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WHO SHOULD BE CALLED FATHER?

PAULOFTARSUS BETWEEN THE JESUSTRADITION & PATRIAPOTESTAS

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Who should be called “father”? What an odd question. Doesn't everyone in every culture grow up calling the male who begot them their linguistic equivalent of “father”? In the world of Jesus and Paul, everyone knew the answer to that question. And it included reference not only to their male blood progenitors, and perhaps to their fathers' fathers, but also to the emperor at Rome, the *pater patriae*, the “father of the fatherland.” As Nicholas Purcell observes, “The title was eloquently suggestive of the protecting but coercive authority of the *paterfamilias*” (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed. 1996: 1121).

In Roman culture this nearly absolute, coercive authority was called *patriapotestas*, which in its range included the father's power of life and death over his children, beginning in infancy when a father chose to acknowledge and rear a child or “to expose” it, that is, throw the child away. These second-century Roman jurist Gaius noted that “there are hardly any other men who have over their children a power such as we have.” From ancient Republican times, Roman fathers had been permitted by law to sell their sons into slavery — as many as three times. Yet during the Empire, paternal monopoly on the control of property probably influenced the behavior of sons and daughters more than their father's legal right to execute them.

As Richard Saller has stressed, writers such as Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch urged fathers to use encouragement and reasoning rather than blows or ill treatment as the means to lead their children to honorable lives. Paternal moderation, even toward serious filial misbehavior, was praised as a virtue (see the bibliography page for all the following references). And family affection and genuine respect could motivate the obedience of children, as Judith Hallett has especially documented for Roman daughters. However, the children were motivated, their father was to be obeyed absolutely; and the deeply felt appropriateness of this demand was rooted in Roman male ideology, according to which children, slaves, and women all lacked full powers of judgment.

Thus grown daughters and sons were usually bound by their father's authority until he died. Until then they could own no property, and any of their earnings or gifts they received belonged by law to their father. His consent was necessary for the marriage of both sons and daughters, and he could coerce a divorce. In the *sinema nua* form of marriage that prevailed from the late Republic into the Empire, the wife remained under the authority of her father. And legislation by Augustus further assured fathers that they possessed considerably more authority over their married daughters than their husbands could have. This fact will be particularly relevant later when I invite you to reconsider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians,

FilialPietyandtheAuthorityofFathers

Patriarchyasapsycho-socialsystemisfrequentlybutinadequatelydefinedsolelyasmaledominationoffemales, mendominatingwomen. Yetpatriarchalsocialcodesareenforcedbeyondthehouseholdbytheactionsofmenwhoseektobecomehonorbydominatingasmanyother men as possible. Inawidevarietyofcultures,menarebroughtuptogainhonorforthemselvespreciselybydominatingasmanyothersasthey can, bothmenandwomen. Andthelessonsinsuchdominationbeginandbegininthehome.

Sonsraisedbyfathersandmotherstobeabsolutelyobedienttotheirfathersgrewupanticipatingthatthey, inturn, wouldbecomepatriarchswhowouldappropriatelydemand suchobediencefromeveryoneintheir ownfamilies. Thusaboywasraisedtobe aggressive, todemonstrate self-mastery, andtolookforwardnotonlytobeingservedbyhiswife, childrenandslaves, butalsotoexpectdeferencefromthosemaleshehadsuccessfullychallengedinthepublicrealm.

Boyswhoweretrainedtobeobedient sonsbecameloyalpoliticalsubjectswhowerindeed subjecttotherulingpowers. Forsuchsons, callingtheRomanEmperor“father”fitwellwiththeir commonsenseofhowtheworldworked. Thusanyin-depthunderstandingofpatriarchyintheRomanEmpireor anysociety mustinclude, ifnotbeginwith, ananalysisofmalesocializationandthepower arrangementsvaluedamongmen.

Unfortunately, mostdescriptions ofancientpatriarchyareincompletebecause they routinely disregardthissystematicdominationofmalesbyothermales. Yetbyignoringthiscentralfeatureofancientpatriarchy, scholarshavepredisposedthemselvestomissonesofthefewmostinterestingculturalchallengesonwhichPaulagreedwithJesus.

Acrossallsocialclasses, traditionalmalesocializationprogrammedmales topursueanever endingquestforgreaterhonorandinfluence, includingfathersarrangingtheirchildren’s marriagesothatthehonoroftheirfamilieswouldbeenhanced.

JudeanPatriarchy

InalltheculturesaroundtheancientMediterraneanSea, includingtheoneinwhichJesusgrew up, afather’s honordependedonthe filialpiety, theobedience, ofallhissonsanddaughters. Thusinthe BookofProverbs, afatherexhortshisson: “Letyourhearholdfastmywords; keepmycommandments andlive”(4:4). AndIsraelitetraditionincludedsome draconianwarningsforsonswhosebehaviorshamedtheirfathers:

Ifsomeonehasastubbornandreblioussonwhowillnotobeyhis fatherandmother, whodoesnot heedthemwhentheydisciplinehim, thenhisfatherandhismothershalltakeholdofhimandbringhimoutto theeldersofhistownatthegateofthatplace. Theyshall saytothe eldersofhistown, ‘Thissonofoursisstubbornandreblious. Hewill notobeyus. Heisagluttonandadrunkard.’ Thenallthemenofthetownshallstonehimtodeath. Soyoushallpurgetheevilfromyour midst; andallIsraelwillhear, andbeafraid(Deut21:18 -21NRSV).

Intherhetoricofthispassage, thissonis often called“stubbornandreblious”becausehewas necessarilyaliteralgluttonandadrunkardbutbecausehisdemonstratedlackoffilialpietyshamedhis

parents similarly to a son known to be one. In Israel's wisdom tradition, children were taught that "a wise child loves the discipline of his father" (Proverbs 13:1). And parents were taught that "when the father dies he will not seem to be dead, for he has left behind him one like himself," namely, his obedient son (Sirach 30:4).

