

THE REVISIONARY POTENTIAL OF “ABBA! FATHER!” IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

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Introduction

The term “Abba! Father!” is used three times in the NT, two instances of which are Pauline (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). In Mark, the phrase belongs to Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, but in Galatians and Romans it communicates the transformed outlook of the newfound faith experience. It is the aim of the present inquiry to show that the expression “Abba! Father!” holds untapped potential for revising the contemporary perception of the theology of Paul, and, perhaps more importantly, maps an easier route toward the appropriation of Paul’s message on the part of “ordinary” readers.

In Galatians, the *NRSV* uses the wording, “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). In Romans, choosing the *NKJV* for ease of comparison, Paul writes that “you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom 8:15). These exclamations connote a comprehensive scope, a representative character, and an experiential quality that together constitute potent revisionary material in both letters. While the present inquiry prioritizes Galatians over Romans, this should not be taken to mean that the expression “Abba! Father!” is less important in Romans or that a more thorough analysis of its function in Romans would yield a different result.

“Abba! Father!” in Context

The Structure of Galatians

Attempts to elucidate the structure of Galatians have failed to yield a consensus, but no one can ignore the seminal proposal of Hans Dieter Betz to read the letter as meticulously structured rhetoric belonging to the “apologetic letter” genre.¹ Betz’s structural analysis has run into opposition as to the type of rhetoric employed,² as well as on the proposed structural divisions,³ but what

¹H. D. Betz, “The Literary Composition and Function of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” *NTS* 21 (1975): 354.

²Joop Smit argues against Betz that the rhetoric of Galatians is deliberative rather than judicial (“The Letter of Paul to the Galatians: A Deliberative Speech,” *NTS* 35 [1989], 1-26), whereas J. Louis Martyn, while admitting that elements in the letter that are judicial (1:17-24; 2:17-21) and deliberative (5:13-6:10), holds that “the body of the

is probably his most significant observation does not depend on agreement on these points. According to Betz, “the most important argument, which runs through the entire letter, is the argument from *experience*.”⁴ Experience, billed by rhetoricians as the element least susceptible to rhetorical subversion,⁵ figures prominently at the beginning (3:1-4) and the closing (4:6) of the “proof” section of the letter.⁶ With the exclamation “Abba! Father!” Paul not only refers to experience, but succeeds in drawing his most powerful argument from the mouth of those whom he seeks to persuade. Indeed, if J. Louis Martyn is correct that Paul’s rhetoric in Galatians is “more revelatory and performative than hortatory and persuasive,”⁷ the recipients of the letter are enlisted as codeclarers and coannouncers of the new reality. Their participation in this task is nowhere more evident than in their cry, “Abba! Father!”

The Allusive Quality of “Abba! Father!”

The dialogical nature of Galatians suggests that we are privy to a conversation in progress, and reminders of previous stages in the ongoing conversation are evident in phrases and ideas sprinkled throughout the letter in the form of telling allusions. Richard B. Hays has done readers of Paul a great service by pointing out the underlying narrative assumption of the letters that form the basis for these allusions.⁸ For instance, when Paul reminds his readers that “it was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” (Gal 3:1), he is referring to the narrative he had related in person concerning the

letter as a whole is a rhetorical genre without true analogy in the ancient rhetorical handbooks of Quintilian and others” (*Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 23). He prefers to regard Galatians as “a highly situational sermon.”

³Betz, 368-375, argues that the *probatio*, the decisive proof section of Paul’s argument, encompasses 3:1–4:21. In Smit’s structuration, 13-16, this section falls in the category of *confirmatio*, and the closing cut-off point is 4:11 rather than at 4:21. Richard N. Longenecker designates 1:6–4:11 as the *rebuke section*, but his view is notable in that he too sees the terminal cut-off point of this section at 4:11 (*Galatians*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1990], cix).

⁴Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 30.

⁵Betz, *Galatians*, 30.

⁶Smit, 4, seems justified in his preference for 4:11 as the cut-off point of the confirmatory section, corresponding to Betz’s proof division.

⁷Martyn, 23.

