

Transcript Segment, Part 1

“Praying the ‘Our Father’ with Jesus”

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Other great religious figures left behind writings, left behind liturgies, left behind codes of law to govern their community. Jesus didn't leave us much. We have a lot of writings about Jesus from the early Church. But from him, himself, we don't have much. The two things I've come, in my own desire to meet Jesus the theologian, the two places I keep coming back to are the Lord's Prayer, which I think, among the texts of the New Testament, we can have some confidence that this was a prayer that Jesus said, maybe not the same way every time. Maybe that's why we have variations, which I'll discuss in a minute, but that these are probably Jesus's real words.

And then the other thing we have is the Hebrew Bible. So when I say Old Testament, I'm talking about the book that Catholics use, which is expanded. It's not just the Hebrew Bible plus a number of ancient Greek documents that became, for us, canonical. But for Jesus, the Hebrew texts were the ones he might have known the best. It's kind of thrilling to read those and think, *my eyes are passing over the same words that Jesus's eyes may have passed over, if he could read, or the same words that he might have heard proclaimed*, more likely, in a synagogue or among friends, or in discussion. There's a thrill to that for me. And that's maybe the intuitive kick in the gut that makes me keep this project going, even though, as a scholarly project, it's pretty hard to do because, again, we're not working from much evidence. But certainly, as a person of faith, to be connected to Christ in this way is something I often find very moving.

I want to talk about what we really do have to work with. Jesus didn't have a Bible, obviously, as we do today. I meant to bring one. But he didn't have books, the codex, as we have today is probably something that was probably invented around his lifetime, definitely in the first century. He wouldn't really have understood it; he had scrolls. And *he* didn't have them, scrolls were very expensive. Scrolls might have been available in his local synagogue; Luke seems to think so. When Luke describes the synagogue at Nazareth, he describes it as having at least one scroll, the scroll of Isaiah. There was, most likely, a Temple library in Jerusalem. Who had access to that, whether Jesus would have had access to that, we don't know. But when he would have thought of these documents, he would have thought specifically of scrolls that were expensive artifacts and for public use.

It's conceivable that Jesus was not literate. It's entirely conceivable that Jesus was not literate. Luke seems to think that he was, but only Luke mentions Jesus's literacy. There's that great scene in John's Gospel, where Jesus, interrupting the stoning of the woman caught in adultery, traces on the ground. But the word used there doesn't necessarily mean he was writing words, just means he was doodling, maybe to kill time. Luke has Jesus reading, but this is, as John Dominic Crossan pointed out, this is a much better description of Luke than it is of Jesus. So we have to keep open the possibility that even if he could read, he probably didn't read as well as any of us.

Where I go for this bit of information is Augustine's awe at St. Ambrose. Augustine, in *Confessions*, book VI, chapter 3, talks about why he thought St. Ambrose was such a genius. The reason *why* is when St. Ambrose read, he didn't have to voice the words out loud as he read. He could read silently

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to himself. That's pretty significant, when you think about Augustine's literary output. The fact that he could only read by reciting a text out loud is pretty astonishing. The way we separate words and sentences and use capitalization, that's the invention of medieval monks who, because of vows of silence, were not able to read those texts out loud.

Speaking of those medieval monks, while I was at Johns Hopkins, the creative writing department did a study on how different reading is today from when it was at other points in history. What they determined was that a person who sits on a public transit conveyance and reads all of the advertisements in maybe 75 seconds, is probably reading more in those 75 seconds than a medieval monk would have read in a month.

Reading, even in those days, even among people who were committed to preservation of texts, was not something that was engaged as much as we do, or even practiced in the way we understand it. So my whole project, how was Jesus reading the Old Testament, needs to keep this in mind; that Jesus is not reading quite the way we read, and maybe wasn't even reading himself, but listening to a technician read, somebody who had literacy.

What I'm looking for though—I'm assuming he knew these texts in one way or another, and I'm also assuming, as I said, that the Lord's Prayer, maybe in its variations, are *his* words. So my interest has been, how does Jesus take these words that he's hearing, maybe that he's reading, and incorporate them in his own sense of mission, his own sense of prayer? How does he find words to describe his own desires, his own hopes, his own fears, using the words that he inherits from the Hebrew Bible?

So that's where I am with this. So I've done most of the primary text research so far, and I've done some secondary research that I'll share with you, and I think I'm starting to get a picture. I think I'm starting to get a picture. The first verse of the prayer, as we know, is Our Father. I think I needed to take a moment with myself at one point and decide, where does this language come from?

As we might know, Matthew has a different version than Luke does of this prayer. Joachim Jeremias did a study of this prayer, I think it was back in the sixties, and his conclusion, which I think is still fairly supported today, is that Matthew's version is longer and probably expanded. Luke's version is a little shorter, but maybe closer to the words that Jesus most commonly said. I'll again point out, Jesus might've never said this prayer exactly the same way twice, so Matthew's expansions might be an authentic tradition. They just might not have been the more common way of expressing it. Matthew however, according to Jeremias, might be using words that are more at home in an Aramaic-speaking environment. Luke might have actually been changing some of the words so that they made more sense to his Greek-speaking audience. So both of the ancient versions I think we need to look at in order to get a sense of perhaps what was going through Jesus's mind.