Many reports about the activities and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, himself accused of being a "glutton and drunkard" (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34), point to his setting aside of primary filial duties within the blood-descent kingroup and to his challenging othersto join him in that rejection. By his actions and instruction, Jesus of Nazareth brought shame upon his own bloodkingroup. For example, according to Mark 3:21, Jesus' bloodfamily "went out to restrain him" when they heard the buzz created by Jesus' public activity: "people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'" Measured by the social code of Deuteronomy, Jesus appeared to be a "stubborn and rebellious son," who was sharply diminishing rather than dutifully increasing the honor of his own bloodkin. Furthermore, he compounded his outrageous, anti-familial decisions by urging othersto imitate his behavior.

In striking contrast to the positive emphasis on family loyalty and obedience that has persisted in most if not all cultures throughout millennia, Jesus of Nazareth, in the name of Israel's God, called for an absolute break with such filial piety and initiated potential conflict between a son and his father. Jesus' sharp challenge to the authority of earthly fathers was an essential first step toward implementing his redefinition of three related conceptions, power, honor, and family.

According to the historical Jesus, in striking contrast to the understanding of power on which every patriarchal system is based, namely, domination, the aspect of God's power which human beings should imitate must result in empowerment of others. In a astonishing contradiction of the values they had been taught since childhood, men should seek to acquire honor by giving others honor rather than seeking endlessly to take it away from others. And the family has been restructured as a human group living as brothers and sisters without an earthly father, bound together by their common commitment to doing the will of God as revealed by Jesus.

Jesus' Challenge to the Authority of Fathers

Since this anti-filial aspect of Jesus' vision of God's Ruling has been minimized or played down recently by some scholars and misunderstood by many readers of the Gospels, consider briefly what are arguably the most offensive, the most misrepresented, the most subtle, and the most startling anti-filial/anti-patriarchal passages in the Gospel traditions.

"I have come to set a man against his father"

To twenty-first century ears, perhaps the most offensive, anti-family Jesus tradition is the statement: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Even the less strident version in Matthew 10:37 sounds disturbingly anti-family: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Indeed, according to Matthew, Jesus introduced this challenge with the assertion: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household" (NRSV).

This tradition is given further, perhaps independent, attestation by the Coptic Gospel of Thomas

in which the saying appears in two passages in almost identical words: “Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple” (55:1; 101:1). And the first passage continues: “Whoever does not hate brothers and sisters, and carry the cross as I do, will not be worthy of me” (55:2). It is difficult to conceive of stronger anti-blood-family language.

Thus, quite frequently interpreters begin by assuring us that the Greek term *misein*, translated “hate,” doesn’t really mean what it seems to mean. To be sure, the point of the saying is not the cultivation of a negative emotion among those who would follow Jesus but rather the challenge to make a hard choice. In the words of Joel Green: “In this context, ‘hate’ is not primarily an affective quality but a disavowal of primary allegiance to one’s skin”, a courageous “distancing themselves from the high cultural value placed on their family network .” (565). In other words: a rejection of filial piety.

The Greatest Offense to Filial Piety?

Perhaps the most misinterpreted sentence on Jesus’ lips in this connection is his response to one of his would-be followers, who had answered Jesus’ challenge to join Jesus’ group with the plea that he first be permitted to go home and bury his father. According to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus replied with one of the most anti-filial, anti-patriarchal family statements coming to us from antiquity: “Let the dead bury their own dead!” In Martin Hengel’s judgment “there is hardly one logion of Jesus which more sharply runs counter to law, piety, and custom.”

When I first heard this passage discussed as a teenager, I was told that the urgency of Jesus’ call to discipleship was so great, that potential followers could not even take off a few hours to attend their own father’s funeral. Many interpreters continue to understand the passage in this way, and some of them are encouraged in their view by Jesus’ reply [according to Luke] to the next “wannabe” who stated: “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” In Luke, Jesus shot back: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the rule of God.” It suggests to you that while Luke does link these two scenes, they are not redundant. Rather, Jesus’ replies assume two distinct scenarios: the first implies the postponement of following Jesus until conventional filial obligations were met; the second seems similar to the kind of leave-taking the prophet Elijah granted his follower Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21). Moreover, the “plow” saying is more difficult to trace back to the historical Jesus than is the “bury their own dead” statement, which satisfies the major criteria for such historical tracing.

In any case, in the first scene, the point as I see it, is not that the potential follower’s father has just died and that Jesus is so strict that he forbids his leaving for the weekend to attend to burial matters. Neither am I persuaded by Byron McCane’s argument that this saying refers not to the initial burial but rather to the re-burial of the person’s bones in an ossuary, a scenario embraced and elaborated upon by Kathleen Corley in her new book, *Women and the Historical Jesus*. No, in view of the solemn obligation in filial piety for the son to be sure that his father receive a dignified burial, it is much more likely that this would-be disciple of Jesus was saying: “I need to go home and serve and support my father until he dies, and I have buried him. Then I’ll return to follow you.” Only after reaching this conclusion, did I discover that Kenneth Bailey, one of the first scholars to stress the importance of Mediterranean cultural values for understanding the Gospels, also has observed that the potential disciple’s request to bury his father expressed the son’s duty to obey his father until his father’s death and fitting interment.