⁸Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, SBLDS 56 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also Douglas A. Campbell, “The Story of Jesus in Romans and Galatians,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 97-124; and, in the same volume, Graham N. Stanton, “I Think, When I Read That Sweet Story of Old,” 125-132.

suffering and death of Jesus. This prior narrative provides a storehouse of meaning on which Paul draws liberally in his letters. Hays suggests that the *dianoia* or theme of the gospel message in Galatians is embodied in the phrase "Jesus Christ crucified." This expression is said to comprise the essence of the intended recollection of the story of Jesus Christ, a phrase that "stands for the whole story and distills its meaning."⁹

But "Jesus Christ crucified" is not the only allusion that evokes the prior narrative. "Abba! Father!" belongs in this category too,¹⁰ and its significance in the overall argument of the letter may be as great as the phrase referring to the crucifixion of Christ. To assign pride of place to one or the other is not necessary; at this point, it is sufficient to accept the force of the underlying narrative assumption and to concur that "Paul's Christian instruction to gentile converts included some synopsis of Jesus' own life of obedient sonship to God, a synopsis complete with Aramaic soundbites."¹¹ The Aramaic sound bite, of course, is *Abba* in the phrase "Abba! Father!"

Either in connection with his preaching or on some other occasion, the cry "Abba! Father!" had been heard in the Galatian churches (Gal 4:6). With the Roman community, Paul could not fall back on shared memories, but he nevertheless assumes broad common ground, taking for granted that "Abba! Father!" was an important and meaningful expression to them as well. This is one reason to suppose that the phrase had a life independent of Paul, an integral part of the initiating gospel narrative, not only in *his* preaching. Granting this makes its use no less remarkable, whether the expression is examined from the point of view of its use in the churches or in the context of Paul's letters.

The Occasion for the Letter

The vehement and frequently exclamatory tone of the letter to the Galatians reflects Paul's perception of a crisis in the making. The Galatians are in the process of "deserting the one who called you" and "turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). Opponents have arrived on the scene with a message that has led to confusion as to the grounds for inclusion of Gentiles in the fellowship of faith (1:7). In Paul's eyes, the subversive ambassadors are selling flawed merchandise, a message so defective, in fact, that it has failed even those who were in the best position to make it succeed (2:15-16). Where the opponents seem to be speaking as though the issue is how to include new members in the "old" group, leaving the terms of the old group reasonably intact, Paul answers that "the truth of the gospel" requires a new set of terms (2:5), or at least a new understanding of the terms. The ongoing discussion is mirrored in Paul's

⁹Hays, 197.

¹⁰Cf. Richard B. Hays, "Crucified with Christ: A Synthesis of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Philippians, and Galatians," *SBL Seminar Papers 1988*, ed. David Lull, 324.

¹¹Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 62.

answer: "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?" (3:2). Circumcision, the opponents' sign of authenticity, clearly played no part in the Galatians' reception of the Spirit. Irreconcilable perceptions and incommensurable notions are clashing on this point, quite possibly justifying the translation, "Having started in the Spirit, are you now ending with a piece of severed human foreskin?" instead of the more dignified "ending with the flesh" (3:3).¹²

Paul counters his opponents in Galatia by a series of arguments that are probably less systematic than Betz makes it appear, arguing his case on the basis of the Galatians' prior experience (3:1-5), Scripture (3:6-14),¹³ human practice (3:15-18), the temporary function of the law (3:19-26),¹⁴ baptism (3:27-29), and their own exclamation, "Abba! Father!" (4:6). If there is a conscious design in Paul's logic, it might be that he draws ever larger circles as he proceeds, moving from the complex to the simple, from the rare to the familiar, and from the argumentative to the experiential. To the extent that inclusion of the Gentiles is the overriding concern, the cry "Abba! Father!" in the mouth of the Gentile believer pulls the rug from under any attempt to preserve the line of demarcation between the elect and those left on the fringes in the old paradigm. On this point, too, "Abba! Father!" is organic to the issue at hand and to Paul's theological and pastoral concern, and it is legitimate to read the phrase as the climax of his argument.¹⁵

The Meaning of "Abba! Father!"

Why would Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, a man who by his own admission would rather speak five words with his mind than "ten thousand words in a

¹²The plausibility of such a wording depends on what kind of rhetoric is thought to be at work, including a rather sarcastic connotation of "flesh"; cf. Martyn, 290-292.

¹³Martyn, 249-250, argues persuasively that the juristic language commonly attributed to Paul in Western translations should be adjusted in the direction of more relational usage. Thus, where the NRSV has "no one is justified before God by the law" (3:11), Martyn, 6, prefers "before God no one is rectified by the Law." The crucial point at issue, he, 250, suggests, "is that of God's *making right what has gone wrong*."

