1. Introduction

As Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann have argued, the common Christian designation of God as “Father” does not primarily derive from the Jewish Scriptures, where it is infrequent, but arose with Jesus. Moreover, the two scholars highlight the remarkable resemblance with the frequency of the term in the contemporary Graeco-Roman world. In this paper, I trace how this characterization also came to be applied to God in a cosmological sense, in the designation of God as the “Father of all” (πατὴρ πάντων) in the Pauline letter to the Ephesians. When, well into the letter, the author reminds his Christian readers of the new way of life they have adopted, and exhorts them “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1–3), he summarizes the main tenets of their new calling as follows:

There is 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 above all and through all and in all (εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων, ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν). (Eph 4:4–6)

As I will argue, this designation of the one God as the “Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” has its roots in a long tradition of Graeco-Roman thought.

In the letter, the epithet comes as a bolt from the blue, but the author’s hymnic prayer earlier in the writing (3:14–21) does herald this view of God as the origin of cosmic reality. The author bows his knees…

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1 Feldmeier and Spieckermann (2011, 51–91), esp. 85–89.
2 The biblical writings are normally quoted in the New Revised Standard Version, passages from classical literature are quoted after the English translations in the Loeb Classical Library series, unless otherwise noted, and early patristic literature after the Ante-Nicene Fathers series, with small modifications when necessary.
...before the Father (πατήρ), from whom every lineage or “fatherhood” (πατριά) in heaven and on earth takes its name (πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, ἐξ οὗ πᾶσα πατριὰ ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς ὀνομάζεται). (Eph 3:14f.)

In this phrase, we have the long, descriptive form of what is later, in good Greek fashion, condensed to πατήρ πάντων, the “Father of all.” The concise term is then embedded in the terminology of what Gregory Sterling has styled Greek “prepositional metaphysics”: the Father of all is the one ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν (“who is above all and through all and in all”).3 In his designation of God as the Father (πατήρ), from whom all cosmic fatherhood (πατριά) takes its name, the author seems to be unique: I have not found any comparable expressions in the surviving literature that combine πατήρ and πατριά in this way. This could be taken as a sign of how intensely the author had appropriated the Greek view of God as the cosmic Father of all. The subsequent prayer shows the comprehensiveness of the reality of which he believed God to be the father. Not only does he pray that God grant that his readers may “be strengthened in the inner being with power through his spirit (κραταιωθῆναι διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν ἔσω ἄνθρωπον)” (3:16) and that Christ may dwell in their hearts (3:17), but also that they may “comprehend...what is the breadth and length and height and depth (καταλαβέσθαι...τί τὸ πλάτος καὶ μῆκος καὶ ὕψος καὶ βάθος)” (3:18). The whole of reality extends from the microcosmos of “the inner being,” man’s innermost identity, expressed in the vocabulary of Platonic anthropology,4 to the macrocosmic dimensions of the universe, stated in the language of Greek astrology.5 And this whole range consists of “patriarchic family lines,” which issue forth from the divine Father, the “Father of all.”

In this paper, I briefly sketch the emergence of the term “Father of all” from Homer onwards, and then focus on its appropriation and development by the Greek philosophers up to the second century C.E. I go on to examine how Jews of the Graeco-Roman period adopted this terminology, comparing the use of the term by Philo of Alexandria and the author of Ephesians, in particular. I conclude, finally, with some reflections on the debate between Christians and pagan philosophers about the status of the “Father of all,” as revealed in the polemics between Origen and Celsus.

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3 Sterling (1997).