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## “Abba, Father!” On the Humanity of Jesus

John M. Oesterreicher

*Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*

(Mark 14:36)

Like every significant word of Scripture, Jesus' cry in the garden of Gethsemani is a "deed-word".<sup>1</sup> What other expression could offer a more passionate readiness for action than that absolute surrender: "Not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36)? To be sure, suffering has preceded this utterance. As he pays the toll for human existence, the man of Nazareth feels his heart near breaking. Fear and terror seize him (Mark 14:33) as in mind and body he anticipates his own passion.

Yet the hour on the Mount of Olives shatters the framework of a single life, the fate of one individual. The great preachers of the past held that Jesus let the world's suffering descend on him so that its weight hurled him to the ground. Servant of the Lord, thrown into the dust as he was by the terror of his own suffering still to come, indeed, by the terror of all suffering, he is not overpowered by those horrors. After ardent struggle, he offers them to his Father. The Father does not take the cup of bitterness from his Son, yet he does not leave him alone. He stays with him, suffers with him and with all those for whose sake he trembles. For the cause of Jesus is the cause of the all-merciful Father. To cite another Gospel account: "There appeared to him an angel from heaven, bringing him strength" (Luke 22:43).

### 1. *At the Core of the Christ Event*

The initial powerlessness of Jesus in the Garden of Olives, which levelled him with the earth, as it were; the trembling and flinching which rose from the very depths of human existence and ran counter to all notions of Greek heroism; the torment driven to such an extreme that one of the evangelists is moved to the point of

seeing Jesus' sweat drip to the ground like drops of blood (Luke 22:44); the suffering with and for his brethren; the equally far-reaching surrender to the Father's plan for salvation and, finally, the union of the man Jesus with his heavenly Father, and of the Father with his Son in a suffering that is love—all this makes Gethsemani a focal point of the Christ-event, and thus of the whole Christian message.

What does "Christian" mean here? Is it synonymous with "un-Jewish" or even "anti-Jewish"? Not at all. In this context, I can give only a glimpse of the lasting kinship between Christianity and Judaism by pointing to the self-abasement of the Lord God vis-à-vis his creature. The rabbis' teachings about God, the Servant of his chosen people, about his devotion to men and his compassion with sinners do not, of course, form part of halakhic discussions but appear in haggadic disquisitions. Still, they cannot be dismissed as "homiletical exuberance".

Their profundity could be amply documented. Particularly moving is one example, an explanation of the Psalm verse: "Cast your burden upon the Lord, he will sustain you! He never suffers his righteous to be shaken" (55:22). In his interpretation, the Palestinian Amora R. Yohanan (d. 279 AD) ignores the last part of the verse and thus drops the limitation to the righteous. He then tells the following parable: A king's son had to carry a heavy beam. When his father saw how his son doubled up under the weight of the wood he said: "Put all your burden on me so that it becomes mine!" Just so does the Holy One, praised be he, say to the children of Israel: "Roll the burden of your sins off on to me; I will carry them!" (Midrash *Tehillim* XXII, 22).

In addition to this and other parables that depict God as the One who bears the burden of Israel's life, indeed the burden of its sins, there are other rabbinic sayings about the *Shekhinah*, God's grace-filled presence in the world. He suffers with Israel under Egyptian oppression, even goes with the people into all its exiles. To such an extent does God share Israel's distress, the thorns of its existence, that he manifests himself to Moses out of a thornbush. So profoundly does he feel with the people whom he has chosen that the destruction of the Temple, originally a punishment decreed by him, turns into his own pain and his loss. Almost disconsolate, he weeps and laments.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of these considerations, are Judaism and Christianity indistinguishable? No, they are distinct. When the rabbis concern



themselves with the bond with which God has bound himself to the people Israel, they think undoubtedly of a genuine, real but mostly hidden bond. But the bond with which God has tied himself to mankind through Jesus is a visible one. In him God's compassion with sinners has become flesh.