¹⁴Having noted Martyn's proposed attenuation of Paul's "justification" language, one's reading of Paul's argument in Galatians cannot ignore the calls for a similar revision in the perception of Paul's "faith" language away from the objective genitive reading of *pistis Christou* ("faith in Christ") to a subjective genitive reading "the faith of Christ," or "the faithfulness of Christ." In Galatians, this revision affects the translation of 2:16; 2:20, 3:22, yielding the possible wording "in order that the promise might be given by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to those who believe" (3:22b); cf. Morna D. Hooker, "ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ," *NTS* 35 (1989): 321-342; Martyn, 251; Sigve Tonstad, "πίστις Χριστοῦ: Reading Paul in A New Paradigm," *AUSS* 40 (2002): 37-59.

¹⁵Paul's letters do not necessarily follow a linear trajectory in which the conclusion comes at the end. He has theological, pastoral, and practical concerns in most of his letter. But the "Abba Father" expression in Galatians and Romans comes where the strands of theological exposition and practical exhortation meet.

tongue" (1 Cor 14:19), resort to the Aramaic word *Abba* in these letters?¹⁶ Why would he do so knowing that the majority of his readers were mostly of Gentile extraction? And what would be his reason for using this word in what by many criteria appears to be the end-point of his message? That the expression "Abba! Father!" is not an accident is clear from the fact that we find it in two of his most substantial letters and in parallel contexts in both instances. Moreover, the expression has the ring of familiarity, indicating that Paul is conjuring up an image, the significance of which would not be missed by his readers.

The evidence supports Joachim Jeremias's contention that the early Christian communities "used the cry '*Abba, ho patēr*' (Abba, Father) and considered this an utterance brought forth by the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ As noted, this phrase was current in the Pauline (Galatians) and the non-Pauline (Romans) communities alike, and, according to Jeremias, "there can be no doubt at all that this primitive Christian cry is an echo of Jesus' own praying."¹⁸ Some of Jeremias's other claims on behalf of this expression are less certain, but Ernest De Witt Burton also considered it likely that the Aramaic word originated with Jesus and became part of the early Christian experience through the telling of the passion story. These witnesses, writes Burton, "used this word with a sort of affectionate fondness for the term that Jesus had used to express an idea of capital importance in his teaching."¹⁹

The suggestion that "Abba! Father!" represents a vital idea to Jesus indicates that this view also carried over into the teaching of Paul and the experience of the Christian community. But what is the nature of this idea?

Its Use by Jesus

On the assumption that the use of this expression in Paul's letters overlaps with its use in the Gospel of Mark, as noted by Burton and others,²⁰ the search for

¹⁶In the absence of a deeper rationale, leaving "Abba" untranslated "is not very different from a devout Roman Catholic saying *Paternoster*, but Paul will not allow even one word of prayer in a foreign tongue without adding an instant translation" (J. Moulton, *A Grammar of the New Testament Greek*, vol. 1, *Prologomena* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 10.

¹⁷Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 18.

¹⁸Jeremias, 18. Some commentators, notably Ernst Käsemann (*Commentary on Romans* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1980], 228), disagree that Paul's use of the expression should be related to the one in Mark 14:36. Käsemann says that "naturally Jesus did not address God in two languages," a fact that is readily granted, but if Mark attempts to give the most authentic rendition of Jesus' prayer, then Αββα would be the word and not the Greek, ὁ πατήρ."

¹⁹Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1959), 224. According to Burton, a direct link to Jesus is "more probable than that it was taken over into the Christian vocabulary from that of the Jewish synagogue in which the idea of God as Father had so much less prominent place than in the thought and teaching of Jesus" (*Galatians*, 224).

²⁰Cf. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*

this motif must pay attention to Mark. In the Markan version, reflecting the tradition that likely gave rise to the expression, the trail leads to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. In his hour of supreme distress, Jesus exclaims: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want!" (Mark 14:36). Even though Jesus used the expression "Father" on many occasions in his prayers and discourses, this is the only instance where the Aramaic address is preserved. In the Markan context, Jesus is seen to be in a state of intense mental agony, and this connotation gives the phrase "Abba, Father" an intensifying quality. Noting that the setting is the preliminary stage to Jesus' crucifixion; "Abba, Father" is the phrase that recalls and distills the meaning of Jesus' Gethsemane experience, to use Hays's terminology. Most likely this background catapulted the expression into common usage among the early Christians. The allusive force of "Jesus Christ crucified" parallels that of "Abba, Father!" These terms are historically related in the early Christian narrative of Jesus and contextually intertwined in the letter to the Galatians.

