

God the Father in the Old Testament

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SUMMARY

While the idea of God being the Father dominates New Testament studies in relation to Jesus and the followers of Jesus, the Father-God motif rooted in the Old Testament and prominent in the second temple period has received insufficient attention. The concept of God the Father is a broad category but in the Old Testament it is closely

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RÉSUMÉ

Le thème de la paternité divine – à la fois Dieu comme Père de Jésus et comme Père des disciples de Jésus – occupe une place importante dans les études théologiques du Nouveau Testament. En revanche, on s'est trop peu intéressé au motif du Dieu Père qui trouve ses racines dans l'Ancien Testament et a connu des développements importants à l'époque du second temple. Le concept de Dieu comme Père est une catégorie sus-

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Während die Vorstellung von Gott als Vater die neutestamentlichen Studien über Jesus und seine Nachfolger dominiert, hat das Vatermotiv Gottes, welches im Alten Testament verwurzelt ist und in der Epoche des zweiten Tempels vorherrscht, noch nicht genügend Aufmerksamkeit gefunden. Das Konzept von Gott als Vater stellt eine weit gefasste Kategorie dar, doch im Alten Testament ist diese Vorstellung eng mit Israel verknüpft. Als Gott Israel

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1. Introduction

Emphasizing the significance of the idea of the fatherhood of God in the Old Testament, David Tasker writes:

Although theologians have written about God the Father for centuries, the endeavour has been largely Christological, rather than a focus on the Father-God motif. Therefore there has been little apparent progress in understanding the concept.¹

related to Israel. When God redeems Israel out of Egypt, he becomes like a Father to it and Israel becomes his son (Exodus 4:22). Thus, for Israel the fatherhood of God is linked to its redemption by God. This relationship began through God's initiative and with the purpose that they will serve and obey God – yet Israel is often unfaithful to him. God is also seen as the Father of the human kings of Israel.

ceptible de recouvrir un large champ mais, dans l'Ancien Testament, il intervient en rapport étroit avec Israël. Lorsque Dieu libère Israël de l'esclavage en Égypte, il devient comme un père pour ce peuple et Israël devient son fils (Ex 4.22). Ainsi, la paternité divine est liée pour Israël à sa rédemption par Dieu. Cette relation a été instaurée à l'initiative divine et dans le but que les Israélites rendent un culte à Dieu et lui obéissent – et néanmoins Israël lui a souvent été infidèle. Dieu est aussi considéré comme le Père du roi humain d'Israël.

aus Ägypten herausrettet, wird er quasi zum Vater für das Volk, und Israel wird sein Sohn (Exodus 4:22). Somit verbindet sich für Israel die Vaterschaft Gottes mit der Befreiung des Volkes durch ihn. Gott hat diese Beziehung durch seine Initiative ins Leben gerufen mit dem Zweck, dass Israel Gott dient und ihm gehorcht, doch oft sind sie ihm untreu. Ebenso wird Gott als der Vater der Könige Israels angesehen.

There are sixteen instances in which God is designated as Father in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 32:5
 2 Samuel 7:14
 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; 29:10
 Psalm 68:5; 89:26; 103:13
 Proverbs 3:12
 Jeremiah 3:4-5, 7-8; 31:9
 Isaiah 63:16 [twice]; 64:8

Maleachi 1:6; 2:10.²

However, the number of references alone can obscure the prominence of the idea in the Old Testament: It can be present without the word father being used. Some further passages consider the relationship between God and Israel as a Father-son relationship in which God acts as a loving Father (Ex 4:22; Deut 14:1; Isa 45:11; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1). The idea of God being the Father also emerges in the personal names of the Israelites (e.g. 1 Sam 8:2; 2 Sam 8:16).³ When God calls Israel out of slavery he becomes like a Father to it and Israel becomes his son (Ex 4:22). God liberates and stands for his people Israel, rescuing them from their woes, thus being their Father and Redeemer (Isa 63:16).⁴ As far as Israel is concerned, the fatherhood of God is linked to its redemption. This paper examines the Old Testament with a specific question in mind: How is the idea God the Father related to God's redemptive purposes?

2. Father as Redeemer of the whole nation of Israel

Chris Wright notes that the concept of God being the Father of his people Israel is 'far from lacking in their theological repertoire'.⁵ God is described as the Father of the whole nation of Israel. In Exodus 4 God calls Israel his son with the intention to redeem Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. In his instruction to Moses God says,

Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, so I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'' (Ex 4:22-23).

