

Franciscan University Presents
“Pope Benedict XVI and Jesus of Nazareth”
With guest, Dr. Brant Pitre

Excerpts from Dr. Brant Pitre’s “The Lord’s Prayer and the New Exodus”
(*Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 69-96—Pitre’s footnote references omitted for length)

In these excerpts from Dr. Brant Pitre’s essay “The Lord’s Prayer and the New Exodus” he develops a theme similar to one discussed in Pope Benedict’s Jesus of Nazareth. The theme in question has to do with how Jesus’ reply to the apostles’ request to “teach us how to pray” can be understood as an invitation to the “New Exodus” which Christ offers those who would follow him.

For almost two thousand years, Christians have recited the words of the Lord’s Prayer, the only one that Jesus is recorded as having taught his disciples (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). In the second century, Tertullian declared it to be “truly the summary of the whole gospel,” and, much later, St. Thomas Aquinas deemed it “the most perfect of prayers.”

But what does the prayer actually mean? More specifically, what did Jesus himself mean when he taught it to his disciples? And how would they, as first century Jews, have understood its language and imagery? These are important questions, and modern commentators have spilled an enormous amount of ink in the attempt to understand the prayer in its first-century context. Despite the widespread agreement that the Lord’s Prayer reflects the heart of Jesus’ message, questions still remain regarding exactly what the prayer reveals about how Jesus understood himself, his mission, and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Several years ago, N. T. Wright published a brief but thought-provoking article in which he argued that the Lord’s Prayer should be understood as a prayer for the “new Exodus.” Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets had expressed the hope that God would once again redeem the people of Israel in much the same way that he had done in the Exodus from Egypt. In this new Exodus, God would release his people from slavery to sin and

death, put an end to their exile from the promised land, and gather them, along with the Gentiles, into a restored kingdom and a new Jerusalem. According to Wright, the ancient Jewish hope for a new Exodus is the key to unlocking the meaning of the Lord's Prayer:

The events of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, the people's wilderness wandering, and their entry into the promised land were of enormous importance in the self-understanding and symbolism of all subsequent generations of Israelites, including Jews of the Second Temple period. . . . When YHWH restored the fortunes of Israel, it would be like a new Exodus—a new and greater liberation from an enslavement greater than that in Egypt. . . . And the Lord's Prayer can best be seen in this light as well—that is, as the prayer of the new wilderness wandering people. . . . This can be seen more particularly as we look at each of the clauses of the Lord's Prayer from a new Exodus perspective.

(...)

As we will see, each line of the prayer is rooted in the language and imagery of the Scriptures of Israel and in the prophetic hope for a new Exodus. When this Old Testament background is adequately taken into account, the Lord's Prayer does, in fact, appear to be a prayer for the new Exodus and all that it entails: the coming of the Messiah, the release of God's scattered people from exile, and the ingathering of the Israel and the Gentiles to the promised land of a new Jerusalem. To borrow a felicitous phrase from Wright himself, the Lord's Prayer reveals what can be called a "typological eschatology," in which the events of the first Exodus establish a prototype for how God will save his people in the end-times.

(pp. 69-71)

“Our Father”

The first aspect of the Lord’s Prayer that evokes both the Exodus from Egypt and the new Exodus is the opening address to God as “Our Father” (pa/ter h(mw=n) or “Father” (pa/ter) (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:1). Although at first glance the practice of addressing God as “Father” in prayer may seem unremarkable, when we turn to the Old Testament, it is by no means common. Although on several occasions God is depicted as, or compared to, a father, he is almost never addressed as “Father” in a prayer—except in a few key instances. When these are examined we find that both the image of God as father and the practice of addressing God as “Father” in prayer are tied with remarkable consistency to the Exodus from Egypt and the prophetic hope for a new Exodus.

As Wright points out, God’s command to Pharaoh to release the Israelites was directly based on his paternal relationship to Israel: “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me’; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son” (Exod. 4:22–23). Moreover, we find the same link present in the book of Hosea, when God refers to the past Exodus in terms of his paternal relationship to Israel: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1). Finally, the first explicit use of the Hebrew word “father” (b) for God in the Old Testament comes from the famous “Song of Moses,” which is, of course, a recollection of God’s past act of deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt (see Deut. 32:9–14). In light of such texts, Wright concludes:

Calling God “Father” not only evokes all kinds of associations of family life and intimacy; more importantly, it speaks to all subsequent generations of God as the God of the Exodus, the God who rescues Israel primarily because Israel is God’s first-

born son. The title “Father” says as much about Israel, and about the events through which God will liberate Israel, as it does about God.