Old Testament Background

As with many other terms in the Pauline correspondence, it is likely that this expression has an OT antecedent beyond the designation of God as Father in OT prayer language (Isa 63:16; Jer 3:4.19). Any search for such a corollary should take linguistic as well as thematic parallels into consideration. On these grounds, at least one scholar has found suggestive evidence for an allusion to the *Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22. According to Joseph Grassi,

there are indications to suggest that the meaning of *Abba* in Mark 14:36 is to be found in the light of its whole context and Gen 22. Jesus' final trial in Gethsemane appears to be modelled on the supreme trial of Abraham and Isaac. Despite the horror and anguish before the prospect of an imminent sacrificial death, Isaac calls Abraham his *Abba* and, as a faithful son, obeys the voice of God speaking through his father. Parallel to this, Jesus says *Abba* to God in the same way that Isaac does to Abraham. In this context, *Abba* has the meaning of "father" in the sense of a relationship to a devoted and obedient son.²¹

on the Epistle to the Romans, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 203. E. A. Obeng finds it quite plausible that "Abba" "was a distinctive characteristic of Jesus' own prayer; for it will be difficult to explain how the disciples and the early Christians would have dared to address God so intimately if Jesus had not used it and encouraged his disciples to use it as well" ("Abba, Father: The Prayer of the Sons of God," *ExpT* 99 [1988]: 364).

²¹Joseph A. Grassi, "'Abba, Father' (Mark 14:36): Another Approach," *JAAR* 50 (1982): 455. The subject of God as Father continues till the end of chap. 8 in Romans. In Paul's highly allusive language, Rom 8:32 also echoes Gen 22 and the *Akedah*. Speaking of God, Paul writes ὅς γε τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ οὐκ ἐφέλατο. Speaking of Abraham, the LXX says, καὶ οὐκ ἐφέλω τοῦ υἱοῦ σου τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ δι' ἐμὲ (Gen

Grassi's focus is primarily on the trust and obedience of the Son, but the trust of the son, whether Isaac or Jesus is in view, is predicated on the trustworthiness of the father in the respective narratives. It is important not to leave out the father's trustworthiness because it goes to the heart of the expression and because it is often left out. The force of the phrase in Paul's letters has little to do with a quality in the believer and everything to do with the quality of the person to whom it refers. Neither in Galatians nor in Romans is there any hint of distress on the part of the believer, aligning the phrase with the affective tenor of Isaac's unqualified confidence in his father. When Paul tells the Galatians that "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts," the cry of "the Spirit of his Son" is intended to convey a relation between the believer and the Father that is identical to the relation between the Father and the Son. As Douglas J. Moo notes perceptively, "in crying out 'Abba, Father,' the believer not only gives voice to his or her consciousness of belonging to God as his child but also to having a status comparable to that of Jesus himself."²² Not only has the believer become the adopted and obedient son of the Father, but he has also adopted Jesus' *view* of the Father.

Experiential Quality

While we cannot pinpoint with certainty how the expression "Abba! Father!" was used among the early Christians, the weight of evidence favors baptism.²³ In the context of baptism, the past experience of coming to faith in response to Paul's preaching (Galatians), the figurative dying and rising with Christ in the waters of baptism, and the indwelling of the Spirit all would come together in the sharply focused and deeply etched memory of the baptismal experience. On this basis, we are looking at a phrase that was familiar to Jewish and Gentile churches alike, and "Paul would only have had to allude to it, as he does in Galatians and Romans, and its full and profound significance would have registered immediately in the hearts of his readers, or hearers. They had all uttered it at their Baptisms, and had witnessed it frequently at the Baptism of others."²⁴ But even if the expression did not primarily belong in the context of

22:12.16). The verbal parallel seems intentional, especially the use of *φείδομαι* in both instances.

²²Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 502.

²³Cf. Betz, *Galatians*, 210; Obeng, 365; Martyn, 391. John A. T. Robinson sees the baptismal connection substantiated by a series of themes coming together, where "Abba! Father!" is invoked by Paul. This applies to the relationship between baptism and the Spirit and also to the notion of sonship. "In Gal 4:6 the correct translation should in all probability run: 'And to declare that ye are sons of God, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.' Christian Baptism simply reproduces in the life of the Christian the one Baptism of Jesus begun in Jordan and completed in the Resurrection" ("The One Baptism," *SJT* 6 [1953]: 262-263).

²⁴T. M. Taylor, "'Abba, Father' and Baptism," *SJT* 11 (1958): 70.

baptism,²⁵ its vividness and exclamatory nature would still furnish a treasure of shared experience that Paul uses to his advantage.

