

EXEGETICAL BRIEF
Ephesians 3:15
All Fatherhood? Every Family?
The Whole Family?

Paul E. Zell

“On account of this I bend my knees to the Father from whom *πᾶσα πατριά* in heaven and on earth is named” (Ephesians 3:14-15). By and large the thrust of this passage appears to be indisputable, doesn’t it? Throughout his beautiful epistle St. Paul has been exulting in the divine Source of saving grace. God is carrying out the plan he formed before the foundation of the world, Paul writes, and he is doing it exclusively in Christ. The inspired writer has identified the beneficiaries of this amazing grace. Gentiles and Jews who were once dead in their transgressions and sins and who were by nature children of wrath have been made alive, raised, and seated with Christ, saved by grace. They have been reconciled to God and united with one another through the gospel. And the agent God has been using to make this mystery known? It has been none other than the apostle who considers himself less than the least of all the saints. This is grace upon grace!

Now at the close of the first half of his epistle Paul is picking up the prayer he set aside a dozen verses earlier. A humble supplicant, he nevertheless recognizes the extraordinary status he has been given in Christ. So he is about to pray boldly, asking that God would strengthen his readers in their inner man; that Christ would take up residence in their hearts; that along with all the saints the Ephesians would apprehend the greatness of Christ’s love and thus be filled with all the fullness of God.

The apostle’s prayer at the end of Ephesians 3 is a fitting conclusion to his grand symphony of praise. But what is the reader to make of Paul’s description of the Father before whom he bends his knees? In particular, how is *πᾶσα πατριά* to be understood? Is God the Father from whom “all fatherhood” in heaven and on earth is named? Or is it “every family” that is named from the Father? Or might Paul be petitioning the Father from whom “the whole family” in heaven and on earth is named? Today’s reader can once again rejoice in the grace of God as he gives each response to this exegetical question a closer look.

πᾶσα πατριά, all fatherhood

If πᾶσα πατριά is to be understood as “all fatherhood,” the exegete has several church fathers in his corner. In the first of his discourses against the Arians, Athanasius uses this verse to point out that God is the only true Father and that all created paternity is to conform to the pattern he has established (*Orat. in Arian.* i.23). Jerome and Theodoret suggest something similar, as do a few more recent theologians. As an example of the latter, one nineteenth century commentator has this passage in view when he announces that the heavenly Father is “the great original and prototype of the paternal relation, wherever found.”¹ In addition, if πᾶσα πατριά is taken as “all fatherhood,” the translator has a welcome opportunity to bring out the πατέρα / πατριά wordplay in his translation: “I bend my knees to the Father (πατέρα) from whom all fatherhood (πατριά) in heaven and on earth is named.”

Nowhere in this epistle has Paul prepared his reader for such an abstraction about human fatherhood, however. The idea seems to arrive out of the blue, so to speak. Likewise, nowhere else do the biblical writers use πατριά as an equivalent to πατρότης or, as Jerome translates, *paternitas*. Instead the noun πατριά somewhat consistently signifies a group that has a common father—in other words, a clan or a family. This is how πατριά is most readily understood in each of its half dozen occurrences in the Septuagint. (Cf. Dt 29:18(17); 2 Sa 14:7; 1 Chr 5:7; 6:54(39); Jer 2:4; Judith 8:18.) Besides Ephesians 3:15, the word πατριά appears twice elsewhere in the New Testament. St. Luke explains that Joseph traveled to Bethlehem for Caesar’s census “because he was from the house and family (πατριᾶς) of David” (Luke 2:4). Also, for the benefit of his fellow Jews gathered at Solomon’s Colonnade, Peter confirmed the covenant God had made with Abraham as follows: “In your offspring shall all the families (πατριαί) of the earth be blessed” (Acts 3:25).

Some scholars will only reluctantly set aside the interpretation of a Greek-speaking Bible scholar like Athanasius or of a translator like Jerome, who dealt with native speakers of the language. Yet of the aforementioned explanations of πᾶσα πατριά in Ephesians 3:15, the support for “all fatherhood” appears to be the shakiest.

