

# Who is God?

## The Father of the Prodigal Son

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Magis Center of Reason and Faith

### Introduction

For Jesus, the heart of God (*who* God is) is more important than the attributes of God (*what* God is). Jesus accepts the Mosaic revelation of the name of God – Yahweh – which puts the emphasis on *what* God is. *Yahweh* is the causative form of the verb “to be” and is the first word in the complete expression of His name – *Yahweh - ser-yihweh* which means “He brings into being whatever comes into being.” This remarkable revelation coincides with modern proofs of God as unique, Creator, and highest Being,<sup>1</sup> but does not emphasize the *heart* of God. Building on this foundation, Jesus supplies the missing piece – the revelation of *who* God is -- by first revealing another name – *Abba* (Section I), and then revealing His unconditional love for us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Section II). A brief explanation of each points to the heart God.

### I.

#### Jesus’ Address of God as “*Abba*”

“*Abba*” is the Aramaic emphatic form of “*’ab*” – “father” employed as a vocative (as an address). McKenzie notes that Aramaic epistles show that it was a familiar address used by children,<sup>2</sup> which could have the meaning of “my father,” or even a more intimate address, such as “daddy.” The implications of childlike trust and affection should not be written out of the term when Jesus uses it to address the Father. Moreover, Jesus taught His disciples to address God as “*Abba*.” In addition to its explicit use in Mark’s Gospel (14:36), Jeremias sees other implicit references to “*Abba*” in the New Testament: “...we have every reason to suppose that an *Abba* underlies every instance of *pater (mou)* or *ho patēr* in [Jesus’] words of prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ address of God in this intimate way is exceedingly unusual – so much so that for several decades it was thought to be unique to Jesus himself. As Jeremias notes:

...in the literature of Palestinian Judaism *no evidence has yet been found* of “my Father” being used by an individual as an address to God.... It is quite unusual that Jesus should have addressed God as “my Father”; it is even more so that he should have used the Aramaic form *Abba*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the philosophical proof of God on the first landing page “Science, Reason, and Faith – Free Article – Philosophical Proof of God.”

<sup>2</sup> See McKenzie 1965, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremias 1971, p. 64.

Quite recently some rare instances of rabbinical use of *Abba* have been found.<sup>5</sup> Though this use of “*Abba*” is not unique to Jesus (as Jeremias conjectured), it is exceedingly rare in Judaism by comparison to its prolific use in Christianity.<sup>6</sup> The probable reason for this is the presumptuousness that the Israelite elders must have felt in addressing God (who is the “Master of the universe” and the “Master of history”) with a possessive (*my* Father) in a childlike manner.

What might we conclude about Jesus’ revelation about the heart of the Father from His highly unusual address of God as *Abba*? He must have viewed God at once as gentle and affectionate, trustworthy and patient, compassionate and forgiving, and completely concerned with the protection, welfare, and advancement (toward salvation) of all His children – just like a perfectly loving Father. But how can we be sure that Jesus *really* intended this? The Parable of the Prodigal Son makes this interpretation unmistakable (see below Section II).

In Semitic culture, a name is not merely a linguistic label and designation of a particular person (as it frequently is in contemporary Western culture). It has meaning, and frequently expresses the heart, mind, characteristics, identity, and nature of the person. According to Rabbi Paysach Krohn:

In Judaism, a name is not merely a conglomeration of letters put together as a convenient way to refer to someone. Ideally, it is a definition of the individual - a description of his personality and an interpretation of his traits. It may even be a portent of the person's future, or perhaps a prayer that the person bearing this particular name shall live up to the potential expressed in the name.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, Jesus selects the name of Peter (“rock”) for His first apostle Simon (“you are rock and upon this rock I will build my church...” – Mt 16:18). Jesus reveals that His name from the Father is “the Beloved Son” (“My Son, the Beloved One”<sup>8</sup>) because it reflects His character, identity, and essence with the Father. His disciple John names himself “the beloved disciple” because the love of Jesus is the most important and defining characteristic in his life. Thus Jesus’ name (and address) of God as “Daddy” – “affectionate, wise, trustworthy, loving, compassionate, Father” describes the heart, mind, and essence of God.

## II. The Father of the Prodigal Son

Jesus concretizes His revelation of the Father’s love in the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son. This Parable may be considered one of Jesus’ primary revelations of God the Father’s *unconditional* Love.

Three preliminary considerations should be made before retelling the Parable as a First Century audience would have understood it. First, Jesus intends that the father in the story be a

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<sup>5</sup> See Wright 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See Wright 1996, p. 649.

<sup>7</sup> Krohn, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> “*ho huios mou ho agapētos*.” See the revelation of the Father at Jesus’ baptism (Mk 1:11, Mt 3:17, Lk 3:22) and transfiguration (Mk 2:7, Mt 17:5).

revelation of the heart of God the Father. The parable would be more aptly named The Parable of the *Father* of the Prodigal Son. Secondly, notice that the younger son has committed just about every sin imaginable according to the mindset of Second Temple Judaism (the religious context in which Jesus was operating), and so he has absolutely no basis or merit for asking the father to receive him back into the household – even as one of the servants. Thirdly, the older son in this story represents the Pharisees and those who are trying to remain righteous according to their understanding of the Jewish law, and so we can see that Jesus has not abandoned them, but he desires to give them everything he has – so long as they come back into the house.