This implicit reference to God the Father occurs in the context of the particular historical event of the exodus, the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. John Durham vividly says that in God's request to let his son go to worship his divine Father there is a 'glimmer of the exodus itself'.⁶ Although the whole earth belongs to God (Ex 19:5) he has chosen Israel for a special relationship with himself; Israel belongs to God as his son whom he rescues from slavery. This distinctive relationship between God and Israel, based on God's redeeming them out of Egypt, remains an important subject throughout the Book of Exodus (Ex 6:5-6; 15:12-13; 19:4; 20:2; 33:1). The relationship between Israel and God is sealed by the covenant into which God enters with Israel as his children (chapters 19-24).

The same idea appears in Deuteronomy where God is also depicted as the Father who redeems his son Israel and carries him in the wilderness 'as a father carries his son' (Deut 1:31). The exodus motif is certainly present in Deuteronomy 32 where Moses describes God as a Father who finds his people in the desert (verse 10) and leads them out (verse 12).⁷ Psalm 68 pictures God's fatherhood in terms of provision for and defence of the needy; as McCann recognises, the language of exodus is used for the description (verses 4-6).⁸ The Psalm also mentions wilderness, the Sinai and the possession of the land, and it uses the word 'heritage' to designate the land or the people (verses 7-9; cf. Deut 32:10). The needy ones here are Israelites and the provision God made for his people is his care for them in the wilderness. Thus, the idea of God being the Father is once again connected with the exodus motif.

Prior to the exodus, the Israelites cried out to God because of their slavery (Ex 2:23). The word used here for service or slavery is the same as the word for service and worship of God (*abad*).⁹ When God liberates Israel, he points out that their destiny is to be free from slavery for the purpose of serving him who is implicitly their Father. God redeems Israel and calls his people to worship and serve himself (Deut 10:20). They are to be devoted to their God for they are redeemed ones of God (cf. Lev 25:38, 42-43, 55; Ps 107:2; Isa 62:12). Accordingly, this redemption implies more than just the redemption of slaves from Egypt. The redemption is 'emancipation and restoration of the enslaved to wholeness in relation to God'¹⁰ who is implicitly the Father of Israel. Before the exodus they were slaves or aliens in Egypt (Deut 10:18-19) – now they are God's son or God's sons (Deut 14:1-2; Isa 1:2) with the intention that they serve him. In something like 'a formula of adoption'¹¹ Israel becomes the firstborn son of God; no longer a slave. God's redemption of Israel sets the parameters for Israel's identity in relationship to God who becomes their Father.

God's redemption of his son Israel is also linked to creation language. In Deuteronomy Moses reminds Israel that God has redeemed them but that they have acted wickedly toward him although they were his children: 'Is he not your Father, who created you, who made you and established you?' (Deut 32:5-6; cf. Mal 2:10). Israel belongs to God the Father because God created and established it. The language of creating and establishing Israel is not meant to be taken in any physical or natural

sense. God is not the progenitor but the establisher of Israel as a nation and at the same time their liberator.¹² This concept is grounded in divine election. God calls his people out, making them his own, adopting them for the purpose of serving the LORD. He alone is the initiator of the relationship with them.

A similar idea is present in Isaiah 64:7-8: Israel is the work of God's hands. As their Father, Redeemer (cf. Isa 63:16) and potter (the same root as God forming Adam in Gen 2:7)¹³ God has the right and is able to shape Israel's destiny and not to remember their sins. We see that the creation language broadens the scope of God's fatherhood and his redeeming activity. Tasker believes that both the legitimacy and the possibility of God's fatherhood arise from his being Creator.¹⁴ One can conclude that God's redeeming activity is both creative in nature and founded upon the fact that he created Israel.

When God redeems Israel, he calls it his firstborn son (Ex 4:22; Jer 31:9). Regardless of whether this means that other nations are also God's sons,¹⁵ the emphasis is on Israel being the firstborn son when God redeems them. Israel has a clear family relationship with God who takes care of them and leads them out of slavery. Moreover, their identity as the firstborn son is also connected with the idea that Israel is God's heir or God's inheritance. Israel as God's inheritance and his special portion is affirmed in Deuteronomy:

You are children of the LORD your God... you are a people holy to the LORD your God; it is you the LORD has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deut 14:1-2; cf. 32:9)

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy the fact that Israel is God's inheritance is expressed in contrast to the other nations, underscoring the prerogatives which God grants to Israel and which he promised to their forefathers even before the exodus (Deut 7:7-9; 9:5; cf. Ex 19:5-6).

The author of Deuteronomy further expands the idea of God's affection for Israel and his call of them. It is not because of Israel's righteousness but because of God's righteousness and faithfulness to Israel and because of the wickedness of other nations that God called them:

It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will

drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deut 9:5; cf. 7:9)

The land that is in view is of course the land of Canaan (Deut 1:38; 4:21; 4:38; 12:10; 16:20; 25:19-26:1). The land is also the goal of the exodus. God now wants to accomplish what he had already promised to the patriarchs.