(p. 72)

“Hallowed Be Thy Name”

These connections between the fatherhood of God and the new Exodus can be confirmed by turning to the first actual petition in the Lord’s Prayer: “Hallowed be thy name” (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2). Although the traditional translation of this line comes across in English as a declarative statement, the Greek is very clearly an imperative request: “May your name be hallowed!” In this case, familiarity may breed a certain lack of awareness for just how peculiar this line of the prayer is. Why should Jesus instruct his disciples to pray that God’s name be “hallowed” or “made holy”? Is not the divine name already holy? What might it mean for God to “hallow” his own name?

Here again the answer can be found by recourse to the Old Testament background of Jesus’ words. With regard to the first Exodus, few would doubt the prominence and importance of the revelation of God’s “name” to Moses in the famous theophany at Mount Sinai (Exod. 3:13–22). With regard to the new Exodus, many commentators agree that the language of “hallowing” God’s “name” is drawing on an eschatological prophecy from the book of Ezekiel, in which the Lord promises to one day vindicate the holiness of his name (Ezek. 36:23). However, while Ezekiel 36 is widely recognized as a direct parallel to Jesus’ words, commentators often ignore the larger context of the parallel, and the precise event that accompanies the hallowing of God’s name—the ingathering of the scattered tribes of Israel:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I

am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the Gentiles to which you came. And I will hallow my great name, which has been profaned among the Gentiles, and which you have profaned among them; and the Gentiles will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord GOD, when I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the Gentiles, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:22-28)

This is a striking vision of the coming age of salvation: the people of Israel will be set free from exile among the Gentiles and be gathered “from all the countries” into a renewed and restored promised land, a paradise that will be “like the garden of Eden” (Ezek. 36:35). Although in this particular passage Ezekiel does not explicitly use Exodus typology, he has already described this “gathering” of Israel “out of the countries” by drawing on imagery from the first Exodus from Egypt (see Ezek. 20:1–38, esp. 33–38). Hence, the final ingathering will truly be a new Exodus. Moreover, just as the first Exodus included Israel’s passing through the waters of the Red Sea (Exod. 14), so too this future restoration will be accompanied by the cleansing of Israel from its sins by “clean water” (Ezek. 36:25). This new Exodus, and all the events that will accompany it, will take place when God “hallows” his “name” by saving his people.

(pp. 78-79)

When seen in this light, the Lord's Prayer is not just a prayer to the Creator to save his people in the last days. It is a prayer to the God of the Exodus to see the plight of his suffering children and release them from slavery to sin and death. It is a plea for the Father to hallow his name by giving his children a new heart and a new spirit and bring them home to a land that will be more glorious than Eden of old. It is a prayer for the coming of the messianic kingdom, when both Israel and the Gentiles will pilgrimage together to a new Temple and a glorious new Jerusalem. It is a prayer for the new manna—the new “bread from heaven”—that the Messiah himself will give to the new Israel during the messianic age. It is a prayer for the great eschatological Jubilee, when the Messiah would free his people, not just from their debt, but from the even heavier burden of their iniquity. Finally, it is a prayer for divine mercy, for God to spare his people the eschatological *peirasmōs*, the “final Passover” of suffering and death that will precede the ultimate entry of the new Israel into “the glory of the kingdom.”

In short, the Lord's Prayer is nothing less than a prayer for the fulfillment of all God's covenant promises to Israel and the world, as contained in the Old Testament and inaugurated by the new Exodus of Jesus' own passion, death, and resurrection. It is in this light, the light of the Old Testament, that the words of St. Augustine ring true:

Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer.

(From the conclusion, pp. 95-96)

**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*
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***Jesus of Nazareth* by Pope Benedict XVI. Doubleday Publishing. Available through Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952. 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.**

***Jesus, The Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* by Brant Pitre. Baker Academic Publishing. Available on amazon.com.**

***What Is the Church? Confessions of a Cradle Catholic* by Dr. Regis Martin. Emmaus Road Publishing. Available through Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952. 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.**

***The Truth About Trouble* by Father Michael Scanlan, TOR. St. Anthony Messenger Press. Available through Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952. 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.**

***Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Doubleday Publishing. Available through Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952. 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.**