πᾶσα πατριά, every family

Nowadays the majority of biblical exegetes and translators render πᾶσα πατριά as “every family.” Their argument typically begins with the assertion that when it modifies a singular noun without the article, the adjective πᾶς is “each” or “every”; that in such a circum-

¹Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1865), 386.

stance $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ has a distributive sense. New Testament grammarian A. T. Robertson is somewhat firm in this understanding. At first glance, at least, it appears that when $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ modifies an anarthrous singular noun, Robertson takes it as “all” only when the noun is proper or what he calls an “abstract substantive.”²

So if “every family” is in view, what does Paul mean with this description of the Father before whom he bends the knee in prayer? More to the point, who does he mean by “every family” in heaven and on earth, and how are they named from the Father?

Is each family on earth a Christian household, and is each family in heaven those household members who are now at rest with their Father? Is each family on earth a local congregation of believers, with some members of that local congregation now enjoying heavenly peace? In either instance each family could be considered “named” in the sense that it proceeds from God the Father and thus belongs to him and finds security in his name (Rev 14:1; 22:4). Yet one may ask: Where else in Scripture do we have a clear indication that the saints in heaven constitute families or congregations? True enough, the great multitude standing before the Lamb is coming from “every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9) on earth, but to what extent, if any, do such distinctions remain in heaven’s glory?

One interpretation that steers clear of such questions identifies every family in heaven as the holy angels. These blessed “rulers and authorities” long for the wisdom of God that is now being revealed through the church (Eph 3:10; 1 Pe 1:12). They belong to the Father and in his name enjoy his blessing. They are fully invested in carrying out the Father’s will on behalf of every gathering of believers on earth.

Most interpreters nowadays regard the scope of the previous paragraph as being too narrow, however. They contend that each family unit on earth has been “named” from the Father in the sense that it has been instituted by him (Ge 1:28-29; 2:21-25). Whether believing or unbelieving, they say, every family on earth proceeds from the heavenly Father. As for every family in heaven, many contend that this is an expression for the orders of angels, both good and evil, that are mentioned on three different occasions in this epistle to the Ephesians (1:21, 3:10, 6:12). Jerome writes, “I think that the angels and other invisible powers have something like princes of their own in heaven whom they rejoice to call fathers.”³ Ernest Best draws from 1 Enoch

²A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), 772.

³*Epistle to the Ephesians 2.3*, in Thomas C. Oden and Mark J. Edwards, eds. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. VIII* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 153.

when he contends that “the angels are arranged in groups with leaders.”⁴ Similarly Andrew Lincoln points out that “the phrase ‘sons or children of the angels’ occurs in 1 Enoch 69.3,4; 71.1; 106.5.”⁵

In view of Jesus’ response to the Sadducees’ test question, this popular understanding cannot imply that marriage or procreation occurs among the angels (Mt 22:30; Mk 12:25; Lk 20:35). Still, some ask, are there not orders or classifications or even social groupings of angels? Every such “family” of angels, the argument goes, is “named” from the Father in the sense that he has called each into existence and now exercises dominion over them (Ecc 6:10, Ps 147:4, Isa 40:26). Indeed “the Father of the lights” (Jas 1:17) and “the Father of the spirits” (Heb 12:9) is the Father also of those people on earth and those powers in heaven who do not willingly submit to him. He created them; therefore he controls them. What then is the apostle doing here other than praying with confidence in the universal Father who holds all power and authority over heaven and earth? In heaven and on earth he will strengthen and ultimately exalt every family that is in Christ. In heaven and on earth he will subjugate and ultimately condemn every family that opposes him.

Popular as it is nowadays, those who are considering this interpretation of *πάσα πατριά* must proceed with caution. For instance, while at least a portion of what eventually became known as 1 Enoch may well have been in circulation at the time of the apostles—cf. Jude 9—one ought not rank its angelology on the same plane as what can be drawn from the canonical Scriptures. Rabbinical writings refer to the angels as the “family above” and to human beings as the “family below.” (Clinton Arnold suggests, “See the texts cited in Str-B, 1:753-44; 3:594.”⁶) Yet we have no indication that these were the rabbinical thoughts of Paul’s day or that the apostle regarded them as the Holy Spirit’s truth. In addition, nowhere else does Paul or any of the other apostles refer to God as the Father who “names” every human family on earth. Likewise, nowhere else does Paul or any of the other apostles refer to God as the Father who “names” every angelic grouping in heaven. The interpreter must be aware, then, that taking *πάσα πατριά* as “every family” is not only difficult to explain; such an interpretation has the apostle making an announcement about the heavenly Father that is unique to Ephesians, found nowhere else in Holy Scripture.