The young man had probably been taught that the Fifth Commandment — “honor your father and mother” — obligated him at the minimum to support his father materially in his old age and to give him

an honorable burial. Thus Torah -piety as well as filial piety would have been at stake here. In any case, according to both Luke (9:60) and Matthew (8:22) —material they have in common from the “Q” sayings source —Jesus seemed to be aware that this young man would never be able to escape the family obligations that would be heaped upon him if he returned to his father’s house. His father was a patriarch; the young man had been socialized to become a patriarch himself. And after his father’s death and proper burial, all those around the young man would expect him to act like a patriarch —or risk being dishonored and bringing shame upon his family. As Sir ach teaches: “When the father dies he will not seem to be dead, for he has left behind him one like himself,” his obedient son.

No Traditional Fathers Needed When God’s Will is Done

Perhaps the most subtle and easily overlooked elimination of earthly fathers from the ideal society in which God alone is ruling is found in the Gospel according to Mark 10:28 -31: “Peter began to say to Jesus, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age —houses, brothers, and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions —and in the age to come eternal life.” Notice carefully that fathers are not included in the second half of this parallel -constructed saying. But might this be simply an oversight?

Gerhard Lohfink comments, “The question would have to be left unanswered if other texts did not show that the absence of any reference to fathers is anything but coincidence or forgetfulness. Fathers are deliberately not mentioned...they are too symbolic of patriarchal domination.” In contrast, Kathleen Corley asserts that neither Mark nor Jesus intended to imply here what she calls an “anti -patriarchal ethic” (*Women*, 47). Yet when the saying is viewed in the context of the expectations of filial piety, I am convinced that Lohfink, Joanna Dewey, Richard Horsley and other scholars are correct. Part of the good news is that there are no fathers but God in Jesus’ vision. And these fatherless families are gifts of God which are given now, already in the present time, not some in indefinite future.

Once again the context is one of anti -domination; the following sentence in Mark reads: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” The status and authority of fathers are implicitly rejected, and the expectations to control and be served that characterized the patriarchal social system are explicitly subverted. Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza makes the compelling comment that Jesus’ paradoxical exhortation to “receive the rule of God like a child (slave)” earlier in Mark (10:15) “is not an invitation to childlike innocence and naivete but a challenge to relinquish all claims of power and domination over others.”

Now Only God is “Father”

Perhaps Jesus’ most startling challenge to patriarchal authority is found in the material unique to the Gospel according to Matthew 23:9 (NRSV): “Call no man father on earth, for you have one Father —the one in heaven.” The context for this saying is provided by Matthew, whomay have especially prized it because of its reference to God as Father, a favorite theme in his Gospel; he uses the designation 44 times. But there is little question that the core of the saying came from the historical Jesus. As Lohfink observes, “Here we not only find the spirit of Jesus but hear the historical Jesus himself speaking” (47). Schuessler Fiorenza suggests that the original form of the saying may have read: “Call no one father, for you have one father (and you are all siblings).” By it Jesus declared that his followers both should not and need not address anyone but the God of Israel as “father.” And according to Jesus, the God of Israel was a

kind and caring father, with gracious characteristics traditionally associated with motherhood, whom they could trust without reservation.

After challenging all who would listen to reject the authority and protection of their blood fathers, Jesus invited his followers to join him in a sense of intimacy with God as the iron true “father.” Although Kathleen Corley vigorously seeks to cast doubt on the historical Jesus’ use of the Palestinian Aramaic term *abba* in this saying, I remain persuaded that it is highly likely that Jesus did address the God of Israel as his *abba*, thereby employing the common way children were taught to address their fathers with respect and honor, not just as children but throughout their lives. But now only God is to be addressed as *abba*, stripping the legitimation from existing patriarchal institutions and implicitly undermining all relationships of domination. No one, male or female, among Jesus’ followers could then claim the authority of a father in the Jesus movement because such authority now belonged to God alone.

Note very carefully, then, that by reserving the title “father” for God alone Jesus did not at all intend for God to be conceived as a dominating patriarch. Rather, as Jesus’ words and actions in the name of his Father sought to make clear over and over again, God’s fatherly care was quite motherly, when measured by Mediterranean cultural stereotypes. In the narrative of the Gospel of John, when Philip urged Jesus to “show us the Father,” Jesus replied: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” And what Philip and his companions had just seen was Jesus with a towel and a basin of water, washing each of their feet. This image of God as Servant-Father will be important to keep in mind during my discussion of Paul’s rare reference to himself as a father and his readers as his offspring.

Paul’s Challenge to Filial Piety and the Authority of Fathers

Anyone alarmed by Jesus’ exhortation to “call no man father on earth” would have found scant comfort in the writings and actions of his messenger Paul of Tarsus, who sought in a variety of ways to put into effect Jesus’ strategy of undermining the authority of the patriarchal family. For both Jesus and Paul, rejecting both the obligations of blood ties and the venerable traditions that reinforced those relationships was the first step toward their creating a new kind of family: faith-related brothers and sisters—without a traditional father. Who then should be called “father”?

Paul wrote in indirect continuity with the historical Jesus’ focus on God as father, frequently referring to God as “our father” and “the father.” For example, the greeting, “Peace from God our Father,” appears in almost all Paul’s letters. In 1 Cor. 8:6 God is identified as “the Father”: “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist.” And Paul’s use of the phrase, “Abba! Father” in Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:15 provides another striking connection to the Jesus tradition, since the Aramaic term was almost certainly a characteristic prayer form of Jesus himself.

To be sure, no pithy statement like “Call No Man Father” appears in Paul’s writings. Yet there is much evidence that he could take for granted that his early readers and hearers had indeed rejected filial piety and no longer thought of themselves as living under the authority of their fathers—or of their husbands, or of their owners. Had they alienated themselves from the authority of their blood-king group in response to Paul’s message? Or were they already inclined to respond to Paul’s message because of being previously alienated from their blood kin for other reasons? However it happened, Paul assumed that they could and should make important decisions without consideration of family traditions, filial piety, and the constraints of patriarchal authority. And by acting on this assumption, Paul followed Jesus’ innovative and controversial strategy of rejecting the obligations of filial piety.