Theological Significance

"Abba! Father!" has a comprehensive scope in the theological vision of Galatians. Paul invokes the phrase as a representative metaphor for the relationship between God and the new Gentile believer, assuming that the Spirit-inspired cry has the ring of ultimacy and that inclusion of the Gentiles is a foregone conclusion. This view accords well with the immediate and remote context in Galatians and Romans alike. In both letters, Paul argues for the inclusion of the Gentiles on the basis of God's faithfulness (Gal 3:1-14; Rom 4:9-17). "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?" Paul asks rhetorically at one point, cognizant of the only possible answer within a theological outlook that is grounded in the conviction that God is truly "Abba, Father" for both groups (Rom 3:29). Favoritism and preferential treatment are explicitly repudiated because the God who is addressed as "Abba! Father!" shows no partiality (Rom 2:11). In Galatians and Romans, the theme of baptism is explicit, and the baptismal metaphor is part and parcel of the larger theme of dying and rising with Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3-11).²⁶ As Paul moves closer to the phrase under consideration here, the legal language of "righteousness by faith," as it has been understood traditionally, gives way to terminology that belongs in the category of "participation" (Gal 3:28-29; Rom 8:9-11). Along this route of mental travel, hallowed bastions of discrimination, distinction, and subservience must fall: "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Moving to the more immediate context, there is another striking change of metaphor as the participation theme finds expression in father-child language (Gal 4:1-7; Rom 8:14-17). "Abba! Father!" is the concluding statement in this sequence and the most sharply focused metaphor for the new relation.

The Revisionary Potential of "Abba! Father!"

On the basis of the foregoing, I suggest that the expression "Abba! Father!" has at least four potential consequences for the reading of Paul, each of which

²⁵Käsemann, 228, does not deny a connection to baptism, but considers it an acclamation with a confessional character that was not specifically baptismal. The element of exclamation is clear from the use of κράζειν, but neither the present active participle κράζον in Galatians nor the present active indicative κράζομεν in Romans is distinctive enough to decide whether "Abba Father" was used only on the specific occasion of baptism or in other connections as well. Joseph Fitzmyer concurs with interpreters who regard the *Abba* as an instance of *ipsissima vox Iesu*. He makes the point that although the phrase "could reflect *some* liturgical usage," Paul is not speaking of "a mere liturgical usage" (Romans, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 498).

²⁶Cf. Martyn, 391.

wields significant revisionary power. The first of these is to acknowledge that with the expression "Abba! Father!" Paul's emphasis is theocentric. This theocentric affirmation is not a peripheral issue, and its present recognition calls for a reassessment of the perceived theological priorities in Paul's letters. E. P. Sanders's assertion that from Paul "we learn nothing new or remarkable about God" overlooks important evidence to the contrary—as does the remark that "Paul did not spend his time reflecting on the nature of the deity."²⁷ Competing claims as to whether Paul's thrust is anthropological,²⁸ christocentric,²⁹ or soteriological in one direction or another³⁰ are likely to continue, but whatever the outcome of such debates the evidence suggests that Paul did, in fact, reflect on the nature of the Unseen, and his teaching has much to say about God that is new and highly remarkable. J. Christiaan Beker, who argues persuasively that Paul should be seen as "an apocalyptic theologian with a theocentric outlook,"³¹ makes an exception with respect to Galatians. This exception is unwarranted because Galatians too has a theocentric core.³² The prominent role of the phrase "Abba! Father!" in Galatians indicates that Paul sends his message on the same wavelength as in Romans, and the question of whether Paul is more christocentric than theocentric posits an unnecessary and misleading polarity.³³

²⁷E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 509. In fairness to Sanders, it must be admitted that he not only welcomed the testing of his assertion in the preparatory stages of this essay, but also predicted unsentimentally that his own assertion would fail.

²⁸Rudolf Bultmann, attempting to revitalize the Lutheran doctrine of justification in existentialist terms, put anthropology at the center of Paul's theology (*Theology of the New Testament* [New York: Scribner's, 1951], 1: 191). This once-so-daring proposition hardly represents a viable theological undertaking today.

²⁹Oscar Cullmann, though not commenting specifically on Paul, claims that "early Christian theology is almost exclusively Christology" (*The Christology of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959], 2-3).

³⁰Sanders, 502, has returned to Albert Schweitzer's emphasis that participation and dying with Christ stand at the center of Paul's thinking. Sanders concludes that "there should . . . be no doubt as to where the heart of Paul's theology lies. He is not primarily concerned with the juristic categories, although he works with them. The real bite of his theology lies in the participatory categories, *even though he himself did not distinguish them this way.*"

³¹J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle. The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 362.