## 2. *Legend or History?*

Before I examine the significance of Jesus' cry *Abba!* I should like to deal briefly with doubts cast on the authenticity of the Gethsemani scene as recorded by Mark. Mark, and Matthew with him, speaks of Jesus thrice walking "forward a little", away from his three companions in order to pray. But Luke mentions only one prayerful outcry. Some exegetes conclude from this that the triple structure of Mark's report is "artificial";<sup>3</sup> that it was possibly fashioned after the threefold denial of Peter (Mark 14:66-72), and the traditional threefold calls for help (see 2 Cor. 12:8; Daniel 6:11, 13). It is quite conceivable that "the second and third prayer walk . . . are later stylistic embellishments".<sup>4</sup>

I cannot agree, however, with Bultmann's concept of the Gethsemani scene as a "faith- or cult-legend".<sup>5</sup> Is it to be supposed in all seriousness that a community believing in Jesus as the Christ and Lord, should have fabricated occurrences showing him in a condition of unimaginable weakness and fear, and a struggle which surpasses all their comprehension? Can we really imagine that the disciples invented a legend which proclaims their own wretchedness and failure? Some exegetes do not go so far in their criticism. While they let the pericope largely stand they reject the words of Jesus' prayer as unhistorical. They object that the disciples could not have slept and heard Jesus' words at one and the same time. Sometimes they go even further: the disciples could not have heard what Jesus said silently—"in private".<sup>6</sup> The counter-argument is simple and compelling. Mark's account tells first of Jesus' outcry (14:35), he does not mention the sleep of the disciples till afterward (14:37). Moreover, their response is never called a deep sleep.

Even if the New Testament contained no further statement on Jesus' anguished cry at the beginning of his passion, we would suppose that he, as a true son of Israel, would hardly whisper his soul's distress to himself but would rather shout it to heaven, with the silent world about him as witness.<sup>7</sup> There is such a statement in the Letter to the Hebrews. According to it, Jesus, "the priest for ever

after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4), when he still walked on earth, had 'offered up prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears before him who could save him, and he was . . . heard" (Hebr. 5:7). He was heard; he was given the opportunity to transmute the general subjection to death into a sacrifice for all, the senselessness of dying into the loftiest meaning.

The disciples must have heard his cry of despair even though they did not understand it. They must have seen how he suffered tortures as if the misery of all creation had been poured out over him, without fully understanding, however, what was happening. Later when they had comprehended the secret of Gethsemani, they testified. Thus we may interpret the meaning of the event with two contemporary and by no means uncritical exegetes.

Eduard Schweizer writes: "Here was real suffering . . . It is quite striking how much complaining there is in the Old and New Testaments. This happens because there men keep their heart open to suffering, because they do not wish to protect or arm the heart against distress. This biblical posture is profoundly grounded in the fact that God himself assented to this road leading into suffering instead of skirting life; in other words, God himself assented to the real enduring, inwardly and outwardly, of the anguish of Gethsemani."<sup>8</sup>

In the first edition of the same commentary, Julius Schniewind observes: "As he speaks with his disciples, Jesus uses words like 'watch', 'stay awake', 'hour', 'temptation', words used of 'the end of days' (Mark 13:34 ff.; 1 Thess 5:6; Rev. 3:2 ff.; Mark 13:32; John 5:25; Rom. 13:11; Rev. 3:10). Here and now, the decisive struggle has begun."<sup>9</sup>

### 3. *The Outcry of Jesus*

The very wording of the prayer at Gethsemani testifies to its authenticity:

*Abba, Father,*  
all things are possible for you!  
Take this cup away from me.  
Yet not what I will,  
but what you will!

(Mark 14:36).

As elsewhere, when Jesus speaks either to proclaim or to pray, brevity and conciseness prevail. How could it be otherwise? The



man Jesus who prays here has come "to cast fire upon the earth", and wishes "that it were already kindled" (Luke 12:49).

No less convincing is the invocation of God as *Abba*. Joachim Jeremias rightly sees in the Aramaic *abba* the *ipsissima vox Jesu*. As a category of biblical criticism *ipsissima vox Jesu*, "Jesus' very own utterance", means that he actually used the invocation *abba*; that it was not simply attributed to him. In our context moreover, *ipsissima vox* signifies that the invocation *abba* carries the seal of Jesus' especial humanity, of his individuality.

