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Image of God the Father in the New Testament : Introductory Issues

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IMAGE OF GOD THE FATHER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

Teaching on God the Father has only recently been recognized as a separate part of dogmatic theology. Its primacy might seem obvious. If the structure of New Testament theology is to reflect the traditional order of dogmatic treatises, presentation of the content related to the First Person of the Holy Trinity should precede christology and pneumatology¹. Indeed, for a long time there has been no equivalent of the two latter among the treatises devoted to the Divine Persons. “On One God in Trinity of Persons” cannot be treated as such, nor can be any of its two parts, sometimes considered separately. The gap was apparently unnoticed during the first period of the debate on the content of dogmatics, which started in the middle of the last century. Classical dogmatics was then blamed for taking insufficient account of the historical nature of God’s revelation with its anthropocentric orientation and christocentric dynamism. The debate, however, did not lead to any final solutions. Modern textbooks of dogmatic theology do not present their content according to one universal order².

In the course of the last century, the development of biblical studies often provided inspiration for dogmatic theology. Such influence can be noticed in the above-mentioned debate on the content of dogmatics. Instead of quoting biblical texts as *dicta probantia* and limiting itself to speculative reflection on the ontic elements of revelation, dogmatic theology has turned to their dimension related to

¹ Problems with naming that branch of science with a term equivalent to “christology” or “pneumatology” are emblematic. For example, Polish has two terms to describe the above-mentioned branch of dogmatic theology: “patrylogia” (from the French “patrilogie”) in J.D. Szczurek, *Bóg Ojciec w tajemnicy Trójcy Świętej. Elementy patrylogii*, Kraków 2003; “paterologia” (from the English “paterology”) in J. Szymik, *Traktat o Bogu Jedynym*, in: *Dogmatyka*, t. 3, red. E. Adamiak, A. Czaja, J. Majewski, Warszawa 2006, p. 177.

² In the two-volume textbook edited by T. Schneider (*Handbuch der Dogmatik*, Düsseldorf 1995²), the reflection on God is divided into two parts, placed at the beginning and at the end of the series of treatises. Teaching on the Only God as the protagonist of salvation history comes in the beginning, while a reflection on the Holy Trinity as the fullness of God’s self-revelation completes the whole work. An innovative solution can be found in the one-volume textbook by G.L. Müller (*Katholische Dogmatik. Für Studium und Praxis der Theologie*, Freiburg 1998²). The author has distinguished a part called theology and entitled “God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus”. The chapter has been placed before christology and pneumatology and is separate from trinitology. A separate treatise focusing on the revealed content concerning God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus helps to bridge a significant gap in dogmatic theology.

salvation history. Biblical studies have had a similar impact on the development of a separate treatise on God the Father. An important role was played by the studies of Jesus' words related to God as his Father and God as the Father of men³. However, the studies did not result in creation of a separate biblical science devoted to God, similar to biblical christology and pneumatology. The need for a treatise on God the Father, as perceived by dogmatics, provides an incentive for biblical scholars to present biblical data related to the main protagonist in the history of salvation⁴.

1. The Need for a Theology of God the Father

There is no other way to know the Father than through his Son (John 1:18; 1 Tim 2:5). The necessity of such mediation means that, in its reflection upon Jesus of Nazareth, theology should go beyond "horizontal" christologies. The revelation of the identity of Jesus is not an aim in itself. He himself reveals the Father: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The whole revelation transmitted by the Son comes from the Father and should lead to the knowledge of the Father.

The order of knowing the Persons of the Trinity results from the ontological relations between them. The Father is the source of all relationships in the Holy Trinity: giving birth to the Son and sending out the Holy Spirit. The primacy in the relations within the Trinity corresponds to the role of God the Father as the main protagonist of holy history, the author of the plan and the goal of the history of salvation.

Biblical theology oriented towards the teaching on God the Father takes account of the evolution of revelation in its entirety, as testified by both parts of the Bible. Such theology makes it possible to define the links between the two parts, the elements they share in common and those that make them different. It is only in the light of teaching on God the Father that genuine elements of continuity, discontinuity and progress between the two stages of revelation may be discussed. Christological or pneumatological studies will not demonstrate such evolution, since the discovery of the identity of the Son and the action of the Spirit belongs to the Christian revelation. The novelty of the revelation contained in the New Testament can only be fully perceived against the background of the teaching on God found in the Old Testament and the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period.

The lack of an advanced theological reflection devoted to God the Father is in a sharp contrast with intensively developing christology, and recently also pneumatology. The reasons for such asymmetry are common for both dogmatic and biblical theology.