Now we may proceed to a retelling of the parable. A father had two sons, the youngest of whom asked for his share of the inheritance. This would have been viewed as an insult to the father which would have shamed both father and family (because the son is asking not only for the right of possession, but the right of disposal of the property which legally does not occur until the death of the father<sup>9</sup>). Nevertheless, the father hears the son's request and acquiesces to it. He divides his property and lets his son go. Remember the father in the story is Jesus' revelation of God the Father.

The son chooses to go to a foreign land – probably a Gentile land, indicated by his living on a Gentile farm with pigs. Whether he started there or simply ended there is of little consequence. His actions indicate a disregard for (if not a rejection of) his election and his people, and a further shaming of the family from which he came.

Then the son adds further insult to injury by spending his father's hard-earned fortune on dissolute living (violations of *Torah*) in the gentile land. This shows the son's callous disregard for (if not rejection of) God's law, God's revelation, and perhaps God Himself. Furthermore, he manifests his callous disregard for his people, the law, and God before the entire Gentile community – bringing shame upon them all.

Just when it seems that the son could not possibly sin any more egregiously, the foreign land finds itself in a famine. The son has little money left, and is constrained to live with the pigs, which were considered to be highly unclean animals. The son incurs defilement not only from working with the pigs but actually living with them! He even longs to eat the food of the pigs which would defile him both inside and outside. This reveals the son's wretched spiritual state, which would have engendered both disgust and revulsion from most members of Jesus' First Century audience.

The son experiences a “quasi-change” of heart, not so much because of what he's done to his family, country, people, election, law, religion, and God, but because of the harshness of his condition (“How many of my father's servants have more than enough to eat...”). He decides to take advantage of what he perceives to be his father's merciful nature by proffering an agreement to accept demotion from son to servant (even though it was the father's right to reject and even disown him altogether). The son then makes his way back home.

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<sup>9</sup> Joachim Jeremias 1972, *The Parables of Jesus*. (London: SCM Press Ltd). p. 128-29.

The father (who is the God-*Abba* figure in Jesus' Parable) sees him coming while he is still on his way (possibly indicating that the father is looking for him) and is so completely overjoyed that he runs out to meet him (despite the fact that the son has so deeply injured and shamed both him and his family). When he meets his son, he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The kiss is not only an act of affection, but also a sign of forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> The son's list of insults, injuries, and sins is incapable of turning the father's heart away from him. The father is almost compelled to show unrestrained affection toward him. The son utters his speech of quasi-repentance/quasi-negotiation: "Just treat me like one of your servants...." Instead, the father tells the servants to get him a robe, which not only takes care of his temporal needs, but is also a mark of high distinction.<sup>11</sup> He then asks that a ring be put on his hand. Jeremiah indicates that this ring is very likely a signet ring,<sup>12</sup> having the seal of the family. This would indicate not only belonging to the family, but also the authority of the family (showing the son's readmission to the family in an unqualified way). He then gives him shoes, which again takes care of his obvious temporal need, and inasmuch as they are luxuries, signifies a free man who no longer has to go about barefoot like a servant or slave.<sup>13</sup> He then kills the fatted calf (reserved only for very special occasions) and holds a feast. This is a further indication of the son's readmission to the family by being received at the festal family table.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus' audience probably felt conflicted (if not angered) by the father's "ridiculously merciful" treatment of his son, because it ignored (and even undermined) the "proper" strictures of justice. The father's love/mercy seems to disregard the justice of Torah. This does not deter Jesus, because He is convinced that God the Father treats sinners – even the most egregious sinners – in exactly the same fashion, that is, with a heart of unconditional Love.

Jesus continues the story by turning His attention to the older son who reflects a figure of righteousness according to the old covenant. He has stayed loyal to his father, family, election, country, religion, law, and God. Furthermore, he has been an incredibly hard worker and seems to accept patiently the father's frugality toward him ("You did not so much as kill a kid goat for me"). Most of Jesus' audience probably sympathized with this older son's plight when the father demonstrated his extraordinary mercy and generosity to his younger son. By all rights, the father should have either rejected or disowned the younger son, and if not that, he certainly should have accepted the younger son's offer to become a servant – but an unqualified re-admittance to the family appeared to be an injustice (if not a slap in the face) to his loyal son.

The father understands the son's difficulty with his actions and goes outside to literally "plead" with his son – virtually begging him to come back into the house (an almost unthinkable humiliation for a father at that time). He begins by giving his older son all his property, addressing his older son's need for justice: "You have been with me always, and everything I have is yours." Then, he gives him an explanation which did not fall within the mainstream interpretation of the law: mercy must take precedence over justice and love take precedence over

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<sup>10</sup> See *ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid*, p. 130.

the law, for that is the only way that the negativity of sin and evil can be redressed and overcome – “Your brother was lost and is found; he was dead and has come back to life.”

Who is God? He is Jesus’ Father – *Abba* – the father of the Prodigal Son – the heart of unconditional love – nothing less. Since this is central to Jesus’ revelation, we must compare any other image or concept of God to this one, and if it is found to be inconsistent with the father of the Prodigal Son, we should reject it and place our trust in the revelation of Jesus.