1 Corinthians 7

For example, Paul's line of argument in 1 Corinthians assumes that adult children without their parents, wives without their husbands, and slaves without their owners have become members of the house-churches in Corinth. Throughout the entire letter, in fact, Paul addressed all the "holies" in Corinth as if they no longer had any obligations of filial piety. Chapter seven begins with a striking subversion of traditional patriarchal authority in marriage.

Here Paul urged followers of Christ who are married to understand that the husband belongs to the wife in exactly the same way as the wife belongs to the husband with the consequence that decisions regarding their sexual life together are to be made by mutual agreement rather than by patriarchal fiat. In his words: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise (*homoioos* - "in the very same way") the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement (*eksymphoonou* - "with one voice together") for a set time, to devote yourself to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor. 7:3-5).

I have heard from modern readers who wish that Paul had gone even further and completely avoided the use of "authority over" language. In this case, such a wish is tantamount to asking a male raised in Mediterranean culture not only to jump out of his skin but to leap over his shadow while he's at it. Keeping in mind Paul's own context, what is truly striking is that he showed no respect for one of the primary codes of first-century life, taken for granted by both men and women: a woman's body belonged to her husband, period.

More directly to the point regarding respect for a father's authority, all the advice Paul gave regarding marriage assumes that his readers would respond with decisions made with due respect to their blood family's interests or wishes. This is truly astonishing in light of the cultural values of the ancient Mediterranean world, where in the words of K. C. Hanson marriage was "a social contract negotiated between families, with the economic, religious, and (occasionally) political implications that went far beyond the interests of sexuality, relationship, and reproduction." Marriage was rarely arranged by individuals apart from their fathers' interests and authority.

In the world of both Jesus and Paul, when a woman married, her status changed from being embedded in her father, that is, existing under the authority, legal responsibility, honor, and care of her father, to a similar embeddedness at least in her husband's honor if not also his authority. Yet throughout 1 Cor. 7, Paul wrote to the unmarried, male and female, as if each of them would make decisions independently about refraining from marriage or entering it. For example, not the authority of their respective fathers but being "aflame with passion" should be one of the deciding factors (7:9). And note that Paul gave this advice to both women and men, assuming here and throughout this chapter their equality in moral responsibility and decision-making. Instead of directing his words primarily or exclusively to the men, twelve times Paul strikingly alternates between the men and the women, his "brothers and sisters" (7:15).

When Paul then addressed the case of a woman in Corinth who had left her husband, he neither chided her for having rejected the authority of her husband nor advised her return to the authority of her father (7:11). Note even Paul's awareness of a command from Jesus opposing divorce led him to suggest in her case that family piety was more important than her freedom in Christ. The only condition he mentioned was that she should be reconciled to her husband if she chose again to live a married life. With

such advice, Paul risked provoking the resentment and retaliation of non-Christian husbands and fathers.

That Paul gained a long-standing reputation for provoking such resentment is vividly documented by the late second-century narrative entitled *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. According to this story, written in Asia Minor, young Thecla's outraged betrothed, Thamyris, persuaded the authorities to imprison Paul because Thecla broke her engagement with him after she became fascinated by Paul's teaching. Thecla's horrified mother (no father is present) then implored the governor to burn her daughter at the stake, for by following Paul she had brought immense shame on her family and set a scandalous example for other women who had heard him.

Roman men, in particular, were hostile to non-Roman religious groups by which their wives and daughters were drawn away from the family religion, bringing shame upon their bloodkin. Thus the late first-century moralist Plutarch (45-125 CE) gave this advice to married couples:

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions.

In this strongly male-oriented context, in which a wife was expected to worship only the gods her husband honored, Paul's advice for women who had become "sisters in Christ" without their husbands must have shocked and often angered these easy pagan husbands. Furthermore in 1 Cor 7:12-16, Paul not only confirmed these married "sisters" in their own, independent religious status but also turned traditional cultural values upside down by asserting the power of these women to determine the spiritual ambiance of their marriages. He wrote:

And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband... But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you.

All aspects of this advice are based on a truly astonishing rejection of the expectations every male brought to his wedding; it directly challenged the religious dominance every husband assumed would be his throughout his marriage. David Daube, distinguished Jewish scholar of Roman and Biblical Law, refers to Paul's counsel here as "a momentous *novum*," and suggests that Paul revealed his clear awareness of his own radicality when he painstakingly stated everything he had to say twice, once for the and once for the woman (*Jesus and Man's Hope* 1971:2:240.)

Paul's logic in this case seems to have been as follows. When the wife in question became a "sister" and a "new creation in Christ" (see 2 Cor. 5:17), all social obligations, including her marriage, were formally dissolved. But then, as the spiritually dominant partner, she formally recreated the marriage by intercourse with her pagan husband, as Daube persuasively argues from rabbinic parallels (*Mishnah Kiddushin* ["Betrothals"] 1.1 and *Ketuboth* ["Marriage Deeds"] 4.4). And even such intimacy could not defile the believing wife, for the power of holiness in her was now greater than the power of potential defilement from her pagan spouse. Indeed, it is the unbelieving husband who was now in danger of being "contaminated" by his spouse.

Scholars have wrestled long with the phrase "the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife." Among their proposals, the most convincing to me is Daube's argument that the phrase refers to

the *reconsecration* of the marriage by the believing wife's decision to continue sleeping with her pagan spouse. As Daube points out, "in Judaism, it is invariably the woman who is consecrated to spouse by the man. Paul [however] deems it immaterial whether the convert is a man or a woman." And supporting my contention regarding the strong connections between the Jesus traditions and Paul's writings, Daube observes that "this is in line with, in the spirit of, the reformed view of marriage proclaimed by Jesus" (240).