³ W. Marchel, *Abba, Père! La prière du Christ et des chrétiens*, Roma 1963; J. Jeremias, *Abba. Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte*, Göttingen 1966.

⁴ J. Galot, *Découvrir le Père. Esquisse d'une théologie du Père*, Louvain 1985; J.D. Szcurek, *Bóg Ojciec w tajemnicy Trójcy Świętej. Elementy patrylogii*, Kraków 2003.

1. The incarnation of the Word, and not the First Person of the Holy Trinity means that God speaking to men through his Son becomes the content of faith (John 1:14; Heb 1:1). Thus, theologians and exegetes, while interpreting the content of faith and studying the testimonies for the central saving events, focus their attention on the person of Jesus and his activity, his *Sitz im Leben* and the reception of his deeds and his teaching during the pre-paschal period and among the post-paschal community⁵.

2. With the development of biblical sciences, the interpretation of revelation testimonies has been shifted towards religious and historical studies. As a result, theology focuses on one side of the interpersonal relationship, namely on Jesus Christ. More precisely, theology stops at his image contained in the first three Gospels or tries to seek some earlier elements in the pre-synoptic tradition. The content of the Fourth Gospel or the letters about Jesus revealing the Father are generally beyond the scope of its studies.

3. Modern theology rightly places emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the mission of Jesus. For its full Trinitarian dimension, however, it still lacks a focus on the Father, comparable to the development of pneumatology. Pneumatology has discovered a significant role for the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the person and the activity of Jesus by pointing to the mission of the Spirit in the life of Christians and the Church. If the role of the Father has not been discovered in a similar way, it may be due to the fact that the revelation of his Person has been reduced to the revelation of God in the history of salvation. The reduction is visible in the presentation of the teaching on God the Father in the two parts of the Bible. The truth about God as Father is already revealed in the first part, where he is presented as the Father of the chosen people. That teaching will only find its confirmation in the theology of the second part of the Bible. In other words, the theology of God the Father in the New Testament is considered to be identical with that of the Old Testament.

4. The novelty of the revelation brought by Jesus lies in the manifestation of the truth about the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. The context of religious dialogue favours such understanding of the Christian revelation. If Christians and Jews share the knowledge of and faith in the same God, then God the Father seems to “have been known” already in the Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people. Therefore, an interest in the teaching on God the Father in the New Testament appears only on the margin of other issues, which are typical for the message of Jesus: his messianity, the kerygma of the Kingdom of God, eschatology, ethics.

5. The reduction of knowing the Father to knowing God finds its expression in religious language. The terms “God” and “Father” are treated as synonymous. That synonymy would be confirmed by their parallel or even interchangeable use

⁵ In the subject index of the first volume of the series devoted to the historical Jesus, there is an entry “father of Jesus *see* Joseph”. – J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking of Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, New York 1991, p. 478.

in biblical texts. However, the words of the Father speaking about Jesus and those of Jesus speaking about the Father do not support this approach. At the baptism and transfiguration, God does not speak of Jesus as the Son of God, but his Son. Addressing God in his own words (therefore except Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), Jesus always calls him "Father", never "God". The same message can also be found in the words of Jesus relating to his disciples' knowledge of him: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), and not "Whoever has seen me has seen God".

6. If Jesus' words about himself in relation to the Father were to be interpreted within the meaning of biblical and non-biblical messianic texts written before the New Testament, the most significant content of Christian revelation might be obscured. Jesus makes himself known as the Son of the Father, and, only in this sense, as the Son of God. Such a way of knowing him is related to the concept of the so-called messianic secret, which provides interpretation to the order of silence imposed by Jesus on both demons, who tried to uncover his relationship with God, and his disciples, who opposed erroneous opinions of others. According to the correct interpretation of the concept, calling Jesus the Son of God, Christ or the Servant of the Lord does not mean knowing the truth about him. If the meaning of those words defining Jesus were to be limited to the Old Testamental ideas of calling the Servant of Jahveh and establishing the king as God's anointed and son, they would not be able to reveal the mystery of his incomparable relationship with the Father. The Old Testamental content expressed in messianic titles seems to be deeply transformed by the testimonies of the New Testament, and only within their context does the idea of divine sonship take on its true meaning of his being the Son of the Father.