But although Israel holds possession of the land, it is only an alien or tenant in it (Lev 25:23; Jer 2:7; Hos 9:3; cf. Gen 17:8). The prophets warn that Israel's unfaithfulness to God would lead to exile and the loss of the land (e.g. Jer 7:1-15; Amos 3:11; 7:11). The land continues to be the LORD's and he can take it back if people become faithless. It is not the land itself but its theological meaning as God's promise and as an expression of the continuing relationship between God the Father and his people which has the greater significance for this discussion.¹⁶ This explains why the tribe of Levi has no share in the land, for their inheritance is the LORD himself (Deut 10:9; 12:12; Num 18:20-24). It also explains the Israelite custom to reflect their status as redeemed before God in the consecration of the firstborn males of every womb to God (Ex 21:29-30).¹⁷

The relationship between God and Israel as that between Father and son came into being through God's initiative and for God's purpose. That purpose is that they will serve and obey God. The important issue of this relationship is Israel's obedience to God as part of their belonging to God (Ex 19:4-6). God's chosen son is entrusted with the responsibilities of proper response and obedience to him. Israel's obedience and following of God's commandments are part of their covenant responsibility to him (Ex 19:4-6). Obedience is the major element of the covenant between God and his people in Deuteronomy. The author of Deuteronomy also refers to the true obedience to God as circumcision of their hearts (Deut 10:16); in the words of Peter Craigie, this metaphor describes the requirement that they would show 'a wholehearted commitment in love, from which all other proper behaviour stemmed'.¹⁸

Israel is also to manifest God's steadfast love to those who respond properly to God by loving him and obeying his commandments (Ex 20:6; cf. Deut 5:10). The Book of Exodus combines the imperative of how Israel must behave with the promise of what Israel will be among the rest of the nations.¹⁹ God reminds them to follow his

ways, all of his commandments, in order to extend the experience of his redeeming activity towards aliens and strangers. After all, they themselves were once aliens and strangers (Deut 10:19; 24:19-22; cf. Lev 19:34). God's desire is that his name will be proclaimed in all the earth (Ex 9:16). In Deuteronomy God says that he wants Israel to be a model for the other nations so that they may see the greatness and nearness of God in them (Deut 4:6-8; cf. Gen 12:1-3). In Isaiah too God's faithfulness to Israel is a demonstration of his redeeming plans in sight of all the nations:

The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:10; cf. Isa 19:24-25; 51:4-5)

Isaiah recalls that God's intention in making Israel his chosen son was not for the sake of Israel only. Israel is to be 'the light of the nations' (42:6). The role given to Israel has universal implications.

If they do not obey or if they act corruptly toward God, they are not his children (Deut 32:5-6). But God is still their Father; Israel's unfaithfulness cannot eliminate God's faithfulness (cf. Deut 32:35-42). Psalm 103:9-13 declares,

He will not always accuse... great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed.

The psalm knows the compassion of God which is like that of a father and the unwillingness of God to remain forever angry at his people who committed sins. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love (Ps 103:8), which recalls Exodus 34:6-7.²⁰ The psalm depicts a loving and forgiving God who takes care of his people through an allusion to the exodus when God carried Israel like a father (cf. Deut 1:31). In spite of Israel's transgressions (cf. Ex 32-34) God continually shows his steadfast love and righteousness (Ps 103:6, 17). God's fatherly compassion or mercy²¹ in forgiving sins is mentioned, though, in connection with those who fear him or those who are obedient to him (Ps 103:18; 30:5; allusions to Deut 1:31; Num 11:11-12). The psalm presents the tension between God's instruction to be righteous and just on the one hand and on the other hand the fact that he is committed to a relationship with his people, loves them like a loving father and like a compassionate mother (cf. Isa 49:15). He

especially loves those who obey him. How exactly God stays faithful to Israel in spite of its faithlessness and how he would bring them back to obedience are questions for further consideration below.