At the end of chapter seven Paul then advised widows that they were free to marry anyone they wished as long as they chose a partner who was "in the Lord." (v. 31). Paul made no reference to the widow's obligation under the law of guardianship, *tutela mulierum*, to consult blood kin, to consider their interests, or to obey their family's wishes regarding remarriage. More than a few women may well have felt encouraged by Paul's counsel to ignore the continuing authority and interests of their fathers, or of their other kin if the father had already died. Consistent with Paul's advice throughout chapter 7, filial piety and patriarchal authority were once again simply ignored as relevant cultural values for those who were following Jesus.

I was sharply reminded about how easy it continues to be to bootleg our assumptions about how our own world works into our exegesis of the Bible by one of my undergraduate students, who took what I had been teaching him about 1 Cor. 7 and applied it to the controversial passage in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:4. Until my student pointed it out to me, it simply had not occurred to me that when warning the Corinthians against being "mismatched with unbelievers" (6:14), Paul clearly assumed that they could and would respond without reference to filial piety. Here, as in 1 Corinthians, Paul continued to address each follower of Christ, without respect to sex or social status, as an individual moral agent, as a decision-maker who were no longer embedded in the honor of their blood families, no longer restrained by the social codes of filial piety.

Also largely overlooked is the fact that Paul's encouragement of sexual celibacy for both men and women in 1 Cor. 7 seriously challenged the authority of parents, in particular of fathers, to arrange their children's marriages. Giving such counsel to marriageable women would have been regarded as scandalous, especially by their fathers whose reputations were at stake when planning a "good marriage" for their daughters. Was not a major value of a daughter her potential for bringing honor to her father and the entire family by joyfully entering the marriage her father arranged? Yet Paul took no notice of a father's interest, rights, and honor when he wrote to those daughters who had become followers of Christ in Corinth. In Paul's eyes, they had become empowered to marry or not, as they chose. And he urged women as well as men to join him in his own celibate state, if they were so "gifted" (see v. 7), for the purpose of joining with him in undistracted service in Christ (see vv. 32-35).

But Was Paul Himself Called "Father"?

In a recent article, the South African scholar, Stephan J. Joubert, argues that Paul saw himself as the *paterfamilias* of the Christian household group in Corinth. Joubert asserts that "even when Paul did not make explicit use of familial concepts, he acted out typical role expectations associated with that of a *paterfamilias* and at the same time also conferred the role of 'children' upon the Corinthians" (218). Joubert concludes that "Paul's interaction with the Corinthians was to a large extent focused on their recognition and acceptance of his patriarchal authority." In what follows here, I examine the same data reviewed by Joubert, reframe it, and propose a distinctly alternative interpretation.

Paul did refer to himself once as "father" of the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:14-15) and as the one who "begot" Onesimus, Philemon's slave (10). These two passages are the only instances in which he directly

sodesignateshimself,andinbothcasesheclearlyintendedtofocusattentiononaspiritual“begetting” andonanurturingrelationship. Notecarefullythatinbothcasesheaddress edhiswordstomalesinparticularwhosesocializationinclinedthemtoignorecounselfromanyonewhosoughttolimittheirstriving forhonororrestraintheirexercisingcontroloverothers. In1Cor4:8 -21,Paulironicallyreferstothose spirituallyarrogantCorinthiansas“kings,”as“wiseinChrist,”as“strong” —obvousevidenceofthe continuinginfluenceofpatriarchalvaluesintheirlives.

Paul’spersonalexampleprovidedastrikingcontrast. Hewrote:“Whenreviled,webless;when persecuted,weendure;whenslandered,wespeakkindly. Wehavebecomeliketherubbishoftheworld, thedregsofallthings,tothisveryday.”(Vv.12 -13). In1Corinthians4:15 -16heimploredthese“kings”: “InChristJesusIbecameyourfatherthroughthegospel. Iappealtoyou,then,beimitatorsofme.” And hisbehaviortowhichhedirectlyreferredforemulationfocusedonhisonauthoritarian,non -retaliatory responsetothese manyexperiencesofhumiliationanddishonorinhislifeasa“servantofChrist and stewardofGod’smysteries”(4:1). Thisisneithertheattitudenorthebehaviorofapersoninclinedto perpetuatepatriarchalprivilegesandvalues!

“WithaStick?”

Sowhatareweto makeofhiswordsin4:21:“Whatwouldyouprefer? AmIto come toyouwith astickorwithloveinaspiritofgentleness”(4:21)? Firstweshouldkeeptheimmediatecontextinmind, rememberingthatthewasstillseekingsomehowtopersuadethe“spiritualkings”inCorinthtorepentof theirarrogance. Andthissentence revealsPaul’songoingdilemmaashesoughttoresocializehis converts,especiallythemalesamongthem. Tospeakwithouttheauthorityanddominatingtonethattheyhad beenbroughtuptorespectinviteddisdainforPaul’spersonanddismissalofhis radicalmessageofGod’s reversalofpatriarchalvalues. Hisattemptstoappealtothem“bythemeeknessandgentlenessofChrist” (2Cor. 10:1) hadoftenfallenondeafears,ashislineofargumentin2Cor. 10 -13amplyverifies. Those competitorsfor influenceamongtheCorinthians,whomPauldesignated“super -apostles,”“falseapostles anddeceitfulworkers,”operatedwithlongfamilialsocialcodes. Theyboastedoftheirpersonal accomplishments(10:12 -11:18),soughttotakeadvantageoftheirhearer sandcreateddependency relationships, anddemandedtobegivenhonor.

