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## God the Father in the Trinity

In his 1994 Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* (*As the Third Millennium Draws Near*), Pope John Paul II dedicated the past year of 1999 to God the Father. In paragraphs 49 and 50, he compares Christian life to a pilgrimage back to the Father. As Christian theology has always maintained, the Father is the one from whom all has come and to whom all returns. He is “the whence” and “the whither” not only of all creation but even of the Son and the Spirit. In the words of the Christian tradition both East and West, the Father is the source (*pege, fons*), the origin (*arche, origo*) and the principle (*aitia, principium*) from whom come the Son and the Spirit and back to whom all returns through the Son and in the Spirit. And so in the earliest centuries of the Church, as even today, Christians prayed to the Father through the Son and in the power of the Spirit. The Father is the origin and end of all, the alpha and the omega (Rev 1:8, 21:6).

In this article I wish to discuss the meaning of the term “Father” as applied to God as the first person of the blessed Trinity. The question I am addressing is: what do we Christians mean by *Father* when we say: In the name of the *Father*, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? Who is this Father?

### TWO INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Before entering directly into the topic, I wish to make two important introductory comments which will be presumed throughout the remainder of the article.

First, in *Christian* discourse or usage, the title or image of “father” as applied to God can have four somewhat distinct but related meanings:

a. Father can refer to the covenant God of the Jewish Scriptures, the God whose name is YHWH, the God in whom Jesus trusted, to whom he prayed, whose Reign he proclaimed, and whom he himself called “Abba,” which may well be a term of affection or endearment meaning something like “dad,” or “pops.”

b. A second aspect of the meaning of God as Father in the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology is the notion of God as creator. So, for example, in early credal statements, to say “I believe in God the Father” is to say “I believe in God as creator.” That meaning of Father came to be stated expressly in the creeds of both the East and West when they were expanded to say: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker (creator) of heaven and earth.”

c. A third meaning of God as Father is God as “the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” While for Jewish theology, God is the Father of Israel and of all faithful Israelites, and while for the New Testament this same God/Yahweh is our Father, nevertheless, for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, God is the Father of Jesus in a unique way. There is a unique relationship between Yahweh (God) and this particular Jew, Jesus. For the New Testament writers, Jesus is Son in a unique way. He is *the* Son or the *only begotten* Son (John 1:14). With this third meaning, we are now on our way to a *properly trinitarian* usage of the term “Father” (i.e., God as Father of Jesus Christ, his *only begotten* Son).

d. Finally the fourth meaning in Christian discourse of God as Father: within Christian *trinitarian* discourse, Yahweh (the God of Judaism-Christian faith) not only has a unique relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, so much so that Jesus is his unique son; he also is as Father the ultimate source of the Holy Spirit. With this fourth meaning of Father, Yahweh as Father is not only the one who brings forth or (to use technical language) “begets” his one and only Son (the perfect image and therefore revelation of the Father), this same Father brings forth or originates (“spirates”) his powerful Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the gift of God’s powerful, creative, enabling love to creation. Only now with this fourth meaning of the term (the Father as source of Son *and* Spirit) do we have the full *trinitarian* meaning of God as Father (i.e., the Father is the source, the origin, and the principle of the Son and the Spirit).

In this first introductory comment, I have presented four usages or meanings for the term “Father” as applied to or predicated of God in Christian usage. But it is important to remember that we are not talking about four different realities here, four gods or four “fathers.” There is only *one* God and *one* Father. The God of Israel, Yahweh, is also the God who is Creator, is also the God who is the Father of Jesus and the Source/Origin of the Holy Spirit. In trinitarian usage this God is called the first person of the blessed Trinity, God the Father.

Second introductory comment: As is perhaps obvious from above, while the fourth meaning of Father (i.e., as source of the Son and Spirit) is the proper *trinitarian* meaning, it does not exclude but rather includes the first three meanings. Therefore, talk about God as Father in the Trinity will have to include the first three meanings. As is also probably obvious, one cannot talk about the Father in the *trinitarian* sense without also talking about the Son and the Spirit, for the Father in the *trinitarian* sense is not the Father without the Son and the Spirit. Another way to say that: if one tried to talk about the Father in the *trinitarian* sense without talking about the Son and the Spirit, one really would have nothing to say, since the Father *is* Father (origin, source, and principle) only in relation to the Son and the Spirit.