3. Father of the king and his offspring

While the major event of the exodus established God's fatherhood and redemption of Israel as a nation, God as Father also continues to relate to certain individuals within the nation of Israel, especially to king David and his offspring (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 2; 89:26-27; Prov 3:11-12). The relationship between God and the king is described as the relationship between Father and son. In 2 Samuel 7:14-15 the LORD declares with reference to king David's offspring, 'I will be his father, and he will be my son... my faithful love will never be taken away from him.' In 1 Chronicles 17:10-14 the idea of 2 Samuel 7 is recapitulated with the divine purpose for David and his offspring. Solomon stands alongside David as elected by God (1 Chr 22:8-10). In Psalm 89:26-27 God is as a Father to the king and his descendants; they cry to God: 'You are my Father.' It is plausible that in this passage David's designation as God's son and firstborn (2 Sam 7:14; cf. Ps 2:6-7; 89:27) legitimises him as Israel's representative, as the embodiment of God's covenant people, who is also called his 'son' and 'firstborn' (Ex 4:22). When Israel becomes a monarchy out of the sinful desire to be like the other nations, God appoints them a king (1 Sam 8:5) but this king is supposed to exercise a different sort of kingship from that of the surrounding nations. Their king is 'limited by the character of God as revealed in his law'.²² So when the king disobeys the commandments of God, God rejects him from his role as king (1 Sam 13:13-14). A. Coppedge aptly writes, 'From God's perspective a king in Israel is the representative of God and not his replacement.'²³

The king and the people under him must follow the LORD their God (1 Sam 12:14-15) and be obedient to him (1 Chr 28:21). The king is to represent God's lordship (1 Chr 28:5) and to carry out his commands (1 Chr 28:7). Both the king and the entire nation have the responsibility to obey God. In this regard Chris Wright argues that the king of Israel is not 'a *super-Israelite*' but 'a *model Israelite*' who sets the example of what it means to be an obedient son of God.²⁴ Both the king and the whole nation under his dominion must serve God with the implication that they will be a 'vis-

ible model to other nations' (cf. Deut 4:6-8).²⁵ The same idea appears in Psalm 2 where God has a Father-son relationship with the king, defeats his enemies, makes him a great king in the world, and thus makes him a witness to God's purposes. John Goldingay also sees here a form of fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that is expressed in blessings for Abraham and 'all people who covet such blessings and in curses for who would belittle him' (cf. Gen 12:1-2).²⁶ Thus, although the application of the word 'son' to the king seems to shift the focus from God as the Father of all Israel to God as the Father of one individual, the corporate element of God's fatherhood remains, insofar as the king serves as the head and representative of the people.²⁷ Thus, God remains the Father of Israel who redeems them and who takes care of his children, because he continues to have a covenant relationship with the whole of Israel even through their king (Ps 89:3-4).

Although Saul was the first king, God adopts and marks out not him but king David as his son (2 Sam 7:14), his special agent and a shepherd of God's people:

I have given help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. (Ps 89:19-20; cf. Ezek 34:1-10)

God may chastise his son David but he will never cast him off as he did with Saul (2 Sam 7:14-15; cf. Prov 3:11-12). In Psalm 2:7 the king is addressed as 'my son' and the text refers to God's 'begetting' the king. The language of 'begetting' is the same as in the case of the whole nation (Deut 32:6). God adopts the king and enters into a family relationship with him so that God can continuously work with him and through him with the whole nation. Perhaps the emphasis on the significance of the Davidic kings as God's chosen ones was aimed 'at those circles which may have questioned the dynastic succession as well as the legitimacy of the house of David'.²⁸ Nathan's oracle that the Davidic kingdom would endure forever before God (2 Sam 7:15-16) retains its relevance for future generations.²⁹ Jeremiah says that God will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land (Jer 23:5-6). Thus the Davidic dynasty has a particular significance in God's relationship with his people.

In reality, however, the monarchy failed to accomplish its purpose. This might lead us to

assume that God's plan with the king failed. Why then does he promise an everlasting dynasty extending from David to secure a future of promise to Israel (2 Sam 7:5-16; 1 Chr 17:13)? The language of the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, clearly expresses God's faithfulness, love and covenant which will never fail. Thus the idea of God's continuous work through the royal dynasty and his promise to the patriarchs, and thereby the concept of the monarchy, are affirmed.³⁰ For example, Psalm 89 celebrates the promise given to David, his sonship and his responsibilities as son (89:26-37). The emphasis in this psalm is on the eternity of God's promise (Ps 89:28-29; 36-37). The psalm explicitly mentions God's promise as a covenant (Ps 89:3, 28, 34, 39). It mentions God's steadfast love which also occurs in 2 Samuel 7 and his faithfulness (which is Deuteronomical language) to the Davidic dynasty. This underlines God's enduring rule through this line.³¹ In Psalm 2 God affirms his ongoing relationship with the king with the implication that he will have dominion over the nations (verses 8-9). At the same time, Psalm 89 pictures the destruction of the kingdom, the exile of people and the end of the Davidic line:

But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one. You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust. (verses 38-39)

