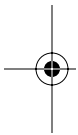


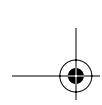
## Introduction

When you pray, say, “Our Father in heaven . . .”

With these words Jesus introduced his disciples to a whole new dimension of prayer. Not that they did not already know how to pray—even though we might think that from their question, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). The faith of Israel was a praying faith, and the disciples of Jesus belonged to a people for whom the prayers and praises of the Psalms were woven into the fabric of their daily lives as much as their everyday food (which never passed their lips without prayer). The point of their question seems to have been, “Lord, teach us to pray *like you do*.” For clearly the prayer life of Jesus went beyond anything they knew themselves, or even anything they had observed among the professional prayer experts (about whom Jesus had some less-than-flattering things to say).

One major dimension of that prayer life of Jesus (something that probably surprised, puzzled and perhaps shocked them), was the familiarity with which Jesus addressed God as Father. They could see that Jesus had a unique, intimate relation with God as *his* Father, whom he addressed in the family language of “Abba.” But could such a way of relating and speaking to God in prayer be available also to his followers? With his classic template of prayer, Jesus says that it is not only possible, but it is to be normal and standard. And so ever since then followers of Jesus have entered effortlessly (though some-





times routinely and without thought) into the limitless relational richness of calling God “Father.”

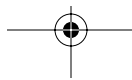
Calling God “Father” in prayer is second nature to *Christian* believers, but it seems that it was surprising to Jesus’ first disciples. Why was that? The simple reason is that it was not the common way of addressing God within the worshiping life of Israel. Now this is not because the ancient Israelites did not know of God as Father—both the concept and the terminology are most definitely there in the Scriptures of Israel that we call the Old Testament, and we shall explore them further below. But “Father” is not the common or normal form of address to God in the Old Testament. It is not used, for example, in the book of Israelite hymns and prayers<sup>1</sup>—the Book of Psalms, even though that book abounds in other ways of speaking about God and to God.

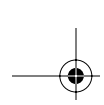
So the question must arise, then, in the mind of anybody contemplating the title of this book: how can so many pages be filled with a theme that is so apparently slender in the Old Testament itself? Is it not somewhat forced or anachronistic to talk about “knowing God the Father *through the Old Testament*”? Surely this is something that we can really only discuss, as Christians, in the light of the New Testament, and that fuller revelation of God through his Son Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is in knowing Jesus as the *Son of God* that we know more clearly about the *Father* (as Jesus himself told his disciples). And then from that point we move toward the more developed understanding of the trinitarian nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Well, of course all this is true, to a point. But we are still left with

---

<sup>1</sup>Except once as a form of address by the Davidic king (Ps 89:26), and in a few metaphorical verses that we shall look at in chapter 1.





the biblical fact that Old Testament Israel did know a thing or two about the living God, and they *did* on occasions call their God Father—even if other titles and forms of address are much more common. And they certainly used the role, expectations and responsibilities of human fathers as a way of speaking about certain aspects of God. That is to say, there are fatherly portraits and metaphors for God, even when he is not directly called Father.

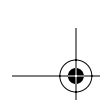
So another way of putting our question would be this: Is the God of the Old Testament revelation—the God whom Israel knew as Yahweh (though by the time of Jesus already, probably, they had ceased to pronounce this name, and substituted for it either *Adonai*—“the Lord,” or *Ha Shem*—“the Name”)<sup>2</sup>—is that God the same as the God we call Father? In other words, can we equate Yahweh of Old Testament faith and affirmation with God the Father in our trinitarian understanding of God? I believe we can say yes, with some careful qualifications, for the following reasons.

### THE UNITY OF THE TRINITY

Christians do not believe in three Gods. It is of the very essence of trinitarian confession that God is One. We believe that truth just as strongly as Israelite believers did when they recited the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4). So on the assumption that the God revealed in the Old Testament is the one true living God whom we also now know in the fullness of his final revelation through his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we must also affirm that all

<sup>2</sup>The earliest Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures (made well over a hundred years before Christ), followed this practice, and rendered the divine name YHWH as *ho kyrios*—“the Lord.” In the same tradition, English translations use the capitalized form “the LORD” to render the personal name of God in the Old Testament. It is worth remembering, when we read this term—that it represents a personal name, not just a title.





three persons of the Godhead (as we now call them), are “contained” within the singular, integrated personal identity of the God who chose to be known as Yahweh in the Old Testament.

The great affirmation of Deuteronomy 4:35 and 39 affirms not only the uniqueness but also the universality and completeness of Yahweh as God.