Indirectandastonishingcontrast,Paulhadpreviouslyurgedhisreaderstobecome“imitatorsof me,asIamofChrist”(1Cor11:1),thatis,in“notseekingmyownadvantagebutthatofmany,sothat theymaybesaved”(10:33). PaulsoughttopersuadetheCorinthianswhowere“wise,powerful,andof noblebirth”(ashereferstothemin1Cor1:26)tosurrendertheirtraditional,status -linkedprivilegesin favoroffunctioningasGod’scommunityinwhich“themembersmayhavethesamecareforone another,”withparticularattentionto“givingthegreaterhonortotheinferiormember”(1Cor12:24 -25). InPaul’snewunderstandingofreality,theGodofIsraelmeasuresthestrengthof the“strong”bytheir capacitiesandwillingnesstoempowerthe“weak.”

Paulsoughttobestronginjustthisparadoxicalway. Ashewrote:“WheneverIamweak[in termsofconventionalpatriarchalexpectations],thenIamstrong[intermsofservingothers“forthesake ofChrist”](2Cor. 12:10). Buthowwasthetogaintheattentionagainofthosewhoeitherwerereverting tolongfamiliarwaysoftreatingothers,probablyunderpressurefromtheirfriendsandneighbors,orwho weremakingindiscernibleprogressintheprocessoftheirconversiontoChristandhisways?For example,hadnotsomeofthemsoughttogainadvantageoverotherswithinthegroupbybringinglaw suitsagainstthem(1Cor6:1 -7)? Theirbehavioringeneralprovokedhimtouseexaggeratedrhetoricand

to express himself in ways that he regarded as “foolish.”

Thus when he asked them, “Am I to come to you with a stick or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” I conclude that he never had any intention to try to use a “stick” on them. Rather, he ironically sought simply to stress in reverse the alternative values he had consistently lived by when he was with them. Would they really have preferred him to act in “the old-fashioned way”? Undoubtedly, some would have felt more comfortable if he had done so, for in the absence of Paul’s example of using his power for the sake of others, they could have concluded that they were “off the hook” regarding their own personal transformation.

Consider, then, Paul’s Letter to Philemon in which Paul did not let this slave-owner “off the hook.” First note that Paul referred to himself as the one who “begot” Onesimus, not at all to suggest his authority over Onesimus, but to emphasize to Philemon as Onesimus’ owner the deep bond that had resulted from Paul’s spiritual “begetting” of Onesimus as his “offspring” [*teknon*] in Christ. In Paul’s rhetorical jousting with Philemon, Paul apparently sought to argue like this: On the one hand Onesimus was Philemon’s slave, but on the other he had recently become Paul’s surrogate “son.” Yet more importantly Onesimus had also become Paul’s surrogate “brother” in Christ. Therefore Philemon should also recognize Onesimus as his brother — indeed as “a beloved brother” (v. 16).

Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus back into the household as he would welcome Paul himself. Then Paul set the framework for the future by his use of sibling language to describe and define the relationship he envisioned among Onesimus, Philemon and himself. They were all now “brothers,” and evidence from Paul’s brilliant rhetoric is strong that he sought to set for Philemon’s imitation a persuasive example of the renunciation of patriarchal authority. Thus in contrast to Joubert’s claim that Paul used sibling language to mask his actual patriarchal role, I argue that Paul sought to persuade both by encouragement as brother to brother and by his own example of surrendering control over both Onesimus and Philemon.

The same spirit pervades the passage in 1 Thessa. 2:11-12: “As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his offspring [*tekna*], urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Note that “offspring” is a better translation of the Greek term *teknon* than is “child,” because the latter English word implies dependency and immaturity while “offspring” only states relationship. Here the emphasis is on “urging, encouraging, pleading,” not on “demanding, commanding, and dominating,” actions and attitudes more readily associated with the fathers in Paul’s world.

And here I register my strong disagreement with Elizabeth Castelli’s reading of 1 Cor. 4. For all Castelli’s literary sophistication, her interpretation misses entirely Paul’s undermining of precisely those justifications for privilege and domination that characterized the patriarchal system (*Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* 1991). As David M. Bossman observes: “Paul’s role of father is one of instruction, encouragement, and reinforcement rather than one that is authoritative, powerful, or punitive as one might assume from true patriarchy.” Even so, Paul’s preferred manner of addressing the Thessalonians, already in 1:4, is as his “brothers and sisters” not as his offspring. He noted their emulation of his service among them (1:6). And he described his demeanor among them as “gentle... like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (2:7). Paul’s converts may well have regarded his behavior toward them as that of a maternal uncle, an *avunculus*, who had no recognized authority but who was admired when he offered nurture and teaching to his nephews and nieces.

So, did Paul’s teaching and behavior incline his readers to call him “father”? In his letters she

never exhorted his brothers and sisters in Christ to do so. Certainly the metaphor of “begetting” easily fits the experience of Paul as he sowed the “seed” of the Gospel. And it is this experience that generated Paul’s use of “father” language, rather than any intent to replicate patriarchal patterns of dominance in relation to his household-churches. He did indeed claim that his “begetting” his spiritual offspring should obligate them to listen to his challenge of their arrogant attitude and dominating behavior and not to be misled by other teachers. He wrote: “Though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (4:15). But he quickly reverted to calling the Corinthians his “brothers and sisters,” by far his favorite metaphor for his relationship to them and for their relationships among themselves, 39 times in 1 Corinthians alone! The probability is very high that they referred to him as “Brother Paul,” reserving the term “father” for the one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist” (8:6).