This language reflects the experience of exile and its aftermath. McCann, analysing the psalm, points out that it probably reflects 'the process of re-evaluation that led to an eschatological understanding of God's reign... and the expectations of an anointed one (messiah)'.³² Even within the Old Testament, Psalm 89 and Psalm 2, according to Chris Wright, may have had messianic overtones pointing to the one like the son of David who would fulfil the expectations of reigning in justice and peace not only over Israel but over the other nations.³³ In this way God will continue to act through his son, the king (cf. Jer 23:5). Goldingay doubts the eschatological understanding of Psalm 89. However, outside the Psalter he does see affirmations of God's commitment to the Davidic line in Jeremiah 23:5-6 and Isaiah 55:3-5.³⁴ In any case, both psalms and these two prophetic passages point to God's commitment to the Davidic dynasty, to Israel and to God's reigning in the world. The impression is that God the Father will provide the glorious future through the descend-

ant of David. The prophetic writings may bring further insight into the idea of God the Father and his redeeming purpose.

4. God as a faithful Father in renewal

So far we have seen that the idea of God being the Father of Israel and of the Davidic kings is very important in the Old Testament. The idea that God redeems the king does not appear but the language of God electing and adopting the king and keeping a covenant relationship with him is present. Through the king as representative of Israel God relates to the whole people (Ps 2 and 89). God, the Father who redeems Israel, continues to take care of his people by appointing a king who has to lead Israel in obedience to him. But how will God as Father continue to lead Israel in spite of their unfaithfulness? And how is he going to remain committed to the king and through the king? These are questions that still need our attention.

In the prophetic writings Isaiah explicitly connects the idea of God ‘our Father’ with ‘our Redeemer’ (Isa 63:16). Earlier, in Isaiah 51:10, the prophet mentions that Israel has been delivered from Egypt. Although there the prophet does not explicitly speak in terms of a Father-son relationship, he still uses the language of begetting and possession of Israel, saying,

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isa 43:1; cf. Deut 32:6)

In chapter 63 the prophet lists God’s actions in the past history of Israel. The precise events are not specified but, as J. Watts recognises, they can be both the exodus and the events of Sinai.³⁵ God dealt with Israel with greatness, compassion and with covenant loyalty (Isa 63:7). Isaiah uses the language of redemption to describe that God by his love and pity redeemed, lifted and carried Israel (63:9), that he became their Saviour (63:8) and that he led them in the wilderness (64:13-14). He also implies God’s fatherhood when he calls them God’s children and his people (63:8, 11). Finally, in 63:16 Isaiah summarises who God is for Israel: he is the Father and Redeemer. The importance of these words is that if Isaiah has in mind God’s action in more than just the exodus event, then the idea of God being the Father who also redeems is

affirmed across the intervening centuries.

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah recalls the time when God delivered Israel out of Egypt, when he cared for them (31:1-6). Jeremiah implies that the appeal for mercy to God the Father reflects Israel’s tradition and their history that constantly illustrates God’s election and the redemption of Israel out of Egypt (Jer 31). Hosea also remembers the exodus: when God brought Israel out of Egypt he treated it like a child (11:1). Hosea uses the beautiful metaphor of a ‘father’ treating his ‘child’ with love to represent the relationship of God and Israel (11:1-3).³⁶

The Old Testament refers to God the Father who redeemed Israel and to Israel as God’s son who disobeyed their Father. The disobedience of Israel is a major theme in Deuteronomy. Moses accuses Israel of having forgotten the fact that God is faithful and cares for his children (Deut 32:4-5). He is their Father who created or formed them (Deut 32:6) – which recalls the language of God becoming their Father and Redeemer. Yet they behave so corruptly that they can no longer be called his children (Deut 32:5). Likewise Jeremiah declares that in spite of the fact that Israel was elected and placed among the sons of God, given an inheritance and patrimony among the nations, and came to call God ‘Father’, these privileged sons committed apostasy and became faithless (Jer 3:3, 19-20). Instead of addressing God the Father who redeemed them out of Egypt (cf. Deut 32), they mischievously call objects their father and worship Canaanite idols:³⁷

They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, ‘Come and save us!’ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah. Why do you bring charges against me? (Jer 2:27-29)

In similar vein in Malachi God is presented as a Father who merits honour, obedience and ongoing response but does not receive them:

A son honours his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honour due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me? (Mal 1:6)

Malachi’s narrative discusses Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, reminding them that God establishes Israel:

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors? (Mal 2:10; cf. Deut 32:6; Isa 64:8)

In his narrative Malachi condemns the Israelites' marriages with foreign women who do not have the same father/creator.³⁸ This is a breakdown of the mutuality within the community that inevitably leads to idolatry. Malachi interprets being faithless towards one another in terms of being faithless to God the Father who formed them. The thought that Israel has become unfaithful to God is also emphasised in Hosea (11:2; 13:13).