7. In a majority of collects, only the Son and the Holy Spirit are explicitly mentioned, while there is no clear reference to the Father. Even though, after the 1971 reform of the Roman liturgy, most mass prayers invoke God the Father, their anacletic very rarely refers to the Father as the addressee of the prayer. Instead of an explicit address, phrases "Almighty (Eternal) God" or "God" are customarily used. Outside the context of liturgy, they might be interpreted as calling upon God in the Holy Trinity, not addressing God the Father. Only together with the conclusion of the mass prayer and its reference to the mediation of the Son, does the invocation of God Almighty mean that the prayer, in fact, invokes God the Father. Such ambiguous wordings in the Roman liturgy do not help to perceive the need for developing a theology of God the Father.

2. The Primacy of the History of Salvation Over the History of Religion

Studies of the historical Jesus could attempt to analyze his impact on the development of the image of God the Father in the writings of the New Testament. However, a reconstruction of the theology of Jesus of Nazareth would only be possible if one were able to capture his words and deeds, and separate them from

the further development of his idea of God in the synoptic tradition. Such reconstruction poses as many problems as the separation of the historical Jesus from the Jesus of faith or pre-paschal traditions from those of the post-paschal period. The synoptic problem remains unsolved in the research on the genesis of the Gospels. The theology of the historical Jesus can be determined by means of reconstruction of the earlier versions of the Gospels texts and clarification of the religious, social and political contexts against which the first Christian communities operated in Palestine. Such attempts, however, remain highly hypothetical. Even though, despite the above-mentioned difficulties, it is possible to know certain features of the pre-paschal Jesus, arriving at the complete theology of the historical Jesus is not feasible if merely historiographic criteria are to apply. Therefore, the evolution of the image of God from the features found in Jesus of Nazareth's theology to its final form contained in the theology of canonical scriptures cannot be a subject of synthesis in biblical theology.

It does not mean, however, that the historical dimension of the Bible is to be ignored. History is accounted for in its real dimension, not reduced to historiographically verifiable data. History in its essence means gradual revelation of God and its reception by people. That is the proper historical context for the Sacred Scriptures of Israel and the Church, the fundamental *Sitz im Leben* of revelation. Both Testaments testify to the progress of God's revelation. In the interpretation of that progress, two deformations have occurred. Since the times of ancient Christianity, they have assumed various forms defined as Marcionism and Ebionism.

The former proclaims an absolute novelty of the Christian revelation of God, compared to the analogous content found in the books of the Old Testament. Solving the ancient crisis over the biblical canon did not close the discussions on the meaning of the first part of the Bible. The debate re-opened in the beginning of the last century, when biblical scholars, rather than the authorship of the Old Testament, questioned its relevance for modern Christianity. The answer they provided was frequently negative. It may not have been given explicitly, but it could be inferred from exegetic studies. As the texts were combined with their original context, a gap between the two parts of the Bible widened. An analysis of Old Testament texts has to take account of sociological, historical and religious conditions which determined the various stages in the long history of Israel, while the text of the New Testament have to be studied within the analogous context of the early Christianity. Thus, the texts seem to be coming from two very different and very distant worlds. The development of the historical-critical method, particularly *Redaktionsgeschichte*, resulted in creation of a number of separate biblical theologies, often juxtaposed to one another. An emphasis was placed on the differences between theological approaches within individual books, their groups and, above all, between the main parts of the Bible: the Old and the New Testament. Such trend dominated in a number of exegetic works written in the first half of 20th century.

The latter view, defined as Ebionic, proclaims an opposite thesis: there is no difference in the image of God between the two parts of the Bible, there is full conver-

gence. This trend was particularly popular among Christians after the Second World War. The development of the trend to bring the two Testaments closer together was, to a large extent, triggered by a reaction to the tragedy of Shoah and an objection against the attempted dejudaisation of the New Testament. A great impact of archaeological and paleographic discoveries (Qumran, Neophyti) must also be noted. Other factors include: a growing appreciation for Palestinian Judaism in the historical-critical method, recognition of theological pluralism in the Second Temple period, development of Old Testament criticism with a stress on the ancient versions (e.g. Peshitta), and an interest in the methods of rabbinic exegesis. A document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (*The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*) draws attention to modern Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in the light of the new reality brought by the person and event of Christ, who exceeded the expectations of Israel and fulfilled the promises in an unexpected way: “[...] Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression”⁶. However, according to PBC, possible parallel reading does not offer a possibility to replace one by the other, and christological reasons are cited: “For to read the Bible as Judaism does necessarily involves an implicit acceptance of all its presuppositions, that is, the full acceptance of what Judaism is, in particular, the authority of its writings and rabbinic traditions, which exclude faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God”⁷. It is symptomatic that the document presents faith in Jesus Christ as the reason of a fundamental difference in the parallel reading. Does the parallel reading, however, offer the same image of God? The PBC document seems to be giving a positive answer, thus, accepting part of the Ebionic interpretation which points to the conformity of the teaching on God the Father in the Old and the New Testament. It does not mention any discontinuities between Judaism and Christianity in the subject of the revelation of God. On the contrary, it strongly emphasizes the common teaching on one God in the two parts of the Bible, passing over the text which indicates a discontinuity: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made [him] known” (John 1:18)⁸. The literal meaning of the quotation prompts a statement that, pointing to the christological content which distinguishes Christianity from Judaism, the PBC document stresses the uniqueness of Father’s Exegete, but fails to notice the novelty of the central message of his exegesis. This approach is reflected by a striking gap in the text. The theme of God’s fatherhood is almost completely absent: the only references to God as Father occur in the quotations of the words of Jesus and have a purely