No doubt, the vernacular *abba* began as lallation, but soon passed from infant speech into general usage. It may well have kept an aura of intimacy as, among other examples, an episode from the life of the miracle worker Hanan the Hidden proves.<sup>10</sup> From the lips of Jesus the address *abba* expresses a union that fills the depths of his being. When Jeremias maintains, however, that a pious Jew at the time of Jesus would have considered it "irreverent and therefore unthinkable to address God in this familiar way", this seems to me more than doubtful, unless the emphasis lies on the somewhat unfortunate expression "in this familiar way". Jeremias explains further: "It was something new, something unique and unheard of, that Jesus dared to take this step and to speak with God as a child with his father, simply, intimately, securely."<sup>11</sup>

The adverbs "simply, intimately, securely" hardly correspond to the stirring character of the event at Gethsemani. Jesus had just traversed the abyss of human suffering, just faced death eye-to-eye, just experienced the infinite distance between God's mandate and the beat of the human heart. It is unthinkable that after such an experience Jesus would turn to his Father saying: "Dad, take this cup from me. But not as I will but as you will!" Am I doing Jeremias an injustice if I push his interpretation to this extreme? The invocation *Abba!*, indeed the whole outcry of Jesus, visited as he is by fear, are not signs of "childlike confidence" but of an unlimited, indeed unique abandon.

By tying *Abba* to the childlike sound it once was, Jeremias—probably very much against his intention—robs Jesus' prayer of its gravity and turns his trust in the Father into a harmless attitude. This is not the only misunderstanding we must guard against. The occasional attempt to see Jesus' message about the Father in a false contrast to Israel's belief in the Father is no less misleading. Some theologians who examine the fatherhood of God in Scripture have found that in the Old Testament the idea of

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God's fatherhood often appears together with his power of creation.

A few examples should suffice to show that we are confronted here with a wealth of theological insights unsuspected by many. For instance, in the song attributed to Moses, Israel is reminded of its election and dependency:

You foolish and unwise people!  
Is it not your father  
    who has created you?  
Did he not make you and establish you?

(Deut. 32:6).

From a penitential liturgy of the sixth century BC, this confession comes down to us:

You, Lord, are our father.  
"Our ransom from of old" is your name. . . .  
You, Lord, are our father!  
We are the clay  
    and you the potter.  
We are all the work of your hands.  
Be not angry beyond measure, Lord,  
    and do not remember our iniquities forever.

(Is. 63:16, 64:7).

The Lord is creator, not only because he calls into being, but also because he loves those he has called into being. His creative power has no limits. He forgives iniquities and renews the sinner.

Is Ephraim not my favoured son?  
The child in whom I delight?  
As often as I would threaten him,  
    I still remember him with favour.  
My heart stirs for him:  
    I must have pity on him.  
This is the word of the Lord.

(Jer. 31:20).

Joachim Jeremias offers the following comment: "This is the final word of the Old Testament with regard to divine fatherhood: the 'must' of God's incomprehensible mercy and forgiveness."<sup>12</sup> Is that not also the essence of the New Testament message? The words of Scripture I have just quoted testify to the all-



encompassing character of the biblical concept of Creator. The almighty God is at the same time the all-merciful. This vision of the Torah and the Prophets becomes manifest precisely and most impressively in the prayer at Gethsemani. If we take "all things are possible to you" or "everything lies in your hand" not as separate sentences but as part of the address, then we could—indeed should—translate thus: "*Abba*, You all-powerful One!" This supreme power that rules all things is the power of love. Jesus' outcry is thus, not only supplication, but also a response, not only the Son's submission to his Father but the Father's to his Son: "No other title seems . . . as well suited to express God's innermost being as the name 'Father'. It is the most human of all titles and describes God simply as the One who brings the sacrifice of his well-beloved Son . . . If the name 'Father' is to be no empty word then it conveys that God suffers with his Son. . . . The Father is with him, is in him. He makes the Son's sadness, fear, and loneliness his own and bears them with the Son."<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. *Abba, The Key Word*

Jeremias sees in *Abba* the key to the secret of Jesus: "*Abba* was childish babble, an everyday word. No one would have dared address God in this way. But Jesus does so constantly in all prayers that have been transmitted to us with the sole exception of his cry on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) . . . Matt. 11:27 ["Everything is entrusted to me by my Father"] tells us that Jesus saw in the childlike address the expression of a unique knowledge and power of God bestowed upon him by his Father. *Abba* reveals the ultimate secret of his mission. The Father had bestowed on him perfect knowledge of God; thus he enjoyed the messianic prerogative of speaking to him in the intimate language of a child. *Abba*, then, contains in essence the claim to his mission and message."<sup>14</sup>

In his American lectures on "The Central Message of the New Testament", Jeremias muses once more on the significance the *abba* title has for Christology: "Thus, when Jesus spoke of God as 'my Father' he was referring not to a familiarity and intimacy with God available to anyone, but to a unique revelation which was bestowed upon him. He bases his authority on the fact that God has graciously endowed him with the full revelation, revealing himself to him as only a father can reveal himself to his son. *Abba*, then, is a word which conveys revelation. It represents the centre of