³²What Beker, 58, wishes to deprive Galatians of is normative status in Pauline studies on the assumption that its Christocentric focus "pushes Paul's theocentric apocalyptic theme to the periphery." If this conclusion is deemed necessary because of the dearth of theocentric material in Galatians, a proper appreciation of the *Abba* perspective negates this need.

³³In Romans, the case for a theocentric reading has been argued by Sam K. Williams ("The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *JBL* 99 [1980]: 241-290). In Rom 8:32, Paul takes the message of "justification" to the ultimate source, θεός ὁ δικαίων.

The OT background of Habakkuk in Paul's message regarding the righteousness of God (Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17; 3:21-26), along with the matter of equal treatment of Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3:28; Rom 4:11-12), show that the unabashed God-centeredness of the expression "Abba! Father!" does not stand alone in these letters. It does, however, bring this emphasis to a pointed and emphatic climax.

The second revisionary element of the expression "Abba! Father!" is existential. In their prefaith state, the Galatians were in a state of enslavement "to the elemental spirits of the world" (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, Gal 4:3). A precise definition of these "elemental powers of the cosmos" has proved elusive, but the flavor is one of forces beyond the control of their subjects, a state of unpredictability and subservience from which human beings are unable to extricate themselves.³⁴ In view of the vagueness of the phrase, it is expedient to draw on the emotional and experiential corollary of the prefaith state described in Romans. There Paul says that "you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear" (Rom 8:15), highlighting fear as the most striking feature of their past experience. While it is likely that Paul is bending his terminology to fit the conceptual framework of his audience, the common denominator pictures people groping in the darkness of superstition and misapprehension of God. In fact, whatever the shape of the resultant enslavement in each cultural or individual instance, it converges broadly with the biblical narrative of the fall that ultimately conditions Paul's thinking. In the biblical perspective, *fear* describes the human condition historically, anthropologically, and existentially. As stated in the Genesis narrative, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid" (Gen 3:10). Paul's description of the prefaith state pictures human beings in a state of distress, subservient to capricious forces and deities (Gal 4:8). It is on the strength of the contrast between the prefaith state of subservience and fear and the present privilege of sonship that the full force of the exclamation "Abba! Father!" is best appreciated.³⁵

This may be seen as referring to God's agency, that is, "God is the one who sets things right," but it may be even more appropriate to read it in a qualitative sense, a testimony to the *kind* of Person God is. The flavor of the statement is then that "he is the kind of Person who makes things right." The emphasis is theocentric, and it is thematically related to the expression "Abba! Father!" in Rom 8:15. In the closing part of the letter, Paul refers to himself as a servant ὑπὲρ ἀληθείας θεοῦ (Rom 15:8), indicating once again that God is more than a peripheral concern in his message.

³⁴Martyn, 394-395, drawing on Bauer and other sources, lists four alternatives with regard to the meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου: "elements (of learning), fundamental principles"; "elemental substances, the basic elements from which everything in the natural world is made and of which it is composed"; "elementary spirits which the syncretistic religious tendencies of later antiquity associated with the physical elements"; and "heavenly bodies." He expresses preference for the second alternative. Whatever alternative is chosen, it should have the connotation of capriciousness, people living in a cosmos of powers that were beyond their comprehension or control.

³⁵S. Vernon McCasland suggests that Αββα ὁ πατήρ should simply be translated

This point deserves a further note because the fear that marks the beginning of human alienation from God is itself the result of a false picture of God. If fear in the Gentile experience relates to capricious deities and threatening cosmic forces, the existential crisis of Gentiles in Paul's day has not strayed far from the initiating encounter with evil in the biblical narrative. In an essay on Paul's narrative world, Edward Adams demonstrates that Paul in Rom 7 echoes the Genesis narrative of the fall.³⁶ According to Adams, "sin/the serpent found its opportunity in the commandment, exploiting God's decree to the primal pair to further its malicious ambitions."³⁷ The account in Genesis is generalized and made existential for a specific purpose in Romans, but it preserves a causal relationship that operates as much in the experience of the human condition in Paul's day as in the Genesis narrative. The capricious nature of the Unseen in the prefaith perception of reality is the corollary of the primal pair's acceptance of the charge that the Creator is an arbitrary and unreasonable despot (Gen 3:1). The Gentiles, "enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods" (Gal 4:8), are in this respect no worse off than human beings who take a distorted view of the Being who by nature *is* God. If capriciousness is the common attribute, there is little advantage to the God who is over the gods that are not. Fear would be the consequence of such misapprehension even of the true God. The privilege of the believer in Paul's Galatian narrative, having "come to know God" (Gal 4:9), is deliverance from subservience to a capricious deity, beginning with the elemental forces of the cosmos that are specified in Paul's letter.