⁶ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, n. 22.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Occurs only as a siglum in footnote 294 referring to a christocentric text.

christocentric interpretation. The whole document contains only one reference to the fatherly love of God in the Old Testament (*The Jewish People...*, p. 86), while the only fatherhood mentioned is that of Abraham (*ibidem*, p. 55).

3. The Primacy of the Composition of the Texts over their Genesis

It is possible to present a synthesis of the teaching on God the Father without making a dubious attempt to reconstruct its original form found in the teaching of the historical Jesus or its development by the synoptic tradition. At the end of the process presented in three parts (the periods of life and activity of Jesus, the kerygma of the Apostles and the formation of the Gospels) definite texts emerge. The full image of God the Father comes from the texts read in their final form. They contain a coherent content, including both the elements that come from tradition in an unchanged form and those modified in the subsequent redaction processes and coming from the redactor. The redactors may be considered as the true authors of the texts, fully deserving the title of Evangelists.

The image of God emerges from the texts interpreted against their immediate and larger literary context. From the very starting point, such approach eliminates a number of hypothetical considerations which lead to exegetic conclusions that are only probable. The interpretation is not conditional on the solution of the synoptic problem (e.g. the precedence of Mark or Matthew among the Synoptics or the role of Q source). Phrases such as “Matthew’s theology”, “Mark’s words” etc. do not mean that the persons bearing such names are in fact historical agents speaking given words. The “identity” of the Evangelists is formed by the Gospels. They can be identified with the voice of the narrator. The theology of God the Father expressed in the synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles is presented from three perspectives: the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel according to Mark and the Gospel according to Luke with the Acts (Luke’s work). The theology of the given Gospel is not determined only by the elements that are unique and original in comparison with the other Synoptics. The redactor drew from tradition, either using his own style or changing nothing in the material which he absorbed into his work. The redactor’s own theological concepts can also be found in the material originating from tradition, which means that the theology of redaction may be identical with the theology of tradition⁹. Texts containing the teaching on God the Father are considered in their final shape in which they reached their first readers. Their meaning is analysed in connection with the larger parts to which they belong and in relation to the whole book.

⁹ One has to bear in mind a semantic overlap of such terms as own – authentic, original – complex, historical – theological, which are often juxtaposed in a diachronic analysis of the text.

4. The Question of Text Selection

The image of God the Father is unveiled in a number of parallel texts of the synoptic Gospels (the childhood of Jesus, his baptism and prayers, the beatitudes, teaching in parables, transfiguration). The above-mentioned passages could be compared horizontally, i.e. discussed successively with the indication of all the similarities and differences between the Gospels. Such method of presentation, however, disrupts the theological unity of the text, since the fragments woven into the whole evangelical narration give it a new identity, just as threads woven into a fabric (*textus*) make it a whole. The interconnection between the texts suggests a vertical presentation of the theologies contained in the individual Gospels as the most effective procedure. The teaching on God the Father is developed from the beginning to the end of the given book, through its successive words and pericopes. Despite the parallelism of synoptic pericopes, the differences between them are so numerous and significant that the vertical interpretation helps to present the content in a more transparent way.