In spite of the theme of Israel's disobedience there is a certain hope for restoration and new life if people return to God their Father. Deuteronomy brings assurance of God's care for Israel and of Israel's triumph among the nations (Deut 32:36-38). Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all attest to a future beyond the end of Israel's disobedience and punishment. Isaiah understands the release from the Babylonian captivity as a new exodus and he uses the concept of God the Redeemer to describe it (for example Isa 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 48:20-21; 49:7; 59:20). The exiles call upon God as Father in their present distress and they hope for a new redemption and a return to the land (Isa 63:16). Isaiah conveys the idea that redemption has to do with restoring the relationship between God and Israel (Isa 43:1-7). He connects God's redeeming action in the return from exile with the forgiveness of Israel's sin and the removal of the effects of its sinfulness (Isa 43:25; 40:1-11). On the basis of God being their Father (Isa 64:8) his people ask God not to remember their sins (Isa 64:9). The Father who created them³⁹ is taking care of them. They call upon God's mercy and upon the forgiveness of the Father. Like Jeremiah, Isaiah pictures Israel's rescue from punishment with the image of a father's forgiving love (Isa 64; cf. Jer 31:8-9). John Oswalt points out that in Isaiah God is not only 'our Father' but that his name, his reputation is inseparably tied to him being 'our Redeemer' from ancient times. This is the God who has been known to Israel.⁴⁰ For this reason God cannot afford to let his son go unredeemed or be held in the bondage of their own sin and unrighteousness. Isaiah's hope for the future restoration of Israel may not be for the whole of Israel, but for the remnant of the righteous within Israel; the survivors of the house of Jacob will be saved (Isa 10:20-22; cf. 1 Kgs 19:10-18; Jer

31:7). God's faithfulness toward Israel in Isaiah is a demonstration of his redeeming plans in view of all the nations: 'The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God' (Isa 52:10; cf. 19:24-25; 51:4-5).

Isaiah also recalls that God's purpose in making Israel his chosen son was not the interest of Israel only. Israel is to be 'the light of the nations' (Isa 42:6). Moreover, the idea of God gathering others who are not his is clearly in the writer's mind (Isa 56:1-8; cf. Deut 32:21; Mal 1:11). Isaiah also says that God will bless other nations (Isa 19:25). In 65:1 Isaiah reinforces the same idea when he says that God will reveal himself to those who did not seek him or call on his name before. The overall context though, suggests that God actively offered himself to his people but they constantly disobeyed him. Thus their problems are not the result of God's failure to listen to them but of their rebellion.⁴¹ The prophet shows God's initiative in calling his people and his continuous concern and expectation for his people to come back to him who is the Father (Isa 65:1-8). He concludes that God will be revealed to the nations through his redeemed people (Isa 66:18-24). So we see that in Isaiah God's fatherhood and his role as Redeemer are implicitly linked with the history of Israel, starting with his saving them out of Egypt and then out of Babylon, their disobedience and God's persistent calling to repentance. Other connected ideas are that of the remnant and of Israel being a light to other nations, and, finally, God's revelation to the nations through his redeemed people.

While in Jeremiah 3:19 the prophet laments the people's idolatry in the name of God and expresses God's disappointment about his children's unfaithfulness, he also describes God's desire to restore the people in the intimate relationship with himself. This relationship is suggested by the familiar image of a father and a son:

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.

Jeremiah develops the theme of God's restoration as another glorious exodus in a way which is similar to Isaiah's new exodus motif (Isa 35; 40:3-5; 41:18-20; 42:16). Jeremiah expects the new covenant and he describes Israel's restoration as an act of God as Father that transcends the exodus

from Egypt in every way. As Thompson notices, Jeremiah's words are reminiscent of the second part of Isaiah, in which the return from captivity in Babylon is depicted:⁴²

They will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son. (Jer 31:9; cf. Ex 4:22-23)

The idea of Israel as firstborn son and God as their Father is very important here and it evokes God's leading of Israel, his son, in the time of exodus. Now he will renew with Israel 'the same fatherly love he displayed in centuries past'.⁴³

A similar theme can be found in Hosea. Although this prophet does not explicitly speak of God as Father, he does speak of Israel as God's child who, in spite of all God's compassion, love and mercy, refuses to obey God (Hos 11:1-8). Hosea continues to articulate the mercifulness of God, the Father of Israel, who redeemed them out of slavery (11:1) and protected them in the wilderness (9:10; 11:3-4). Hosea especially claims that God will renew his relationship with his people. He writes that God would make his own people those who were not his own before,

I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people', 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.' (Hos 2:23; cf. Isa 65:1)

The Deuteronomic language of God's special relationship to Israel ('they will be mine' and 'my special possession') reappears in Hosea (1:10; 2:23) where it applies to the Israelites who are scattered around in the world of pagan religions and being influenced by them.⁴⁴ Hosea condemns the people's idolatry, proclaiming God's covenantal love for Israel and summoning the people to repentance and return to God (2:8, 18-19). He brings the message of hope that God will renew the covenant that was broken by Israel's infidelity. They will again become children of the living God (1:7, 10).

