

PATRIARCHY AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

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This term, we will be exploring the theme of the so-called, Lord's Prayer, from a variety of perspectives. Some speakers, I hope, will speak about what the Lord's Prayer means to them – their personal experience of this prayer. Others will focus on some of the historic, linguistic and ideological contexts in which the prayer has been used and misused.

The title, 'Lord's Prayer', already feels problematic in itself – though the question of Lordship as expressed in the New Testament, is largely a question for another day.

The name of the Lord's Prayer, differs in different traditions. Some call the prayer that Jesus Taught us, the 'Our Father' prayer, the Pater Noster in Latin. When repeated throughout the western world and the British Empire, it would have had the capacity to seep into your bones as an unquestionable ideological defence of the ultimate cosmic patriarchy.

God himself, parked at the top of the tree, with the King or some authority figure, as his representative on earth. And this is precisely how imperial pagan religions throughout history have functioned. In the history of western Christianity, the two major religions feeding into this tradition seem to be Greek, and Roman.

The Greek Gods – are the dysfunctional family that live on top of Mount Olympus, on a diet of tinned rice pudding and divinely supercharged red bull, and not surprisingly -have literally titanic anger management issues. Zeus, is literally, the father of Athena, Apollo and Artemis, Hermes, Ares, and Dionysus. Of course, he had gods with many different mothers. And Zeus was the cosmic Father, or in Greek – the Sky Father.

And the Romans come along, and steal some of these Greek gods to add to their own pantheon. And top of the Roman divinity tree was, of course, Jupiter – which literally – is Father Zeus. Zeus Pater. Again, the Sky God!

And in these cultures, any tyrant or king, has to show that they themselves are directly descended from the gods. They have to be able to show, that somewhere, in their family tree, is a divine figure – proving that they have divine genes. So, they are worthy to rule, because it is written in heaven.

But it wasn't just at the top of the human food chain that you would have a divinely endorsed super-father. The authority of the father trickled all the way down through the empire, from the marble corridors of Rome, to the flea ridden hovels of the provinces – the authority of the Father was enshrined in law.

And it was enshrined in culture – the economy in the empire in which Jesus lived, was based on the relationship between patrons and clients, again- a patron being rooted in the word for a father. And if you are living as a peasant in the empire like this, and you are being unfairly treated – where do you go for justice? To your patron, to the head of your household, to the representative of the very authority that imposed that unfairness on you in the first place. The patron had absolute authority. And each patron had a patron – from the peasant all the way up to the emperor.

From top to bottom, in the patriarchy of the Roman world into which Jesus was born – the father, the patron, the head of the household – these were ultimately representatives of Jupiter, of Father Zeus. The Sky God.

So Jesus pitches up, and encourages his followers to pray to Our Father, which art in heaven. The Sky God. And the word the New Testament uses for heaven – is a word for the sky. So – isn't Jesus just endorsing that same old patriarchy in a new way? That seems to be how, for most of history, it has been interpreted.

But I have another suggestion about what Jesus is up to here, even though it has not yet been subjected to peer review. And who doesn't want to hear a talk about patriarchy, when it's delivered by a white English ordained gammon-headed father-of-4 aged 18-55?

But it looks to me, like Jesus was parodying this entire patriarchal system. Any king, carries divine genes – and is an earthly manifestation of heavenly authority. So when Jesus pitches up, a peasant tradesmen from a provincial nowhere, on the margins of society – what kind of God does that kind of person represent?

In the first instance, the God that Jesus represents is one that completely subverts the entire, Roman patriarchal system. Now, instead of taking your gripes, your concerns, your needs – up through an horrifically unjust hierarchical system – you get to go straight to the God of heaven – without having to go through any of that patriarchal clutter. Jesus has subverted the entire patron client, authority structure that rested on the authority of the Father – and he uses the notion of God himself as a Father to do exactly that!

And of course, if that is how this prayer kicks off – and you allow that to shape your reading of the rest of the prayer – look at how it might go:

Hallowed be thy name. In other words, the Hebrews worshipped a nameless God – one whose identity could not be manipulated or reduced to human power games, one that could not be dragged down into the earthly patriarchies that shaped the economic and political authority structures of the day. God's identity is Holy – he does not have offspring in any conventional sense.

Thy Kingdom Come – is, in an imperial context with emperors, kings, and lord – They kingdom come is a cry for regime change.

Thy will be done, is the opposite of the tyrant's 'My will be done' that then seeks divine endorsement for human atrocities.

The cry for daily bread – is a cry for any earthly Lord – to do their job. Not to go exert power to gain status, but to provide people with bread. And when Jesus' contemporaries farmed a land that was flowing with milk and honey, only to see it taxed away to fill foreign tables and foreign purses – asking for our daily bread was a literal request. This is what Lord's across ancient cultures were supposed to do. The English word for a Lord, is literally, the loaf-ward – whose job is to provide bread for people.

Forgiveness of sins, whatever else it might mean, was originally a declaration of debt amnesty. In an empire that relied on people honouring their debt – Jesus goes around cancelling debt – which is why one economic historian has recently argued that Jesus was crucified because of his economic policy.

Lead us not into temptation – is better described, leading us not to undergo ordeals – and to be delivered from evil is self-explanatory.

But, in some, from the lips of a Galilean Peasant, in a small province whose history had been spent being buffeted between the warring power games of the world's great empires, having a prayer that begins Our Father – might well have been a total, brilliant, subtle, ideological subversion of the most explicit and successful patriarchy the world had ever seen.