⁴Ernest J. Best, *Ephesians* (London: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1998), 338.

⁵Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 202.

⁶Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 208.

πάσα πατριά, the whole family

Perhaps the exegete might revisit what is usually the starting point of the previous interpretation. A careful look shows that the esteemed A. T. Robertson is not nearly as insistent that the anarthrous πᾶς is distributive (“every” or “each”) as several recent scholars are. Robertson points to the previously mentioned instances of proper names and abstract nouns when the modifier πᾶς can be rendered “all.” He also allows that “there is an element of freedom in the matter.”⁷ Nigel Turner elaborates on this freedom when he writes, “First of all, πᾶς before an anarthrous noun means ‘every’ in the sense of ‘any.’ . . . On the other hand, this anarthrous πᾶς also means ‘all, the whole of,’ just as it does when it has the article. . . The distinction of an anarthrous and articular noun with πᾶς is not very clear in the NT.”⁸

C. F. D. Moule takes the discussion further. In his *Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* Moule devotes several paragraphs to πᾶς when it modifies an anarthrous noun. “It used to be claimed that it meant ‘every’ and not ‘the whole,’ . . . yet one hesitates to accept this ruling.”⁹ In addition to a number of those passages in which the anarthrous noun modified by πᾶς is abstract, Moule cites 1 Chronicles 28:8 (LXX πάσης ἐκκλησίας κυρίου, of the whole assembly of the Lord); Amos 3:1 (LXX κατὰ πάσης φυλῆς, against the whole clan); Acts 1:21 (ἐν παντὶ χρόνῳ, during the whole time); Acts 2:36 (πᾶς οἶκος Ἰσραὴλ, the whole house of Israel); Eph 2:21 (πάσα οἰκοδομή, the whole building); and 2 Timothy 3:16 (πάσα γραφή, the whole of Scripture, or all Scripture). Might one even consider Colossians 1:23 (ἐν πάσῃ κτίσει, in all creation) for such a list of citations?

The exegete will note that in several of the instances where πᾶς has the sense of “the whole,” the anarthrous noun it modifies signifies a group of some sort (1 Chronicles 28:8, assembly; Amos 3:1, clan or people; Acts 2:36, house of Israel; Ephesians 2:21, building as a metaphor for the church). So also here at Ephesians 3:15 πάσα πατριά could very well be another group, that is, the heavenly Father’s “whole family.”

Is this interpretation of πάσα πατριά irrefutable? Certainly not. For instance, some will look at πάσα οἰκοδομή in Ephesians 2:21 and see the plurality of elements in the structure, that is, the many souls being brought to faith and joined together even as the “holy temple in the Lord” rises. Or at 2 Timothy 3:16 πάσα γραφή could be understood

⁷Robertson, 772.

⁸J. H. Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Volume 3, Syntax*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1963), 199–200.

⁹C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 94.

as “every Scripture passage.” Nevertheless what we have been able to determine is that in several instances Koine Greek usage does indeed allow for $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ to be “all” or “the whole” even when the noun it modifies is anarthrous. What we are about to see is that the setting of Ephesians 3:15 compels the interpreter to seriously consider taking $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\alpha$ $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ as “the whole family.”

From the start of this epistle Paul describes the church as the Father’s family. “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” he says, “. . . has marked us out in advance for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:3,5). “You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the down payment of our inheritance” (1:13-14), he writes. Who but a father’s children are guaranteed an inheritance? Indeed, the church is the body of Christ (1:23; 3:6; 4:4,16; 5:23,30), he writes, but the church is also the family of the heavenly Father. At one time we were all “children by nature of wrath” (2:3), Paul laments. But now through Christ we who have been saved by grace have “access to the Father by one Spirit” (2:18). Through the gospel Gentiles are “co-heirs” with Jewish believers (3:6). Who but the Father’s family members have access together to the gifts of salvation he gives? And again, who but the Father’s family members are together his heirs?