#### YAHWISTIC ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN TRINITARIANISM

What do we Christians mean by “Father” in the trinitarian sense, “Father” as the first person of the blessed Trinity, “Father” when we say “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?”

To understand the meaning of God as Father within the Trinity, we must first return to Israel’s experience of God as Yahweh, and hence to Israel’s covenant theology. The clue and the starting point for understanding our Christian trinitarian faith, and hence our faith in God as *Father*, is our own Yahwistic faith. If we Christians are truly to understand and appreciate our Christian experience of God (i.e., as God-Father, God-Son, and God-Spirit), we must remember that we first of all are Jews in our faith and therefore believe in the God of Israel, Yahweh. The God in whom we believe and confess as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a *different* God than Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God whom Jesus called “Abba.” It is the God of Israel, the God of the Jewish Scriptures, the God whose name is YHWH.

We must continually remember that our Christian understanding of God is not in the first place different than the Jewish understanding of God. It is merely a more nuanced or developed understanding of that God based upon and made possible by the experience which the first followers of Jesus, who were Yahwistic Jews, had of Jesus. It was because of the experience that the first followers had of Jesus (his life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection) that they began to develop or further articulate, or make more explicit their Yahwistic faith. Therefore, our Christian understanding of God (as Father, Son, and Spirit) is continuous with Israel’s understanding of God. This continuity is very important if we are to understand our Christian faith in God as God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Because in the history of theology we have at times become unanchored from our Yahwistic roots, we have not only created for ourselves unnecessary problems in trinitarian theology (i.e., in our *Christian* understanding of God), we have also constructed trinitarian theologies or Christian understandings of God which do not always speak to us. Needless to say, we also unnecessarily alienated ourselves from our Jewish brothers and sisters whose God is also our God.

#### *God “here with us”*

What are these Yahwistic roots? In Exodus 3 we have the well-known scene of Moses going to Mount Horeb/Sinai and God’s appearing to him in a burning bush, commissioning him to be the liberator of his people from slavery in Egypt. When Moses asks God his name, God responds with the name, YHWH (Exod 3:14). Given the context of the narrative and the covenant theology of the Pentateuch as a whole, the

meaning, though not the translation, of the name, YHWH, is: "I am the one who will be there with you," as the Yahweh of verse twelve explicitly states: "I will be with you." The name, YHWH, is a promise, the promise to be here with us. The God of Israel, whose name is YHWH, who frees his people from Egypt, who forms a very personal, intimate, loving bond or covenant with his people, is the God who is and who *promises to be* "here with us," to be a God *for us*, a loving God, a saving God, a God who draws near. Yahweh is a God who says: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Jer 7:23, Ezek 11:20).

This is not an impersonal God, an indifferent God, a distant God, a God removed from us, a God who does not care. This is a God who is and promises to be "here for us." This is a God whose love for us, whose "being here with us" is depicted through images such as father, mother, shepherd and groom. As Israel's experience of this covenant God develops, Yahweh, the covenant God, becomes also the creator God. Yahweh is not only God of Israel but of all creation (the second meaning of Father mentioned above). Yahweh's being here with us begins with creation itself, the first of Yahweh's saving deeds.

Two more comments must be made regarding this Jewish understanding of God as Yahweh. They are very important to understand the development or expansion of Yahwistic faith into Christian trinitarian faith and hence to understand the meaning of God the Father in a trinitarian sense.