It is significantly difficult to list all the texts containing the elements of teaching on God the Father. An analysis based on concordance – e.g. comparing the occurrence of the nouns “God” or “Father” – gives a very general impression of the semantic tendencies in the Gospels. As for the number of the word “God”, there is no significant differences between the first two Gospels (Matt – 51, Mark – 49¹⁰). In terms of frequency (the number of mentions per 1000 words), Mark (3.74) takes precedence over Matthew (2.4). However, considering that Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” corresponds to the “kingdom of God” in Mark, the proportion is reversed to the advantage of the first Gospel. Luke’s work is notably different from the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark (the word “God” occurs 122 times in the Gospel, which makes 5.44 times per 1000 words, and 164 times in the Acts of the Apostles, or 7.87 in terms of relative frequency). The occurrence of the word “Father” is more representative for the synoptic Gospels and the Acts. It is used 44 times in Matthew’s Gospel (relative frequency of 2.82), 4 times in Mark (0.41), 17 times in Luke (1.01) and 3 times in the Acts of the Apostles (0.19). A comparison of the above-mentioned data points to the Gospel according to Matthew as the most patrocetric among the synoptics. If the comparison is extended to the fourth Gospel, Matthew loses his primacy to John. In the Gospel of the latter, the word “Father” refers to God as many as 121 times (the relative frequency of 8.97 increases the distance between John and the synoptics).

It would be a grave error to discover the image of God the Father basing only on the explicit mentions of the terms in question. Taking account of the texts which directly name God “Father” would prove insufficient. They do not reveal the image of God the Father, but God as Father, and only to a limited extent, since an account should also be taken of the texts presenting Jesus as the Son of God

¹⁰ Including Mark 16:19 in the long canonical ending.

and other people as God's children. An absence of such terms as "father" or "son" does not necessarily imply lack of content referring to God the Father. The principle can be well illustrated by the following example. In the Sermon on the Mount, it is only in the first part of the parenetic speech, which directly follows the eight beatitudes, that Jesus openly speaks of God as Father: "[...] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Taking note of that passage, exegetes present it as Jesus' first revelation of the truth of God as their Father to his disciples¹¹. Limiting the analysis to explicit references leaves out the earlier words of Jesus where God is presented as the Father of men. Such a feature of God is demonstrated in the seventh beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9). The third beatitude also points to the fatherhood of God (Matt 5:5). Despite the lack of such references to God and his work as the kingdom of heaven, *passivum theologicum*, or mentions of sons of God or seeing God, the words about inheriting the earth unequivocally point to him as the Father of the meek. From whom, according to Matthew's theology, does one inherit the earth? When Jesus turns to the Father in prayer, He calls him Lord of heaven and earth. If the act of inheriting means taking over goods from the father, the promise of inheriting the earth implies that the meek as well as the peacemakers enjoy the rights of God's sons. There are even more parallels between the third and the eighth beatitude: the meek – the peacemakers; inheriting the earth – being called God's sons; identical number of words: in Greek, eight in each. All the beatitudes have the same source, thus, they all come from God the Father. The example proves that a patrocetric content may occur in texts which do not point directly to God as Father. Dictionary concordance is insufficient to take full account of all the texts which contain explicit or implicit references to God the Father.

OBRAZ BOGA OJCA W NOWYM TESTAMENCIE. ZAGADNIENIA WSTĘPNE

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W ubiegłym wieku rozwój nauk biblijnych inspirował refleksję teologii dogmatycznej. Odchodząc od powoływania się na teksty biblijne na zasadzie *dicta probantia* oraz od wyłącznie spekulatywnego traktowania ontycznych treści objawienia, teologia dogmatyczna zwróciła się ku ich wymiarowi historyczno-zbawczemu. Można zauważyć analogiczny wpływ współczesnej biblistyki na wyodrębnienie traktatu poświęconego Bogu Ojcu. Znaczącą rolę odegrały w nim studia nad wypowiedziami Jezusa o Bogu jako swoim Ojcu oraz o Bogu jako Ojcu ludzi. Studia te jednak nie doprowadziły do wyróżnienia biblijnej nauki o Bogu, analogicznej do chrystologii i pneumatologii biblijnej. W artyku-

¹¹ H. Langkammer, *Bóg jako Ojciec w świetle Nowego Testamentu*, Radom 1999, pp. 112-113.

le podano przyczyny tego braku oraz trudności w wyodrębnieniu tej nauki. Dostrzeżenie w dogmatyce jej potrzeby zachęca, aby przedstawić dane biblijne odnoszące się do głównego protagonisty całej historii zbawienia. Teologia biblijna, która jest zorientowana na naukę o Bogu Ojcu, jest w stanie uwzględnić rozwój całego objawienia, poświadczony w obydwu częściach Biblii, ponieważ przede wszystkim na tle tej nauki, którą zawierają Stary Testament i pisma judaizmu okresu Drugiej Świątyni, można dostrzec nowość objawienia Nowego Przymierza. W takim studium należy wziąć pod uwagę wszystkie teksty odnoszące się bezpośrednio i pośrednio do Boga Ojca.