Eschatological expectations in Malachi also reflect later prophetic ideas:

They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once again you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve. (Mal 3:17-18)

The Deuteronomic language here operates on a different level. The words 'They will be mine' and 'my special possession' are not applied to all Israel but only to the righteous part that continues to serve God (cf. Mic 7:18; Isa 10:20-22; Hos 2:23). They will be his special possession. (Note the language of inheritance that is applied to the whole Israel in Deut 14:1-2; 32:9.) God will renew his promise to those who fear him and who value his name.⁴⁵

5. Conclusions

The idea of God the Father is developed with reference to his redeeming activity in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt when he elected and lifted Israel to the status of 'son' (Ex 4:22). Thus he is the Father and Redeemer of Israel in the exodus and during the intervening centuries (Isa 63:16). This relationship is sealed by the covenant into which God has entered with Israel as his children (Ex 19-24). The Father's redeeming activity is also creative in nature and grounded in the fact that he formed Israel as a nation (Isa 64:7-8, Deut 32:6-7, Mal 2:19). However, God's purpose for Israel, to make it a special, holy nation, as his son, is far-reaching: his 'son' Israel is to be obedient to God, to serve him, to be the light to the nations and to proclaim his name in all the earth (Ex 9:16). God as Father and Redeemer is understood in terms of his own righteousness (Deut 32:4). God's special relation to Israel and his promise is given not because of Israel's righteousness but because of his righteousness (Deut 9).

God is described not only as the father of the entire nation of Israel but also of king David and his offspring. Although the idea of God as a Father who redeems the king does not appear, the language of God's electing and adopting the king and keeping a covenant relationship with him and through him – as a representative of Israel – with the whole people is retained. The important fact is that God the Father who redeems Israel continues to take care of his people by appointing a king who has to lead Israel in obedience to him.

Israel's history as recorded in the Old Testament remains, however, a 'sorry litany of unfaithfulness and rebellion'.⁴⁶ When the prophets speak of the utter faithfulness of God, they also point to the fact that his son Israel is not obedient to his will, does not live in uprightness and righteousness before him, and does not serve as light to the other nations. As the disobedience continues, the

writers of the Old Testament express the hope for a future fulfilment of the promised restoration and they address God as Father in their prayers for deliverance (e.g. Isa 63:16; 64:8). God as Father will have mercy and bring his son Israel home from exile. He will renew his relationship with the people (Isa 64; cf. Jer 31:8-9; Ps 103:6-14). The Psalms and the prophets connect God's redemption from exile with his forgiveness of Israel's sins and the effects of its sinfulness. Some texts emphasise that God as Father will renew his promise to those who fear him and who value his name (Mic 7:18; Isa 10:20-22; Hos 2:23). Other texts point out that God as Father will continue acting through his son, the Davidic king, raising the new king, his anointed one (Ps 2, 89; Jer 23:5-6; Isa 55:3-5). The Old Testament upholds the idea that God's faithfulness toward Israel is a demonstration of his redeeming plans in front of all the nations (Ps 2, 103) to whom Israel is supposed to be the light (Isa 42:6). The writers of the New Testament argue that these promises find their fulfilment and realisation in Jesus Christ.