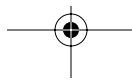
The LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. (Deut 4:39)

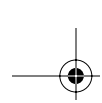
This means not only that Yahweh is the *only* God there is, but Yahweh is also *all* the God there is, or to put it another way, Yahweh is all there is to God. There is no higher deity above or behind him, or a better one to come after him. Yahweh is not just the penultimate name for some more ultimate divine reality. Deity as such, in every sense that can be affirmed within and beyond the universe—deity is defined by Yahweh. God is as he is revealed to be in the person of *this* God, and no other. This being so, then all that we would now strive to express about God through our doctrine of the Trinity is already encapsulated in the transcendent, unique, and universal God Yahweh. The Israelites may not have known all that just yet, but that does not mean it was not the objective reality and truth about God.<sup>3</sup>

This means that it is usually rather pointless (in my view), to ask about any Old Testament verse that speaks about Yahweh, which person of the Trinity it is referring to. There are some places where the Spirit of Yahweh is clearly indicated (as I surveyed in *Knowing the Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament*), and there are certainly messi-



<sup>3</sup> That is to say, if you like this kind of language and you can forget it if you don't, that we can make a distinction between the epistemological dimension (what Israel at any given point in their history *knew* about God, through his action and revelation to that point), and the ontological dimension (all that God actually is, and always has been, in his own divine reality).





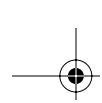
anic texts (in intention, or in later canonical reading) in which we can identify the pre-incarnate second person of the Trinity whom we now know through Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, it is also clear that in the New Testament, the most remarkable thing that happened in the faith of the earliest followers of Jesus is that they came to identify *him*, *Jesus*, with Yahweh, in calling him Lord, and in many other ways.<sup>4</sup> So, yes, it is certainly true from a whole-Bible perspective, that the God Yahweh of the Old Testament “embodies” (if that is not too human a word), the Son and the Holy Spirit. But on the whole it is probably more appropriate in most cases that when we read about Yahweh, we should have God the Father in mind.

#### THE PRIMARY FUNCTIONS OF YAHWEH

When Old Testament Israelites made their great affirmation about the transcendent uniqueness of Yahweh, they frequently associated it with major roles or functions that were attributed to him. The most outstanding was that Yahweh alone is the Creator of everything else that exists apart from himself (e.g., Jer 10:11-12). A second was that Yahweh alone is king. He is supreme ruler, not only over Israel, but over all nations, and the whole of creation (e.g., Deut 10:14, 17). And a third was that Yahweh is the ultimate judge of all human behavior—from the smallest individual thought and action to the macrocosm of international relations in the ebb and flow of history (e.g., Ps 33:13-15). Creator, king and judge: in all these spheres the sovereign universality of Yahweh was affirmed again and again. And these are typically the roles that are commonly associated with the person of God the Father. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of

<sup>4</sup> See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), chap. 4, “The Living God Makes Himself Known in Jesus Christ.”





heaven and earth” we recite, in the Apostles’ Creed, for example.

Now of course, we have to agree that one of the major ways in which the New Testament affirms the identity of *Jesus* with Yahweh (and thereby implying his deity), is through attributing all of these primary divine roles to the Lord Jesus Christ as well—and adding another, the role of Savior (which was another major defining characteristic of Yahweh). In the New Testament, *Jesus* is portrayed as Creator, king, Savior and judge.<sup>5</sup> All this goes to demonstrate the unity of the Godhead in all the ways in which God acts. Paul combines both the Father and Jesus in his remarkable expansion of the Shema in 1 Corinthians:

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.  
(1 Cor 8:6)

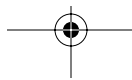
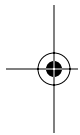
Nevertheless, the more common way of differentiating at a conceptual level between the persons of God is to associate the roles of creating, sustaining, ordering, ruling and judging the earth and all its inhabitants with God the Father. For this reason, again, it is natural to associate the name and character of Yahweh in the Old Testament primarily (though not, as we have said, exclusively) with the Father.