Jesus' awareness of his mission (*Sendungsbewusstsein*)."<sup>15</sup>

Because *abba* has its first home in a baby's paucity of words and its second in the people's treasure of speech, it denotes both worlds and, will, therefore, do the same on the lips of Jesus: his closeness to his Father as well as to the multitudes. His ministry was extraordinary, other than that of the great teachers of Israel; it was directed primarily to sinners, the outcasts, the lowliest in the land, those on the fringe of society. Thus he could say of his mission: "I have come to call the sinners, not the righteous" (Mark 2:17, Matt. 9:12; Luke 5:32). When a Canaanite woman loudly pleads that he heal her daughter, Jesus first answers with an apparent refusal: "I am sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone" (Matt 15:24). The superficial hearer will assume that the issue here is the contrast between the covenant people and the pagans. But is it not more plausible to see in Jesus' stern avowal a deep concern for those that had been pushed to the periphery of the community, for those largely neglected by the shepherds of the people? How else could he fulfil his mission?

In order to do full justice to Jesus' stance in caring for those who had been driven from the very bosom of the community, even in making himself their companion, we have to try, without false pathos, to understand the position of the social outcasts at the time. The harsh measures by which, for instance, the lepers were separated from the rest of Israel's population were not essentially different from those decreed by modern authorities in cases of contagious diseases: "quarantine", "isolation ward" are only two labels to indicate measures, heartless as they may seem, issued for the sake of the common good and limited in their duration. The isolation of the lepers in Israel was essentially different from that of the "untouchables" of yesterday's or even today's India.

An inevitable fate was unknown in Israel. The tax collectors were shunned as public sinners, not because a merciless fate had condemned them but because they had, of their own free will entered into a contract with the occupying powers, in whose service they exploited their kinsmen. Again, however painful and embittered the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans may have been, its cause was not caprice or ill-will but a factual religious difference. In a certain sense women, too, were among these marginal figures because, at least in public, they played a secondary role. The scribes shunned them: they avoided looking at them or speaking with them—not because they thought little of them,



but because they were conscious of their own weakness and the power of the *yetzer hara'*, the "evil inclination".

How did Jesus meet those who ranked least among his people? As a guest in the house of a tax collector he never castigated the man's trade, nor did he preach to sinners as they stood before him about the terror of sin or even about God who waits for and forgives the sinner. Never did he seek to convince the lepers and other sick people that they were not punished by God but that, despite their sufferings, they were loved by him. Nor did he assure women that, regardless of their socially inferior position, they were equal to men before God. Such consolation was unnecessary. His presence alone inspired confidence and courage, brought blessing and salvation, convinced those near despair of the meaning and value of their lives. In his presence people sensed God's presence. For he was the divine habitation among his people, the *Shekhinah*.

At one point, Joachim Jeremias writes perceptively that "*Abba* contains in essence [Jesus'] claim to his mission and message."<sup>16</sup> At other times, however, the ground on which he stands is slippery: "[With *abba* as an address to God] 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!'"<sup>17</sup>

True, as saviour of the oppressed, Jesus was without equal. Yet even Luke, who came from a Greek milieu, could think of no more appropriate description of Jesus' unique mission than the words of the prophet:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me  
because He has annointed me.

He has sent me  
to announce good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the captives,  
and eyesight to the blind.

[He has sent me]  
to let the broken go free,  
and proclaim a year of the Lord's favour.

(Is. 61:1 ff.; Luke 4:18 f.).

According to this prophetic utterance, Jesus himself is a prophet. What, however, distinguishes him from the prophets before him is



the direction of his concern. It cared, not only for the people as a whole, but also, indeed, primarily, for the man, woman, child who stood before him. He bestowed empathy and affection on each one. He taught as did other teachers; but his immediacy and power of conviction must have made him different (cf. Matt. 7:29; John 7:46). "A new kind of teaching! He speaks with authority", the people said of his message (Mark 1:27).<sup>18</sup>

Incontestible as the otherness and newness of Jesus are, they do not, as Jeremias thinks, "break through the limits of Judaism". In his otherness, too, Jesus remains a son of Israel: whatever he proclaims, does, or suffers is unthinkable apart from the root out of which he grew. With his appearance, no Greek philosopher or Indian guru arrived in the land of Israel but a Jew who characterized himself as a shepherd who goes after a single sheep that has ventured astray (Matt. 18:12; cf. Matt. 2:6). Like all heathens, Greeks and Hindus are seekers after God. But, seen in the light of the Bible, man is the one who is sought and questioned by God. There is hardly a biblical motif more Jewish than that of the God who goes after his people, who calls the sinner and draws the rejected to himself. If we keep in mind the profoundly Jewish character of this dominant theme, we must reject Jeremias' thesis that Jesus, by guiding the oppressed and despised to the Father, had left the path of Israel.