Paul’s Personal Example

In support of this claim, note carefully the radically anti-patriarchal, personal model for the surrender of privileges which Paul himself had demonstrated to the Corinthians. The Australian Greco-Roman ancient historian Edwin Judge has called attention to Paul’s “pursuit of radical self-humiliation” which Judge finds running through all Paul’s work “in theology and ethics alike, and on into his practical relations with both followers and rivals” (*Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* (1972) 15:36). Judge comments that Paul’s attitude was “in violent reaction to much that was central to the classical way of life.” In short, Paul’s behavior demonstrated that this understanding of the Gospel had undermined in his own life the patriarchal assumptions that were “central to the classical way of life,” with which he had grown up. As already observed, twice in his letter to the Corinthians he urged them to “be imitators of me,” and in each case he was challenging behavior that he regarded as spiritually arrogant (4:8-21) and divisive (11:1).

Paul’s credibility with his readers could be high because the sharply counter-cultural perception of power taught and demonstrated by Jesus had created a profound upheaval in Paul’s own sense of honorable behavior. As one who had been liberated by the Spirit of Jesus from the need to dominate and control others, Paul became motivated to use his power, training, and gift to empower, to build up, to reconcile, to befriend the socially inferior, to encourage the weak—in short, to serve and to love [*agape*] as he had become convinced that Israel’s God loves.

Three Barriers to Understanding

Why, then, has it been so easy to misread Paul’s words as if he intentionally or inadvertently reinforced the prevailing patriarchal system of his world? Three suggestions have occurred to me: 1) fantasies regarding the extent of Paul’s influence and authority in the first century; 2) inadequate analysis of the forms of influence and justifications of authority in Paul’s world—resulting in misunderstanding of Paul’s roles and leadership goals, and 3) confusion regarding the relation of patriarchal and egalitarian social systems.

Fantasies about Paul’s Authority

First, my sense is that many misinterpretations are based on the assumption that Paul already enjoyed in the first century the high degree of authority his letters gained only during the decades after his death or again during the Protestant Reformation and among contemporary Lutherans and Evangelicals. There simply was no central teaching authority for Christians in the first century, neither that of Paul, or

Peter, or anyone else. And in those areas where Paul was breaking ground for the Gospel, his claims about a divine reversal of major cultural values must have been regarded both as life-giving and as the greatest foolishness. As he wrote, the Gospel is “foolishness to the Gentiles, but... God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:22-25). Only if we constantly keep in mind the precariousness of Paul’s influence over his new Mediterranean converts, will we be able to evaluate his occasional, if later unsuccessful, attempt to co-opt and subvert “father” language.

Roles and Goals of Leadership

Second, in light of all I have presented here, I argue that we need to construct a culturally sensitive reframing of our perception of Paul’s role and goal as a leader. Bruce Malin helpfully distinguishes between the managerial role and a less formal leadership role. Managers include kings, priests, fathers, lords, bank presidents et al. whose rights and authority are rooted in law, tradition, and ascribed social position. In contrast, leaders are those who have achieved their influence by what they have actually done for their followers. In Malin’s words: “Normally the following is due to some generalized reciprocity initiative” such as generosity or freely offering vital information, “that serves as a starter mechanism building up a following in generalized reciprocity” (*Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* 1986: 109). None of Paul’s roles — such as scribe (among the Judeans), itinerant philosopher (among the Gentiles), and prophet/apostle (among his house-based groups) — fit well in the managerial category. Rather his power and influence in all these roles were based on the trust he had generated as a person who knew what he was talking and writing about and whose personal behavior modeled his message.

That is, Paul did not seek to exploit the managerial role of a father. To be sure, Paul used strong words of rebuke and blame when writing to those he experienced as arrogant, as “recalcitrant students’ difficult to cure and in need of a dose of stringent medicine,” as Clarence E. Glad quite helpfully concludes. Glad fruitfully compares the pedagogy and psychagogy (“leadership of souls”) of Paul and the Epicurean Philodemus. Glad contends that “Paul’s use of blame meshes squarely within the tradition that valued therapeutic harshness” (*Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychology* 1995: 310). Glad observes that Paul presents himself in the roles of a “frank friend and a loving but stern father who attempts by means of more stringent forms of persuasion to change the self-deceptive and arrogant wise in Corinth” (325). In my judgment, to serve his argument Glad greatly exaggerates the apparent patriarchal aspect of Paul’s rhetoric behavior. But, as I see it, the power of his case would not at all be diminished if he gave weight instead to the kinds of admonishing rhetoric appropriate to sibling relationships.

On the other hand Glad seems right to target with his major contention that Paul’s gentleness or harshness was specifically calculated to influence the distinctive views and behavior of his hearers: gentleness for the insecure students and rough, even sarcastic, rhetoric for those here regarded as arrogant. In both cases Paul spoke frankly as a considerate friend and brother.

Egalitarianism is Not the Opposite of Patriarchy

Third, scholars have not only overlooked the central role that male domination of males played in the ancient Mediterranean patriarchal system. Along with social analysts and journalists, they have also mistakenly assumed that the terms “egalitarianism” and “patriarchy” describe opposite ends of the same social-political spectrum. Inadvertently, they have blurred the distinctions between two ancient social

institutions: politics and kinship. These two missteps lead inevitably away from comprehension of Paul's implicit and explicit critique of the patriarchy of his day.

In the Greco-Roman world, kinship and politics provided the key metaphors for a wide variety of human relationships. On the one hand, the term "patriarchy" belongs to the semantic field of kinship, the realm of the family. On the other hand, the term "egalitarian" belongs to the semantic field of politics and refers to such things as equal access to the vote, to positions of public leadership, and to ownership of property. Thus the opposite of patriarchal dominance is not egalitarian anarchy (or cooperation), as interpreters have commonly inferred, but something else — something for which we may not yet have a better term than *non-patriarchy*.