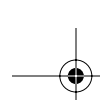
### THE GOD TO WHOM JESUS PRAYED

Jesus was fully human. He grew up in a devout and believing Jewish home, and was without doubt a worshiping, praying child, young man and adult. The daily habit of prayer that we read of in the Gospels must have been ingrained in him from childhood. So when Jesus

---

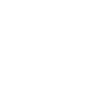
<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

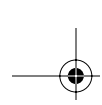




worshiped and prayed, in his home or in the synagogue in Nazareth, to whom was his worship directed? Who was the God whose name he read in all the Scriptures he recited and all the songs he sang? To whom did Jesus pray at the knees of Mary and then through all his life? The answer is, of course, to the LORD, Yahweh (though he would have said *Adonai*). Jesus would have recited the Shema daily with his fellow Jews, and he knew the “LORD our God” of that text to be the God of his people, his human parents and himself. So Jesus’ whole perception of God was entirely shaped by the Scriptures we call the Old Testament. When Jesus thought of God, spoke of God, reflected on the words and will of God, set out to obey God—it was *this* God, Yahweh God, that was in his mind. “God” for Jesus was the named, biographied, character-rich, self-revealed God Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel. When Jesus and his disciples talked together of God, this is the name they would have used (or would have known but piously avoided pronouncing). When Jesus read Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in Nazareth, he claimed that the Spirit of the LORD was upon him “to-day”—the Spirit of Yahweh, God of the Old Testament prophets.

But of course, Jesus also knew this God of his Scriptures in the depth of his self-consciousness as *Abba*, as his own intimate personal Father. Luke tells us that this awareness was developing even in his childhood, and it was sealed at his baptism, when he heard the voice of his Father, accompanied by the Holy Spirit, confirming his identity as God’s beloved Son. So in the consciousness of Jesus the *scriptural* identity of God as Yahweh and his *personal* intimacy with God as his Father must have blended together. The God he knew from his Bible as Yahweh was the God he knew in prayer as his Father. When Jesus took the Psalms on his lips on the cross, the God he was calling out to in the agony of abandonment was the God addressed in Psalm 22:1 as Elohim, but throughout the psalm as Yahweh. The psalmist was calling



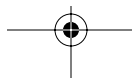


out to Yahweh. Jesus uses his words to call out to his Father.

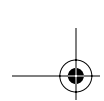
Now since all our understanding of God as Father must start out from knowing Jesus, it makes sense for us also to think of Yahweh, the God of Old Testament Israel and the God of the one true faithful Israelite Jesus, as God the Father, for that is who Yahweh primarily was in the consciousness of Jesus himself.

So then, an important foundational assumption for the rest of this book is just this, that knowing God as Father in the Old Testament is really a dimension of simply *knowing God*—that is, of knowing Yahweh as God. And that perception opens up for us a horizon of great breadth and vistas of rich biblical content. *Knowing God*, or the knowledge of God, is one of the truly immense themes of the Old Testament. It is challenging, frightening and encouraging. It can be intimate and devotional, but it is also deeply practical and ethical. It applies to individuals and to nations. It looks to the past and fills the intentions of God for the future. This will be a voyage of exciting and challenging biblical discovery.

However, as I said, the Israelites did sometimes actually speak of God as Father, even though we have to recognize that it was not a prominent or common dimension of their language of worship (not anything like the extent of its prominence in the New Testament). So we shall certainly also explore this theme of the fatherhood of God in the faith of Israel, and this too should lead us in a journey around some texts and concepts that are rather off the usual tourist routes of the Old Testament. So then, we shall weave our way in the chapters that follow through a twin theme. Sometimes the main emphasis will be on “knowing God” as we look at texts where that theme is in the foreground. Sometimes the main emphasis will be on God as Father in texts where that is a dominant metaphor. Our hope is that the combination and interaction of these themes and texts will enrich







and deepen our personal understanding of, and relationship with, the biblical God.

One final observation before we set forth. Our title is obviously framed from the common trinitarian formulation—"God the Father." This in itself, as we have seen, is not a term that the Old Testament uses in quite that form. And it would be unfortunate if our reflections in the course of this book on the fatherhood of God were misinterpreted to imply some kind of harsh patriarchal authoritarianism. Certainly the metaphor of human fatherhood is used as a way of speaking about certain key characteristics of God. But so is the metaphor of motherhood. In fact, the language of parenthood, in both genders, is explicitly used in relation to God as early as Deuteronomy 32:18. Likewise, should human parenthood fail (whether father or mother), the psalmist looks to God to fulfill their dual role in caring for him (Ps 27:10). Another psalmist compares his attentive dependence on God to a maid looking to her mistress. And God himself draws remarkable self-comparisons to a pregnant mother in labor (Is 42:14) and a nursing mother breastfeeding her child (Is 49:15). Apart from these explicitly motherly metaphors for God in the Old Testament, we shall observe (especially in chapter one), that the language of fatherhood, while it certainly includes appropriate exercise and expectations of authority, is commonly also associated with love, care, compassion, provision, protection and sustenance.