### 5. *Theology of Prayer*

Most exegetes agree with Jeremias that Jesus' form of address *abba* antedates the resurrection. As such, it significantly points to the historical Jesus. More than that, it permits a glimpse into his inner life, his soul. It is a *signum humanitatis suae*, a sign of his humanity and his "being for others". Although when speaking to his first disciples he never says "our Father" but always "my Father" or "your Father", he lets them and all future generations of disciples, participate in that great loving exchange, the love of the Father towards the Son and of the Son towards the Father.

In his volume on New Testament thought, Ethelbert Stauffer maintains that a whole theology of prayer is hidden in the one word "Father!" "The God of the New Testament is a God to whom one can say 'Thou'."<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy between Old and New Testaments is astonishing, not to say dismaying. Should the God with whom Abraham bargains for the fate of Sodom; to whom Moses confesses his dread about the mission given him; by whose



call every prophet knows himself addressed; in whose presence the psalmists exult and lament, offer thanks and petitions—should that God not also be the "Thou" of man? Stauffer continues by describing prayer as a struggle with God's will, a struggle, to be sure, in which man does not seek to subjugate the will of the Lord to his own but in which, to the extent that the prayer is answered, God emerges as victor. The Father whom I address as "Thou" answers me with a "thou"—and in that moment my true self awakes to life. "Only when I pray am I wholly myself."<sup>20</sup>

Yet another commentary on faith in the Father needs to be considered. Karl H. Schelkle writes in his *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*: "In later Judaism at the time of the New Testament, God is removed so far away as to be confined to the beyond, and his personal intervention in the present is hardly known. In the recently discovered very profound prayers of the Qumran community, God is never called 'Father'. What is new in the Gospels and contrasts it with both Hellenism and Judaism, is that for Jesus God is very close and ever present. For him, God is Lord and Father who, though confining and challenging everyone, embraces him or her. For Jesus, God's innermost nature is his love in which man is secure."<sup>21</sup>

Apart from that unfortunate usage of calling the early stages of Judaism late Judaism, the fact that the Qumran psalms never address God as "Father" does not mean that for their poet God is utterly distanced and transcendent. Neither is the Lord in the New Testament canticles, the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus* for instance, merely remote. The God of Israel is great and lofty yet intervenes in the life of his creatures: the mighty and the lowly, the rich and the poor, those oppressed by an enemy and those wrapped in darkness—all of them feel his saving or punishing arm. The Zealots wanted to wrest the land from the power of the idolatrous emperor and restore it to the rule of its only rightful Master, God. Their movement would have been a historical impossibility if these freedom fighters had regarded him as distant and unconcerned with the lot of his own.

Similarly the rabbis. Their care for the observance of the Torah could not be understood unless for them, too, God had been the near and ever-present one. "Be mindful of three things, and sin will not have power over you", is a saying in the *Ethics of the Fathers*. "Know what is above you: an all-seeing eye, an all-hearing ear and a book in which all your actions are recorded" (2:1). Another



saying from the same book of Wisdom of the early rabbis disposes of the thesis that has God dwell no longer among men as he did in Israel's ancient days. "Where two sit together and occupy themselves with words of Torah, there God's presence, the *Shekhinah*, abides among them" (3:3).