You'll read, perhaps, I've certainly read in commentaries that calling God "Father" was an unusual thing among Jews of Jesus's day. I'm going to quibble with that a bit. Might not have been the normal way, in prayer, to discuss the relationship of the human to God, but it was certainly a known trope in multiple traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Hosea 11:1, especially; that's the famous quote, "out of Egypt I have called my son," speaks of Israel as God's child. God is the father of the nation of Israel. Deuteronomy 32:18 says the same thing. Exodus 4:22 gives us that same language. And Isaiah 63:16 gives us that same language. This is definitely language that is common in prayer and especially common in prayers where God is trying to express his mercy for Israel, why he keeps forgiving Israel over and over again. This is where, in the Hebrew Bible, the theological mind went to describe that mercy. The image for it was the image of a parent forgiving a child.

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It's a striking departure from the covenantal language, which is political language, which is the language of a sovereign having to deal with the crimes of an underling. It's a striking departure from that. But the prophets had this model, and they employed it again and again and again.

The other place we see it in the Psalms is where God makes himself, God makes the divine self, the father of orphans and widows. I use this particular line from Psalm 68: "Father of orphans, protector of widows, is God in his holy habitation." This is not an uncommon way for the Psalms to describe God's fatherhood, specifically of orphans and widows. Jesus certainly loves the image of God as Father, and I think he's probably after the mercy that's being expressed there. But if that's the case, he could not have been blind to the fact that the fatherhood of God is so often expressed in the context of orphans and widows. This would have been a very natural union of ideas.

God is also described as mother in a number of cases, and I wonder if this isn't, also, somewhere behind Jesus's mind. Comforting mother in Isaiah 63:16, nursing mother in Hosea 11:3-4, and, my favorite, Deuteronomy, a phrasing that could only be feminine, "the God who gave you birth." Not the God who begat you, "the God who gave you birth." The Exodus event, in the mind of the writer of Deuteronomy 32, was a birth process which, (having never given birth, but my mother described it to me every year on my birthday), when I read the Book of Exodus I see the kind of pain she likes to describe; so there it is.

The other thing that I think is significant, but I suspect more significant for the Evangelist than for Jesus himself, is this line, which becomes hugely important in the early theological tradition of the Church, might not be informing Jesus in his choice of this word. That "God is the father of the Son of David," which I'm fond of pointing out to my students, is a very odd thing to say. God is making this promise to David, and he's talking specifically about Solomon, but the way it's employed in Second Samuel, it's also talking about Hezekiah and Josiah. The way that messianic prophecy incorporates this is, this is going to be the fatherhood of God to the Messiah to come. So this is the beauty of biblical theology as it opens up over the course of 3,000 years, is that this could be Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jesus, or unnamed other messianic figures. But God will be a father to the Son of David.

Now, like I said, I think the Evangelists get very excited about this language. I wonder though—I'll show you in a minute—Jesus seems to be very inspired by Ezekiel 34 which also talks about the son of David, a reborn David leading Israel. One wonders if those ideas didn't come together in a prayer, in his meditation. Again, impossible to say, and yet as I read the Hebrew Bible and try to see what Jesus might have seen, or hear what Jesus might have heard, it's something that jumps out. This is, like I said, I'm still at the stage of primary source work here.

My students who are here, and I see a number of my students here, they know that I can't talk about God and not talk about the images of God that I love, which are not really images of fatherhood or mercy. I'm fond of storm God images. I wrote a whole dissertation on divine fire. You can't do that and not talk about lightning. Now, Jesus could have known these texts, and he wasn't interested in them at all, which is probably good for all of us. "Smoke went up from his nostrils and devouring fire from his mouth, glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down. Thick darkness was under his feet. He rode upon a cherub and flew. He came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water." This is a storm god. This is Haddad, this is Zeus, and this is also Yahweh in Psalm 18:8-10. It's paralleled in Second Samuel 22.

I won't deny, if I were to come up with a god, a god who could spit lightning out of his nose probably would be part of it. Jesus is not interested in these images of God, which are extremely common, especially in theophoric literature in the Hebrew Bible. It's important for me, as one of Jesus's

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disciples, to recognize that no, there's not really much here that I can take. Now, I grant you, my grandmother worships this God. My Sicilian grandmothers both, I think, would be perfectly comfortable with this God. He's also not a war God. This is less attested in the Hebrew Bible, but it's there. So Joshua 10:11: "As the Amorites fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven as far as Azekah, and they died. And there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with a sword." This is our God as a war God. It's there. The Gideons put a copy of this narrative in every hotel room in America. Think about that. These are things that trouble me.

Jesus is completely uninterested, as far as I can tell, in this image of the Father, this image of God. He doesn't draw from this in his preaching. It doesn't seem like the Evangelists draw from this. Now, the writer of Revelation is going to depict God in many of these terms. So the New Testament, the wider canon, will probably have some kind of inspiration drawn from these images. But at least when we're looking specifically at the Our Father, it's the image of mercy, it's the image of fatherhood. It's the image of tender love that Jesus seems to be inspired by and is drawing from the Hebrew Bible.