#### *God of the Future*

First, Israel has a very historical understanding of God. Israel's God has a *history* of being and becoming "here for us," of being and becoming God *for us*, of being and becoming the loving, saving God. Not only does Israel have a very historical understanding of God, a God who becomes more and more God *for us*, she also has a very *eschatological* understanding of God. *Eschaton* is a Greek word which means "the end." For Israel, since God's very *being* is to be "here for us" (i.e., to be saving or loving, God is not "all that God can be" until God fully saves, until God is fully victorious over God's creation). This is the meaning of the biblical symbol "the Reign of God" or, more precisely, the "Reigning God" (the *Malkuth Yahweh*). Only in the end will God be fully "here for us," fully victorious and fully reign over God's creation, bringing it to the paradisaal peace, harmony, and fulfillment which he willed for it from the beginning.

This Yahweh of the Covenant, therefore, who leads, rescues, and cares for his people, who creates all (the heavens and the earth), is a Yahweh whose history of becoming more and more God *for us* is completed only when Yahweh fully reigns. And when Yahweh fully reigns or saves, i.e., brings creation to its fulfillment, then that will be the end

of time and history as we know it. Then God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). Hence theology today often speaks of God as the God of the absolute future. Israel's God is a God of the future, a God of the promises. "I will be there with you." "I will be your God." This is a God who comes at his people and his creation from the future, luring his creation and people more and more into the future, bringing them more and more back to himself until he fully reigns. And so for Israel all of creation and human history are, as it were, on a journey or pilgrimage back to Yahweh, the God of the absolute future.

*God of Immanence: Word, Wisdom, and Spirit*

Second, on the one hand Yahweh totally transcends his creation. He is its creator who alone can bring it to fulfillment. On the other hand, the transcendence of this God is not such that it excludes God from God's creation or keeps God distant from God's creation. That is not possible, since the very being and meaning of this God is to be "here with us," to be a God *for us*. Therefore, while Israel's God is very transcendent or other than his creation (Yahweh cannot be reduced to creation), nonetheless this Yahweh is very near and involved in his creation, for Yahweh is the one who is "here for us."

To bring out this nearness of God or immanence of God to God's creation, Israel uses various symbols in speaking about God. Of the many symbols of divine immanence in the Jewish Scriptures, three are very important for understanding the continuity between Yahwistic and trinitarian faith. The first two become in the intertestamental period very interchangeable and mean basically the same (i.e., the Word of Yahweh and Wisdom of Yahweh). The third is the Spirit of Yahweh whose meaning is very similar to that of Word or Wisdom. These symbols of divine immanence tell us how Yahweh becomes "here with us."

Yahweh creates, reveals and saves through his Word or Wisdom. The Word/Wisdom symbol expresses both Yahweh's eternal *plan* to create, reveal, and save, as well as Yahweh's actual creative, revelatory, and saving *presence* and *activity* outside himself. Another way to say that is that Word/Wisdom bespeaks not only Yahweh's eternal plan or desire to be a saving God, a God *for us*. It also signifies the actual *self-expressive activity* of God outside God's self through which Yahweh becomes more and more a creating, revealing, saving God, more a God present to creation and expressing or revealing himself in creation. These two symbols of Word and Wisdom are, of course, applied to Jesus to depict his unique relationship with Yahweh. Jesus is both the Word and the Wisdom of Yahweh (John 1:14, 1 Cor 1:25, 30). I will return to this theme below.

So Yahweh is a God who is a God *for us*, a God who has an eternal plan/desire to be here with us through creating, revealing and saving.

Yahweh is not only the transcendent Yahweh. Yahweh is also the Yahweh who through his Word/Wisdom can and does turn towards us, get outside of himself, and draw near to us in creating, revealing, and saving. Through his Word or Wisdom Yahweh becomes "here with us," becomes for us the saving, loving God which Yahweh is in himself. To use a metaphor of Irenaeus, the second bishop of Lyons, the Word/Wisdom of God is like a "hand" of God which allows God to get outside himself and become for us what God always, already is in himself, a saving, loving God.

Yahweh, however, has not only his Word or Wisdom. Yahweh has also his Spirit. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, breath or wind. And this breath or wind of Yahweh is a mighty breath, a powerful breath. That is why in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures the "power of God" is so often used in parallelism with the Spirit of God. The word for power in Greek is *dunamis* from which we get "dynamite." Our God, Yahweh, not only has one hand through which he can reveal or express himself in creation; he has another hand through which he makes himself present to creation, and that is his Spirit.