On the other hand, the opposite of egalitarianism is not patriarchy as such but monarchy, oligarchy, or despotism. To be sure, part of our confusion in this area has been abetted by Roman Emperors who sought to disguise their monarchy by selling it as a higher and public form of patriarchy. After five hundred years of the Roman Republic and the Romans' pride in not having to obey a king, the emperor surely could not be thought to be a king or a dictator. Julius Caesar had come to an nasty end because he was so perceived. So his successful successor Octavius (Caesar Augustus) brilliantly headed off the charges that led to the assassination of his predecessor by emphatically asserting that by no means could he be regarded as a king. Rather, beginning in 2 BCE, as Caesar Augustus he should be honored simply as the *pater patriae*, the father of the fatherland! Christians who were taught to "call no man father on earth" inevitably clashed with such a political co-opting of kinship rhetoric. And by the fourth century, thousands of Christians had paid with their lives for their refusal to honor the emperor as their "father."

So any confusion about the metaphor taken from kinship and politics is understandable, but certainly regrettable for having obscured the primary thrust of Paul's challenge to the patriarchal system of his world. Paul's vision of a society of siblings in which only God is called "father" would not have led him or his followers to think of egalitarian political relations. Rather, he exhorted his readers and hearers to join him in undermining patriarchal ideology and those it privileged and to practice "general reciprocity," that is, generous mutual support and sharing without keeping score (see, for example 1 Cor. 13). Paul envisioned the followers of Jesus respecting and giving honor to each other in the way that characterized their relations among siblings at their best.

Here it is essential to keep in mind that blood-related siblings exhibited significant differences in their capacities, strengths, and relative influence in their relationships with each other. Likewise, Paul acknowledged differences in the capacities and relative strengths among the members of his house churches. Some of them were "weak" and some were "strong" (Romans 15:1). Some had "knowledge," others did not (1 Cor. 8:1-7). Some were well-born and others "had nothing" (1 Cor. 11:22). While each had received a "spiritual gift" (*charisma*) for building up the community and contributing to the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7), there was a great variety among these gifts. And some of these gifts, such as prophecy and teaching, were more important to the health of these house churches than others' spiritual gifts, such as "speaking in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:1-6).

In response to this diversity, Paul's apparent goal was not the creation of an egalitarian community in the political sense, but a well-functioning family in the kinship sense. In this family, each surrogate family member used his or her strengths, whatever they were, first of all to enrich the quality of life in the family rather than for themselves as individuals. Thus I contend that Paul was anti-patriarchal while not being egalitarian. His vision is that of a society of siblings, of surrogate brothers and sisters, not related by blood, but now bound together by something even deeper: the personally chosen, intentionally embraced,

and shared commitment to the will of God the Compassionate.

Appealing to the example of Jesus, Paul especially urged the “strong” to pay special attention to the “weak,” gently empowering those who were weak to become strong themselves. Such behavior would create a dynamic “horizontal” network of exchanges of spiritual power and material goods rather than support a fixed hierarchy of any kind. In Paul’s view, God measures the true strength of the strong by their willingness to use their strength not first for themselves but for the sake of those who were weaker among them. By thus undermining the values that reinforced patriarchal domination (*patria potestas*), Paul opened the way for persons of all ages and all blood-family positions to relate to each other as brothers and sisters.

CONCLUSION

By no means are these profound challenges to any patriarchal arrangement of society the *last* word on the ancient family in either the Jesus-tradition or Paul’s letters. Rather, they present the *first* word, apparently intended to dismantle conventional patrilineal blood ties in preparation for the creation of an alternative, surrogate family structure in which no person would function as a patriarch. No person, including blood-kin fathers, would be expected to dominate—or have permission to dominate—the others in the family. Indeed, in Paul’s new understanding of equality, the God of Israel measures the strength of the “strong” by their capacities and willingness to empower the “weak.”

A persistent and widely influential Western scholarly tradition highlights the differences rather than the similarities among the various theological views we find in early Christian documents, often beginning by stressing the undeniable differences between Jesus and Paul. This approach, however informative it has been, has largely overlooked and obscured the significant *agreements* between Paul and Jesus that I have demonstrated in this paper. In particular Paul agreed with Jesus on how people are to regard each other, how they are to respond to each other, and how they are to treat each other.

The historical Jesus traditions and the writings of Paul both share and emphasize the same radical reversal of central cultural values, including:

1. the rejection of filial piety, especially patriarchal authority
2. the invitation to become members of a surrogate family formed by sibling kinship
3. the redefinition of the basis for attaining honor: serving rather than dominating
4. the demonstration of authentic power which now was characterized as empowerment rather than a control of others.

Paul continued the historical Jesus’ vision of the surrogate kinship of “brothers and sisters” according to which kinship based on blood-ties was rejected in favor of relationships rooted in the personally chosen, intentionally embraced and shared commitment to the will of God the Compassionate. Paul’s basic model for his communities was a family of such “brothers and sisters”—his favored designation for his readers—without an earthly father. For Paul, almost without exception, only God was to be the father of each community. The author of 1 Peter strongly agreed. As John H. Elliott has emphasized: “The author of 1 Peter asserts that God alone is the father of the Christian household and that, while the emperor deserves respect, as do all persons, God alone is the object of their awe and reverence (2:17).” (*What Is Social Scientific Criticism?* 1993:85)

What then did Paul have to say to the fathers who became members of his house-based groups? In light of my argument I suggest that he would have expressed the first century Greek equivalent of “God over yourself, my brother! For in our group we are all brothers and sisters. If your son or daughter is in the group, meet your new brother and sister ‘in the Lord.’ For among us, only God is called ‘Father.’”

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See also:

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