Granted, the church consists of many different families and gatherings scattered throughout history and throughout the world. Yet Ephesians hardly seems to be an epistle about a multiplicity of families on earth or of groups in heaven, does it? Ephesians stresses the unity of one family. This is so important to the inspired writer that he urges behaviors and attitudes that will guard this oneness. “Strive to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace—one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (4:3-6). Yes, once again God is identified as the Father. Does Paul want his readers to see the Father as the mighty Creator and Preserver of all creatures or of all things? Important as that idea might be elsewhere in Scripture, it seems out of place here. The context points rather to the Father who stands guard over and works through and lives in all the members of his “whole family,” that is, of his church.

Consider the immediate setting of this bold prayer toward the end of Ephesians 3. “For this reason ($\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\upsilon$) I bend my knees to the Father,” the apostle writes at 3:14. With the unusual expression $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\upsilon$ Paul is resuming the train of thought from which he digressed back at 3:1. The demonstrative pronoun $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ is not pointing to something in the front half of chapter 3. The apostle rather is inferring what he established back in chapter 2. Gentiles, he has announced, are fully included in the real people of God, not by

rules or rituals but through faith in Christ. Indeed, he tells them, “you are . . . members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the Cornerstone” (Eph 2:19-20).

Already back in chapter 2 Paul has identified the church as a household or family in Christ. The exegete will have that in mind when he examines a construction that follows. “In him,” Paul announces, “πᾶσα οἰκοδομή, being fitted together, grows as a holy sanctuary in the Lord. In him you too are being built together as God’s dwelling” (2:21-22). In this passage that provides the basis for the prayer that Paul completes at the end of Ephesians 3, the noun οἰκοδομή is anarthrous. As mentioned earlier, perhaps it is possible that the apostle is hinting at the many blocks, bricks, and stones that are being fitted together to be God’s sanctuary. Yet even recent exegetes and translators have only on rare occasion rendered πᾶσα οἰκοδομή as “every building.” After all, it appears to suggest a multiplicity of buildings that’s simply not in view here in Ephesians 2. Instead the expression πᾶσα οἰκοδομή is almost always rendered “the whole building.”

The move from πᾶσα οἰκοδομή in Ephesians 2:21 to πᾶσα πατριά in Ephesians 3:15 then is only a slight shift of imagery and emphasis, to wit: The Father who builds and dwells in the “whole building” by his Spirit (2:21) similarly puts his name on his “whole family” (3:15). One by one each member of his family is named and claimed from the Father as his own. More to the point here, however, the whole family together receives its identity from the Father. In Numbers 6, the Lord put his three-fold name on the Israelites collectively so as to bless them. Here at Ephesians 3:15 the Father is the One from whom his whole family collectively is named and blessed. The whole family together receives his daily benediction. The whole family together enjoys baptismal graces from his name. The whole family together will be the apostle’s focus as he prays for strength from the Father in the verses that follow Ephesians 3:15.

Occasionally Christian teachers speak of the “church militant” in reference to all the saints on this earth who battle with wicked spiritual enemies. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” Paul warns the Ephesians, “but . . . against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. So put on God’s panoply” (Eph 6:12-13). Those same Christian teachers will also speak of the “church triumphant” in reference to all those saints who have finished the race and kept the faith. They are now victorious and at rest in heaven. Yet there are not two churches, but one. There is one church for whose benefit God has exalted his Son (1:20-22). There is one body for whom the Father has appointed his Son as the Head (1:22-23). Resting upon one foundation,

there is one building in which the Father has taken up permanent residence (2:20-22). There is one bride whom Christ presents to himself “without stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless” (5:27). Yes, there is one family that the Father names as his own, wherever its members are.

This could very well be the one family for whom Paul prays when he bends his knees to “the Father from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named.” This is the one family for whom we too petition and praise the Father, trusting in his power and rejoicing in his love on her behalf. “To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:21).