"Abba! Father!" embodies a third revisionary potential that owes to its simplicity and clarity. In the Galatian context, the believers were initially stirred by Paul's preaching, entering into the believing fellowship through baptism. Subsequent to that a disturbance arose with the arrival of the "teachers" and their insistence that the new believers needed to be circumcised. Paul's effort to set the record straight in Galatians is a complex and tangled argument, perhaps making Galatians the best place to look for the roots of his reputation of "things hard to understand" in his letters (2 Pet 3:16).³⁸ Even if we grant that the Galatians were exceptionally interested and adept in matters relating to their faith, sitting at the edge of their chairs when Paul's letter was read, it is not

"O God, my Father" or "O God, our Father," holding that "Abba was a loan-word which no longer meant 'the Father' or 'my Father' in this idiom, but simply God. This made it possible to write 'Abba, Father' without being conscious of tautology" ("Abba, Father," *JBL* 72 [1953]: 90). Even a "minimalist" reading such as this one, however, preserves the essential element, that is, the believer's experience of God.

³⁶Edward Adams, "Paul's Story of God and Creation," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 19-43.

³⁷Adams, 28. ἡ γὰρ ἁμαρτία ἀφορμὴν λαβοῦσα διὰ τῆς ἐντολῆς ἐξηπάτησέν με in Rom 7:11 echoes ὁ ὄφις ἠπάτησέν με in Gen 3:13 (LXX).

³⁸Scholarly support for this early and "canonical" assessment of Paul is not hard to find.

likely that all the listeners grasped his arguments in every particular.³⁹ Perhaps not a few, tired from the day's hard work, found their thoughts drifting to more mundane subjects or struggled to stay awake when the messenger read the analogy about Abraham and of Paul's complex view of the law (Gal 3:6-14). If such people were among the initial hearers of Galatians and Romans—and there are clearly such hearers in our enlightened times—it is conceivable that they could only be needled back to the apostle's message by something relating to their experience, a word that had unmistakable recognition value because they had been there and because it was as unambiguous as anything was likely to get.

The expression "Abba, Father," charged with an exclamatory and experiential connotation,⁴⁰ answers to such a need. This phrase was familiar not just as a favorite theme of Paul, but also as a word from their experience. Moreover, even if nuances of the phrase eluded some, be they echoes from the OT or allusions to the prayer life of Jesus, it was for them and still is an expression that carries a reassuring and liberating connotation quite apart from any theological conditioning. In the context of the Galatian controversy, it is fair to claim that no element in their mental picture was more comprehensible than this one. Not unlike the many people who have climbed and are climbing the Pauline mountains and never make it to the top, there are believers who can only reach the top on the wings of a simpler metaphor. If such people were present in the Galatian or Roman congregations, this would be the solution for them. Indeed, if such readers of Paul exist today, one owes it to them to point out this option and work to restore to it its simplifying revisionary force theologically and experientially. Moreover, such a view is not a cop-out from tackling difficulties in Paul's letters. It is likely that Paul chose this metaphor chiefly because it was the most representative and adequate among the options available to him. Those who make it to the top of the mountain by this method are not cheating. "Abba! Father!" is the view from the top of the mountain, even for people who make it there by the more strenuous path of Paul's complex arguments and logic.⁴¹

³⁹In connection with the growing interest in Paul's use of the OT, Christopher D. Stanley asks how much new believers understood of Paul's theology ("'Pearls Before Swine': Did Paul's Audiences Understand His Biblical Quotations?" *NovT* 41 [1999]: 124-144). The literacy rate was low, books as we know them today did not exist, and knowledge of the OT was probably quite limited. Did people understand Paul's OT quotations? Did they grasp the more subtle allusions and echoes? Stanley believes that modern expositors are too sanguine with regard to the literary sophistication of the Gentile converts, a possibility that raises the significance of "Abba! Father!" as an element of an appropriated faith to an even higher level.

⁴⁰James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, BNTC (London: A. & C. Black, 1993), 221.