Yahweh's Spirit or breathing is a mighty breathing, a powerful breathing, a creative breathing. So often when we see the symbols of the Spirit and power of Yahweh in the Scriptures, something big or explosive is going to happen; something new is going to happen. There is going to be creation and new creation, life, and new life.

Another dimension of the symbol, Spirit of Yahweh, is that this Spirit or power of God is experienced or understood as coming unexpectedly from the future. The God of the future (Yahweh) comes at us unexpectedly with his powerful, creative, life-giving, enabling Spirit in order to give life and new life, to create, "shake up" and recreate, so as to bring about his Reign so that the God of the Future can become all that God can be, a loving-saving God.

#### THE CHRISTIAN DEVELOPMENT OR EXPANSION OF YAHWISTIC FAITH

The first followers of Jesus, as well as Jesus himself, were Yahwistic Jews. They believed in the Yahweh of Israel. This Yahweh was a God who could and did express himself or get outside himself in creating, in revealing, and in saving. This Yahweh was also a God whom Jesus and his first followers experienced as a mighty God, a powerful God, a God coming at them from the future, empowering them to bring about a new creation, to bring about the Reign of God.

#### *Jesus: Word, Wisdom, and Spirit*

Because of their experience of Jesus (his life, his death, and especially his resurrection), the first followers of Jesus began to further develop or

articulate their Yahwistic faith. They began to talk about *Jesus himself* as the Word or Wisdom of God and therefore also the unique Son of God, and the Spirit as not only the Spirit of Yahweh, but also the Spirit of the risen Christ.

They talked about Jesus as the Word or the Wisdom of God because they experienced in his life, his death and his being raised the complete or total expression and enfleshment of God's plan to create, to reveal, and to save. He *is* the plan or the "mystery" of God enfleshed as one of us (Eph 3:5; Col 1:27), the perfect expression or image of the God who is and promises to be "here with us" (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). And hence he, as a historical human being, *is* the fulfillment of the promise which Yahweh is, the promise to be "here with us" (2 Cor 1:19-21). He *is* "the here with us" who Yahweh is and promises to be. And so he is called the Word and the Wisdom of God.

As the perfect expression or image of Yahweh, he is also the Son of the Father, Yahweh, in a way that no one else is son or daughter. And Yahweh is his Father in a way that he is not Father to anyone else. And so now to call Yahweh "Father" is to continue to say all that was said about him before as Father, but it is also to say that in Jesus, he has fully expressed himself in history as the God who is "here with us," as the God who is *for us*, as the God who is the saving, loving God of the covenant. Jesus is the fullest historical expression of the "here with us" who is Yahweh.

Hence, Jesus is called "Emmanuel," God with us. In Jesus God the Father is not only present to his creation, is not only "here with us." He is so present, so much "here with us" that in Jesus he has become *one with* his creation, which is the basic affirmation underlying the technical and traditional term "hypostatic union." In that total embrace of his creation, in that total becoming one with his creation which is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has fully expressed himself and has brought his creation to completion or fulfillment, which is salvation (i.e., to be brought back to God). And what Yahweh did fully in Jesus (lovingly embrace and bring back his creation to himself) is itself a promise of what God wishes for all of his creation, to embrace it and to bring it back to himself. This brings us back to the third symbol of divine immanence or presence, the Spirit of God.

More must be said of these first followers of Jesus and the experience of God which they had in Jesus. Precisely because they were Jews who believed in Yahweh, they believed also that Yahweh was a mighty God, a powerful God, a God whose Spirit was a Spirit of new creation, a mighty power from the future through which Yahweh would bring his creation to completion. Since in Jesus, especially in his resurrection, they believed that Yahweh had brought his creation to completion (i.e., saved it), they came to say that this creative Spirit of Yahweh was fully

at work in Jesus, anointing or (in Greek) "christening" him, as the Spirit had anointed the prophets before Jesus. It was this creative power of Yahweh's Spirit at work in Jesus that more and more empowered him to become the Christ (the anointed one). Just as through his Spirit Yahweh brought about the first creation (Gen 1:2), so now through this same powerful Spirit at work in Jesus, Yahweh brought his creation, the creation which was Jesus, to fulfillment by becoming one with it. In Jesus through the creative empowerment of the Spirit, the plan (Paul's mystery) for all of creation was fully realized or expressed.