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Notes

- 1 D.R. Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Hebrew Scriptures about the Fatherhood of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 4.
- 2 Tasker recognises eighteen references, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, 6.
- 3 C.J.H. Wright, *Knowing God the Father through the Old Testament* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2007) 24-25.
- 4 The Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים is the heart of the exodus motif, the heart of the covenantal relationship, a description of God's intent to be Israel's protector, to help and rescue those who have fallen in need, to be faithful to their election. M.A. Grisanti, 'אֱלֹהִים' in W.A. Van Gemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 1 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) 882-884.
- 5 Wright, *Knowing God the Father*, 77.
- 6 J.I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco: World Books, 1987) 56.
- 7 Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, 83, 86.
- 8 C. McCann, Jr., 'The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections' in *New Interpreter's Bible* 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 945; see also A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972) 485.
- 9 C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006) 270.
- 10 J.B. Green, *Salvation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003) 69.
- 11 W. Brueggemann, 'The Book of Exodus' in *New Interpreter's Bible* 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 717.
- 12 Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, 83. Also, Peter A. Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 266.
- 13 Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, 150.
- 14 Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, 87, 205.
- 15 C.C. Caragounis allows this implication. See אֱלֹהִים in Van Gemeren (ed.), *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 1, 676.
- 16 Although the following examples are from different areas, they both emphasise the importance of the continuing relationship between Israel and their God who is by implication their Father who redeems.
- 17 Leon Morris, *The Atonement: its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983) 115.
- 18 Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 206.
- 19 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 224.
- 20 McCann, 'The Book of Psalms', 1092.
- 21 Hebrew roots suggest motherly compassion that God has revealed and treated his people with, see McCann, 'The Book of Psalms', 778, 1092.
- 22 Allan Coppedge, *Portraits of God: a Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) 101.
- 23 Coppedge, *Portraits of God*, 102.
- 24 Wright, *Knowing God the Father*, 92.
- 25 Wright, *Knowing God the Father*, 93.
- 26 J. Goldingay, *Psalms* in Tremper Longman III (ed.), *Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) 95.
- 27 Also M.M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 47.
- 28 A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 123.
- 29 Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 123.
- 30 McCann, 'The Book of Psalms', 1037.
- 31 McCann, 'The Book of Psalms', 1036.
- 32 McCann, 'The Book of Psalms', 1034.
- 33 Wright, *Knowing God the Father*, 95.
- 34 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 691-692.
- 35 John W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (WBC 25; Dallas: Word Books, 1987) 332.
- 36 In Hosea 11:4 God 'bent down to them and fed them', which is a function performed by the mother. This links with Deut 1:31; 8:5, Num 11:11-12, Is. 49:15; 66:10-13 that designate God as mother. Hosea also uses other images such as lover, husband and parent to show God's faithfulness and care for Israel.

- 37 J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 180.
- 38 Verhoef, *Haggai*, 265ff. This is also the connection with the creation language. See above.
- 39 Isaiah 64:7-8 uses the metaphor of Israel being the clay, the work of his hands, presumably in a sense of historical reminiscence of when he calls them out, gives his covenant and leads them out of slavery to the promised land. The emphasis is on God's saving character. See also John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 629.
- 40 Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 613.
- 41 Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 636-637.
- 42 Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 569.
- 43 Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 569.
- 44 Macintosh notices that Hosea's message is concerned with the Northern kingdom and maybe with those exiled from it. However, already in 2:1 the vision of the author is transferred to the covenant people and 'becomes proleptically a paradigm of blessings'; A.A. Macintosh, *Hosea* (ICC; Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1997) 28, 37. Yee observes that although Hosea is a northern prophet, v. 1 gives priority to the southern kings of Judah, whose reign extended beyond the kings mentioned in v. 1. His word may be to his later Judean audience as well. Hoses 3:1 emphasises especially the eventual unity of God's people; Gale A. Yee, 'The Book of Hosea' in *New Interpreter's Bible 7* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1996) 217.
- 45 The difference between the righteous and the wicked only occurs here in Malachi; however, the contrast between these two groups is a major motif in the Psalms (1; 37), Proverbs (10) and the prophets (Hab 1:4). See Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco: Word Books, 1984) 339.
- 46 Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Paul: the Early Christian Worldview of the Letter to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997, 2nd ed. 2004) 117.

I believe God the Father, in the Old Testament, was laying down serious groundwork for all the people that would be born from the New Testament on. He wanted to show the serious consequences involved for each person that would break many of His basic laws and commandments. In the New Testament there is a verse that says that the wages of sin will lead to death! God is not only referring to possible early physical death as a result of serious sin, but also to the death of our souls if these sins end up keeping us out of heaven. By setting the examples early on in the Old Testament, I feel God is Conclusion Calling God as "Our Father", is not a new idea only seen in the New Testament. It is a recurring depiction of the close relationship between the Creator and His people, commonly seen in the Old Testament. Yeshua and the New Testament writers did not invent this idea. Rather they built upon the thought of having such a loving Creator, who was willing to call His creation "His Children". Our Heavenly Father has, and will not change. He has always seen the ones who love Him as Children, and His people have also understood their Creator to be a loving Father from ancient times. I hope y In the Old Testament God is called the Father of the nation Israel. God is the Father in an intimate relationship to all those who put their faith in Him. Finally, God is the Father as the Creator and sustainer of all creation. † Back to Don Stewart FAQ List. Return to Don Stewart FAQ List. CONTENT DISCLAIMER: The Blue Letter Bible ministry and the BLB Institute hold to the historical, conservative Christian faith, which includes a firm belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. Since the text and audio content provided by BLB represent a range of evangelical traditions, all of the ideas and princi