Jewish awareness of God is never so narrow or one-sided as to forget his immanence while being alive to his transcendence. Infinitely far and infinitely near—such is the God of Israel. "Near is the Lord to all who call him, to all who call him in truth" (Ps. 144:18), says the daily morning prayer. Yet no word, no picture can contain the living God, nor the praise of a worshipper sufficiently extol him:

If our mouth were capable of song like the sea,  
our tongue uplifted in rejoicing like the tumult of the waves,  
and our lips full of praise like the spacious firmament;  
if our eyes were shining like the beams of sun and moon,  
our arms outstretched like the eagle in the sky  
and our feet hastened [to your service] like a hind,  
we would still be unable to offer you fitting thanks,  
or your name fitting praise,  
O Lord, our God and God of our fathers,  
for even a thousandth part or a ten thousandth of the gifts  
you have bestowed upon our fathers and on us.<sup>22</sup>

#### 6. "Father" in the Teaching and Worship of Judaism

Awareness of our inadequacy in praising God, who is high above all praise, is part of Judaism. No less the confident supposition: whatever has been commanded to man he can also fulfil. Thus we read in the *Ethics of the Fathers*:

If you would do the will of your Father in heaven,  
be strong as a leopard,  
light as an eagle,  
swift as a hart,  
and mighty as a lion.

(5:23).

This advice of Judah ben Tema (second half of the second century AD) proves that the rabbis are familiar with the designation of God as "Father in heaven", even though they do not use it as frequently as, for instance, the phrase "the Holy One, praised be He". But the saying of ben Tema shows more than the mere fact

that "Father" was a familiar name for God among the early Jewish teachers. Its content shows that its counsel is not meant only for the community. Rather, every single member of the people is addressed. In Christian literature on Judaism we often find the assertion that for the pious Jew, God is indeed the father of Israel, the people, but not the father of the individual Israelite. For ben Tema, he is indubitably both.

The conviction that man is capable of fulfilling the Law must not be misconstrued. The self-assured man was not the rabbinic ideal. If a man, which means in our context a Jew, observes the Law and thus does the will of the Father in heaven, he resembles the angels; but if not, then he is altogether earthly. So R. Simai (beginning of the third century, in *Sifré, Deuteronomy*, par. 306, ed. Friedmann, p. 132a). But if one who observes the law is tempted to break a commandment, let us say, to eat pork or to commit adultery, then he should not deceive himself, advised R. Eleazar ben Azariah (second century). In no case is he to say: "I do not wish to eat pork, I have no desire to sleep with a woman who is not married to me." Rather should he say: "Yes, I crave all this. But what am I to do? My Father in heaven has forbidden it" (*Sifra, Qedoshim*, ch. 11, ed. Weiss, p. 93d). For the Jew devoted to the Torah God's will is the beginning, God's honour the end of his life. R. Levi (third century) teaches:

Whatever the bee collects

it collects for its owner.

Whatever Israel accumulates in merits and good works

it accumulates for its Father in heaven.

(*Deut. Rabbah* 1:6)

The fact that the rabbinic sayings cited here have their origin at a time following Christ's ministry in no way diminishes their significance. For I am not concerned here with finding parallels or determining the age of a given saying but to portray a spiritual atmosphere. That the invocation of God as "Father" has outlasted centuries of rivalry and alienation between Judaism and Christianity surely proves that it is part of the oldest and therefore truly inalienable Jewish heritage.

It seems significant that the compiling of a few rabbinic texts which speak of God as "Father" quite naturally yields the rabbinic picture of man as a being open to God. What is more important, the texts and all the prayers addressed to God as Father, reveal



him as one whose heart is turned toward man. The God of Scripture and therefore the God of the rabbis and of the Jewish prayer book is fond of all humanity and every human being.

In the Jewish tradition the title "Father" is only one of several names that testify to God as the lover of men and women. A litany in the evening prayer of the Day of Atonement, for instance, contains the following petition: '*Anenu abhinu 'anenu*, "Hear us, our Father, hear us". It is framed by other appeals. On the one side: "Hear us, O Lord, hear us!" and "Hear us, our God, hear us", on the other: "Hear us, our Creator, hear us!" This last entreaty is followed by others in which God is addressed as "Redeemer", "You pure and true One", "You who lives eternally". All these titles seem to be variations or, if you wish, concealments of the one, namely "the loving One".

In the petitions for forgiveness the worshippers, interestingly enough, always turn to God as Father and as King. So, for instance, it is said in the morning prayer of the Day of Atonement:

Forgive us, O our Father,  
because we have failed out of foolishness.  
Pardon us, O our King,  
for numerous are our signs!

A form of address in the daily morning prayer is quite similar in its usage of the titles "Father" and "King". In the Eighteen Benedictions the congregations prays:

Lead us back, O our Father, to your teaching!  
Take us, O our King, back into your service!  
Through complete repentance bring us anew into your presence!  
Praised be you, Lord, who delights in repentance.  
Forgive us. Our Father, for we have sinned.  
Pardon us, O our King, for we have failed!  
For you are all forgiving and all pardoning.  
Praised be you, Lord, the gracious one, who abundantly forgives.  
(Benedictions 5 and 6).