Moreover, in being raised from the dead through the powerful life-giving Spirit of Yahweh, Jesus not only returned to the Father. He himself was so filled with the Spirit or power of God that he became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45), the unique channel or instrument through which Yahweh sent forth this life-giving Spirit or power into the world. Thus in the New Testament, the Spirit of Yahweh is also called the Spirit of Christ, sent forth by both Yahweh and Christ into the world to continue to do in creation and history what it fully and perfectly did in Jesus (i.e., brought creation to its completion by bringing about the Reign of God, especially in Jesus' being raised).

And so the Spirit is now sent forth by Yahweh and the risen Christ to more and more bring about the Reign of God in creation or to more and more "christify" that creation, i.e., bring it to its completion so that Christ can return it to the Father who can then be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). This Spirit of Yahweh, present and active now in and through the risen Christ, is the loving and empowering "being here" of Yahweh with and within us, just as it had been with Jesus so that as Jesus we too can be "christened" or anointed and hence returned to the Father.

All of creation, therefore, is on pilgrimage back to the Father. It was created through his Word/Wisdom and in the power of his Spirit. Through these two hands of God it will be returned to the Father, the beginning and end of all.

#### CONCLUSION

When Christians believe in God the Father in the trinitarian sense, they do not contradict but merely further articulate their faith in Yahweh. To believe in God the Father is to confess that our God is a saving God, a God whose being it is "to be here with us," to be self-communicative love, a love that cannot contain itself, a love which is overflowing. Because it is, there is a creation, a creation which is created by love and as loved, as embraced by the gift of God's self-giving love, the Holy Spirit. The only creation there is, is a creation always already embraced by this self-diffusive love. This loving, creative, self-expressive work of Yahweh reaches its never to be surpassed high point in the human, Jesus, who is God's perfect self-expression, and hence called

Son, Word, and Wisdom of God. But this powerful creative love of God as Holy Spirit is at work in all of creation, embracing it, yearning to heal it, yearning to bring it back to God, who as Father is not only the source and origin of this powerful creative love, this powerful Spirit but also the goal of all creation.

To say that our God is Father in the trinitarian sense is to say that our God is a God who through his hands of Word and Spirit can “get outside himself” and become *for us* what he truly is, a God of love, a God of salvation.

To believe in God the Father is to believe that all of creation and human history is sacred because it is created by, embraced by, fulfilled by, and restored to God. This we have seen fully in the gift of God’s powerful Spirit at work in Jesus. Because of him and his resurrection, we Christians proclaim that the Spirit of God the Father will be ultimately victorious in creation and history because it was fully victorious in Jesus, the Son. To believe in God the Father is to be an eternal optimist, despite all the sickness and suffering, despite all the tragedy and injustice, yes despite even death itself, because to believe in God the Father is to believe that God, the Yahweh of Israel, through the powerful presence and work of his Spirit, has become in Jesus one with this creation of ours. Henceforth, from that moment creation not only received its infinite depth but belongs eternally to God, the God who in the end will be all in all, who in the end will reign over all, who in the end will be revealed to all as the God he claimed to be, the God fully revealed in Jesus. Our belief in God the Father is belief in the God “who is here with us,” the God whose name is Yahweh (“I will be there with you”).

It is that God, that Yahweh who is the Father of the blessed Trinity, the one who was fully with us as one of us in Jesus and who remains with us in his Spirit. Through that Spirit he can bring us home to himself beyond all injustice and all suffering, beyond all loneliness and pain, beyond every tear and even death itself. To that Father be glory through his Son and in his Spirit.