were considered no longer his people (1:9) into members of his family, "sons of the living God" (1:10). As sons they will be the recipients of the new covenant (2:18-20). They are the people who may truly address God with the words "You are my God"—that is, "my Father"—and the Lord recognizes them to be his people (2:23b). The reason for their restoration to covenantal status and to sonship lies not in their goodness but rather in the very nature of God in that he is a God who does not destroy like man but who is gracious even in his judgment (cf. 11:9; Isa 55:3).

Isaiah reflects on the renewed spirit in God's people in the prayer of penitence (Isa 63:15-64:12). In this prayer they address God twice as "our Father" (v 16). They recognize that Abraham may forget them because they have sinned against God, but they are calling upon the Lord's zeal and mercies (v 15) to deliver them from their bondage and to redeem them (v 16b). They cast themselves fully upon the grace and mercy of God: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (64:8). They pray that Yahweh may restore them to the land, to Jerusalem and to the temple (64:10-12).

The prophet Jeremiah called on the people of Judah to return to Yahweh their God. Though they have rebelled against him, he will restore his love if only they repent (Jer 3:21-22). Then they will call him again "my Father"⁵² (v 19b). A comparison of this verse with v 22b—"Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God"—shows that the address of God as "the Lord our God" and as "my Father" is dynamically equivalent. Jeremiah further explains that the Fatherhood of God expresses itself in his ability to save his people who wait for his deliverance (v 23b). He promises that the Lord will renew his mercies to Israel and Judah and that this will be particularly experienced by those who have a spiritual relationship with him. The precondition for renewal is repentance (31:21). The renewal of favor is based upon God's tender feelings for Israel as his son: "Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still

⁵¹M. Mansoor, *The Thanksgiving Hymns* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 162.

⁵²MT *ʾabī*. J. A. Thompson correctly observes: "It seemed to the present commentator that Yahweh was indeed commanding Israel to call him *My Father*" (*The Book of Jeremiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 207).

remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him" (31:20).

From these references it must be clear that the prophets of Israel addressed the faithful remnant and gave hope to those who sought the Lord. They were not only restored as a nation but also experienced a special relationship with God, a relationship best expressed as that of the adoption of sonship.

Paul summarizes the OT as the era of adoption to sonship and to covenantal privilege: "Theirs is the adoption of sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen" (Rom 9:4-5).

V. CONCLUSIONS

In the OT there are various ways of describing the relationship between God and his people. The multiformity of titles, analogies, metaphors, and names of God evidences the freedom of God's people to address him in creative expressions of love and endearment. They enjoyed a familiar relationship with him, and the colorful language of the OT only reinforces this.

If there were any hesitation in addressing Yahweh as "Father" it may be explained from a polemical concern. He is, after all, not like the gods of mythology. The OT authors express themselves about him in many metaphors. He is "like," but he is also "unlike." The danger of limiting God to human concepts, relations and analogies was always present.

God's Fatherhood extends to all of Israel as it does to all the nations. By virtue of his creation and sustenance of his creation he is the Father of everything. He extends his Fatherhood in a special way to the nation Israel. They are the recipients of his covenants and glory. But the OT does not assume that all Israelites had claim to God's Fatherhood. Through the law of Moses and the prophets Yahweh called his sons to adoption from among the national children. As a Father, God disciplined his children. They prayed: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa 64:8).

Jesus' distinctive contribution does not lie in the newness of his revelation of God as *Abbâ*². Rather, Jesus restored the OT teaching of Yahweh's love, forgiveness, readiness to listen to prayer, and fatherly concern. Jesus intensified this relationship in that he, as the Son, lived among us and taught more about the uniqueness and the glory of our relationship with our heavenly Father. Appreciation for the continuity between OT and NT also requires recognition of the discontinuity.⁵³ In the OT Yahweh relates to his people in a paternalistic way. He is like a patriarch as he defines his relationship with, and the freedom of, his people through Moses and the prophets. In the ministry of his Son he emancipates his children while requiring them to walk in the footsteps of his Son. In the Son he gives them the Spirit of freedom. Instead of God's being the *paterfamilias*, he establishes a *familia Dei* in Christ. So Visser 't Hooft writes:

⁵³W. A. VanGemeren, "Perspectives on Continuity," in *Festschrift for S. Lewis Johnson* (Westchester: Crossway, 1987).

It is in his teaching about the nature of God that Jesus' freedom from patriarchalism is most clearly seen. . . . That God the Father transcends the limits of patriarchalism is even more clearly expressed in the parable of the prodigal son. . . . To Jesus sonship meant not power but obedience.⁵⁴

Moreover the Spirit of God extends the privileges associated with the era of restoration with all regardless of sex, age, or social standing (Joel 2:28-29).⁵⁵ With the apostolic Gentile mission the Spirit further extended the privilege of sonship to Gentiles (Rom 8:14-17; 10:11-12; cf. Gal 4:5-7).

When Jesus' disciples asked him for a prayer, they followed an established practice. Rabbis established the solidarity of their circle by teaching their disciples a prayer. So Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's prayer. It exists in three versions as found in the synoptics: Matthew with "our Father," Mark with "Abba," and Luke with "Father." Apparently the gospel writers were more concerned with the canonical function of the Lord's prayer than with the precise wording of the address.

Thanks be to God that in Christ we have received the affirmation of our relationship with the Father God in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is, however, regrettable that we have lost the creative freedom of speaking about God or of addressing him by using meaningful metaphors and analogies as expressive of the closeness of our relationship with him. In the OT, metaphors were taken from everyday life and applied to God. Today, however, we are much more hesitant in using everyday metaphors. I believe it would be within the framework of our Lord's teaching, and also the OT, if we were to express our relationship to God as Father also by the use of familial language, titles, analogies and metaphors. I venture to go one step further. In view of the weakened conception of the Fatherhood of God today it might be well for us to look again at the OT ("King") or at Judaism ("our Father," "our King," "Lord our God," "our Father in heaven"), or even to use the term "Father-Mother."⁵⁶

It is high time to demythologize the popular conceptions of God's Fatherhood. The OT gives us examples as to the variety of ways in which God may be addressed. The OT authors responded to the popular misconceptions of their day, and Jesus did the same. What is our response to the misconceptions of our time?

We also need to be reminded of the clear tension between our being the sons of God and his Fatherhood on the one hand and the future emancipation on the other. Rightly does Visser 't Hooft write: "Paul is referring to the ultimate redemption of the human being, and not, in any way, to change in worldly society."⁵⁷

⁵⁴Visser 't Hooft, *Fatherhood* 122-124.

⁵⁵W. A. VanGemeren, "The Spirit of Restoration" (forthcoming).

⁵⁶Moltmann concludes: "He is our motherly father. He can no longer be defined as single-sexed and male, but becomes bisexual or transsexual. He is the *motherly father* of his *only-born Son*, and at the same time the *fatherly Father* of his *only-begotten Son*" ("Motherly Father" 53).

⁵⁷Visser 't Hooft, *Fatherhood* 135.