God is addressed as "Father" not only in these prayers which ask for forgiveness; he is the giver of all good things. Thus the congregation exclaims every morning:

Give peace, welfare and blessing,  
mercy, favour and pity  
to us and all of your people Israel.

Bless us, O Father, all of us together  
as one in the light of your countenance . . .

### 7. *The Uniqueness of Jesus*

In my endeavour to grasp Jesus' outcry at the Mount of Olives in its depth and thus to throw light on the prayer which he taught his disciples, I have tried to avoid extreme standpoints—not because I fear every extreme and consider the golden mean the ideal of life and thus of thought. On the contrary, everything real is polar and can be comprehended only by one who keeps this polarity in mind. Applied to Jesus, this means that he is a Jew, wholly and totally, and must be understood as such, but also that his humanity is not exhausted by his Jewishness; that he is always himself; that as a human being, as a man of prayer, as a teacher, he is unique and unrepeatable. This an interpreter must never forget. Nor should he ever fashion the Jewish humanity of Jesus—a statement of reality and source of knowledge—into an instrument with which to rob Jesus of his titles.

In order to dispel any doubts as to where I stand I wish to declare emphatically that I consider Joachim Jeremias misleading when he cites the dissimilarity between the gospels and Judaism as a criterion for the identification of the authentic words of Jesus. As much as I am convinced that Jesus' address to God as *Abba* is in the spirit of Jewish prayer, that it does not burst open the framework of Judaism properly understood; that Jesus' avowal to do the will of his Father rests on the frequently used Jewish formula *yehi ratzon milephanekha*, "may it be your will", so I am equally convinced that Jesus stamped his personal impress and thus his particular meaning on both expressions.

Something similar is true about the *Oratio Dominica* which should really be called *Oratio Discipulorum*, "Prayer of the Disciples". According to its form and meaning it is related to, indeed analogous with, the prayer to be recited at times of crisis or moments of danger which the rabbis teach in b. *Berákhoth* 29b. A short *tephillath haderekh*, prayer for a journey, is also mentioned there.<sup>23</sup> This is also true of the Lord's Prayer. It is one the Lord gave his messengers to take along on their pilgrimages and apostolic journeys as a vade mecum, a brief summing up of his message.

Samuel Sandmel errs when he claims that "the Lord's Prayer gets its Christian character from its association with Christianity".



Yet, he is right when he continues: "The words themselves are quite congruent phrases of prayer in habitual use in the Talmud."<sup>24</sup> This fact in no way prevents the same phrases from assuming a special sense when spoken by Jesus. Israel Abrahams is much more profound when he cites Wellhausen: "True prayer is a creation of the Jews, and the Paternoster follows Jewish models although it is not simply put together *ex formulis Hebraeorum*."<sup>25</sup> "To follow Jewish models" does not mean that the prayer which Jesus transmits to his disciples is a mere *cento*, a patchwork put together from synagogal prayers.<sup>26</sup> It is a gift which springs from the heart of the Master and one in which his heart continues to beat.

### Notes

1. The Hebrew *dabhar* means both word or saying and thing, event or deed. 'Asereth Hadebharim means "Ten Words", ie, the Ten Commandments (Ex. 34:28 and *passim*), while *dibhré hayamim* stands for the "events of days", ie, annals (1 Ki. 14:19 and *passim*).
2. Rabbinic sayings on God's offering of himself on behalf of his creatures and on his service to them have been collected by Peter Kuhn in *Gottes Selbster-niedrigung in der Theologie der Rabbinen* (Munich, 1968). The sources for the sayings quoted here about God's co-suffering with Israel are to be found on pp. 87-90.
3. Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (London & Baltimore, 1963), p. 389.
4. Josef Schmid, *Evangelium nach Markus, Regensburger NT* (Regensburg, 1963), vol. II, p. 278.
5. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, tr. John Marsh (New York & Evanston, 1963), p. 306.
6. Nineham, *op. cit.*
7. To cite biblical examples: David's lament at the death of Jonathan (2 Sam. 1: 19-27) and mourning for Absalom (2 Sam. 19: 1-2, 5); Judith's petition that God change the fate of his people (Judith 9); petition of the condolers at the house of Jairus (Mark 5:38); petition of pilgrims on the way to the grave of Lazarus (John 11:33); finally Jesus' cry on the cross (Matt. 27:46, 40).
8. *Das Evangelium nach Markus, NTD* (Göttingen, 1967), p. 169.
9. *Das Evangelium nach Markus, NTD* (Göttingen, 1949), p. 188.
10. During a drought school children were sent to the secret wonder-worker, to ask him to send rain. "Abba, abba, give us rain", called the children. Hanan turned to God: "Ruler of the world, do it for the sake of these here who cannot yet distinguish between an *abba* who has the power to send rain and an *abba* who has not (b. *Ta'anith* 23b). David Flusser, in his *Jesus* (tr. Ronald Walls; London & New York, 1969, pp. 94 ff., 144 ff.) offers some valuable points with regard to these and other Talmudic stories on charismatic wonder-workers: eg, Honi the "drawer of circles" (b. *Ta'anith* 23a).