⁴¹To Burton, 223, the full significance of Paul's view, exchanging legal language for the language of family relations, belonged to this metaphor "precisely in the fact that . . . a truly filial relation and attitude of man to God shall displace the legal relation that

The fourth revisionary element in this phrase depends on maintaining its cognitive valence. Jeremias's widely accepted contention that the word *Abba* "surely originated from the idiom of the small child"⁴² and thus might be read as an equivalent of the English "*Daddy*" has not held up under closer scrutiny. On his review of the evidence, James Barr counters that there is no linguistic basis for this argument, and that Jeremias based his view on mostly assumptive evidence. To Barr, "the nuance of 'Abba' was not at all the nuance of childish prattle, but the nuance of solemn and responsible adult speech."⁴³ This cognitive valence has gone unrecognized and unappreciated and may be one of the main reasons why "Abba! Father!" has not received the attention it deserves. It is neither the emotional aspect nor the element of primitive speech that should serve as one's point of reference. The Gentiles' enslavement to "the elemental forces of the cosmos" should be seen as ignorance of the truth, not only as a state of powerlessness relative to an otherwise clear view of reality. In his discussion of the Jewish predicament, Paul chose to characterize it also as "ignorance" (Rom 10:3). Against this background, it is easier to appreciate why it matters to preserve the understanding of "Abba! Father!" as mature, intelligent speech. Readings that emphasize the primitive or the intimate at the expense of the cognitive are distortions, whether considered in the light of the expression itself or in the wider context of Paul's thought.⁴⁴ Antecedents to the

law creates, that instead of looking upon God as lawgiver in the spirit of bondage and fear (Rom 8:15) he becomes to us Father with whom we live in fellowship as his sons." C. E. B. Cranfield is no less expansive as to the meaning of this expression: "The implication of this verse understood in its context is that it is in the believers' calling God 'Father' that God's holy law is established and its 'righteous requirement' (v. 4) fulfilled, and that the whole of Christian obedience is included in this calling God 'Father'" (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 184). Longenecker, 174, writes that "the content of the cry or acclamation epitomizes the believer's new relationship with God: 'Father.'"

⁴²Jeremias, 21.

⁴³James Barr, "'Abba, Father' and the Familiarity of Jesus' Speech," *Theology* 91 (1988): 179. In a related and more in-depth article ("'Abba' Isn't 'Daddy,'" *JTS* 39 [1988], 28-47), Barr questions a series of Jeremias's most popular assumptions. As to the origin of the form "*abba*," Barr lists the options that have been suggested: that the word is Aramaic in the "emphatic state," i.e., that the -a ending corresponds to the definite article in Hebrew, and that this form gradually came to take the meaning of the first person singular "my father"; a "vocative" explanation, meaning that the word is derived from children's speech; and the "babbling sound" explanation, a *Lallwort*, from the most primitive speech of infants. Barr shows that the word "*abba*" was used by adults in adult speech, that there is no evidence that it was derived from the speech of small children, and thus the "Daddy" connotation is invalid, and finally, that its origin could be Hebrew rather than Aramaic.

⁴⁴Intimacy was also possible in the Jewish religious experience. According to Sanders, 222, "it thus appears that at the very heart of the Rabbis' supposed legalism is the feeling of intimate contact with God."

use of *Abba* in Paul's letters are replete with cognitive overtones; the binding of Isaac or the surrender of Jesus to the Father's will in Gethsemane become caricatures unless they are seen as examples of trust that is based on insight and confidence in the person in whom one's trust is placed. Such insight also goes to the heart of the experience of the believer and is reflected in the utterance, disclosing the core value of his or her faith. If, in an adapted version of the language categories of Wittgenstein, in which language I is the language of relationships, language II the language of information, and language III the language of motivation, then "Abba! Father!" clearly belongs in the category of First Language, the language of intimacy, relationships, and prayer.⁴⁵ But its notion of intimacy is, in this context, predicated on understanding.

Conclusion

I conclude that the expression "Abba! Father!" holds a reserve of revisionary power with respect to the theological priorities in Paul's letters. This applies to the center of Paul's theology, to his understanding of the ultimate basis for the inclusion of the Gentiles, and to his conviction that the God who is addressed as *Abba* is a Being who "shows no partiality" (Rom 2:11). Above all, this expression speaks to the challenge of appropriating Paul's message, offering welcome relief to readers who find in his letters "things hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16). Something along these lines must have been the view of Alfred Loisy, who long ago wrote that Paul "succeeded in drawing out of the invocation 'O Father', his entire theory of salvation."⁴⁶

⁴⁵Eugene H. Peterson, "First Language," *Theology Today* 42 (1985): 211-214. A comparative-religions' evaluation of the expression "Abba Father" has not been attempted here. Sanders, 549, has hinted at its direction, but anticipates limitations and results that most likely would be quite different if his view that Paul has "nothing new to say about God" turns out to be exaggerated.

⁴⁶Alfred Loisy, *L'Épître aux Galates* (Paris: Nourry, 1916), 166.