Jeremias knows the corresponding pericopes but considers them of small importance in our connexion because they only use *abba* as a dative, never as vocative. In one case he is even a little perplexed by a jocular usage of the title *abba*, although this underscores precisely that intimacy which he otherwise cherishes. (See *The Central Message of the New Testament* [New York, 1965], pp. 19 f.)

11. *Central Message*, p. 21; also *Das Vater-Unser* (Stuttgart, 1965), p. 19. The view held by Jeremias is mirrored in most of modern literature about Jesus. Wilhelm Kasper writes in an essay "Jesus im Streit der Meinungen": "From a historical point of view it can hardly be doubted that Jesus polemicized against Jewish legalism, broke the Sabbath law, violated the regulations concerning purity, and addressed God as *abba*, 'Father', though [to Jewish ears] such an intimate address must have sounded alien, indeed scandalous." (*Theologie der Gegenwart*, 4 [1973], p. 235.) Every part of this statement is historically inexact. In fact, the whole sentence reflects gross misunderstanding of a situation hard to grasp for all not fully conversant with Judaism at the time of Jesus.
12. *Central Message*, p. 14.
13. Witold Marchel, *Abber, Vater, Die Vaterbotschaft des Neuen Testaments* (Düsseldorf, 1963), pp. 43 f. The following summation follows closely upon the last sentence cited in the body of this essay: "There is one who purchased the name 'Father' with the heart's blood of his own Son. Since then we, too, have a Father" (p. 44). Who is meant by "we"? The Gentile Christians who previously did not know the God of Israel? What goes on inside a theologian who first discusses the revelation of the fatherhood of God in Israel, but then ignores it as soon as he contemplates the proclamation of Jesus' message? Would it not be closer to the truth to phrase the sentence along the following lines: "Since Gethsemani the nations of the world who became Christians can also participate fully, indeed abundantly, in that paternal love of God with which he first drew, *and still draws*, Israel to himself."
14. *Das Vater-Unser*, p. 19.
15. *Central Message*, pp. 26 f.
16. *Das Vater-Unser*, p. 19.
17. *Central Message*, p. 30.
18. One has to agree with Jeremias when he states again and again that Jesus was the only teacher at the time of early Judaism who dared to address God, not only in the holy tongue of Scripture and worship, but also in the vernacular. This agreement, however, demands a qualification: The number of charismatic prayers by the rabbis that have been handed down to us is scarce (see Flusser, *op. cit.*, p. 145, n. 62). Jeremias is aware that later, at the time of the hasidic movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and probably also today), God is addressed in a most intimate manner. But Jeremias fails to inform us whether he is acquainted only with that fact or also with the contents of such prayers.
19. *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart, 1948), p. 156.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Düsseldorf, 1968), vol. I, pp. 112 f.
22. From the morning prayer said on the Sabbath, *Nishmath kol hai* . . . ("The



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breath of all living . . ."), cf. b. *Berakhoth* 59b.

23. I am indebted to my friend Professor Asher Finkel for the idea that the Lord's Prayer is the same as, or similar to, the prayer for a journey cited in the Talmud. As a prayer of pilgrimage, it permits the worshipper to express the fundamental distress that presses on him and on every human being, and to respond to the call to turn to God, which is addressed to him and again to everyone.
24. *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (Cincinnati, 1956), p. 150.
25. *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge, 1924), II, p. 94.
26. *Ibid.*