



4-1-2008

We Who Owe Everything to a Name

Lynda Mackey Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Wilson, Lynda Mackey (2008) "We Who Owe Everything to a Name," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol47/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

We Who Owe Everything to a Name

Lynda Mackey Wilson

When I was ten years old, my mother told me that my father was not really my father. My “real father” was a man named Aladdin, a foreign student at UC Berkeley where she had been a student. When his father found out that he had gotten an American girl pregnant, he whisked Aladdin back home.

I found this interesting. I tucked it into a mental drawer labeled “intriguing data” and went out to play. It did explain some things. Like why I was olive skinned with jet-brown eyes and dark hair when my little sister was blond and blue eyed. But it was not in the drawer labeled “disturbing facts.” All the unpleasant things about growing up in my family were related to my mother.

Finding out that I had a father somewhere in the Middle East was intriguing when I thought about it—which was rare. You see, I already had a father. His name was John Joseph Mackey. He was a retired Catholic from Boston, the son of Irish immigrants, and he was the most real thing in my life. Not for a second did I ever think, “Oh no, that means that Daddy is not really my father.”

He *was* my father. He was my rock. He taught me. He spent time with me. He told me jokes. He took me for rides on his big BMW motorcycle. On Saturday mornings we went out for pancakes. He complimented me. He protected me. He smiled at me. He told me that I was smarter than he was and that I could do anything I wanted to. I didn’t think anybody could be smarter than my father, but I knew it meant he believed in me. All the mental health I gratefully draw on in my adult years comes from the security of knowing that my father really loved me.

It took me years to realize what an amazing thing he had done.

During the time my mother and father were dating at Berkeley, my dad took off for a two-month course at UCLA. He didn't tell her he was leaving or that he was coming back. She wasn't an important part of his life then. But he was everything in her thumping heart. Devastated, she drowned her sorrows in the elixir of physical attraction. Aladdin asked her out. I don't know how many times they dated, but one day my father called and said "I'm back." No big deal.

Except that she was pregnant. She told Jack she was pregnant with his child. He did the honorable thing and offered to marry her. They tied the knot during a break between classes. She told me later of the last time she ever prayed. "Please Lord, let this be Jack's baby."

She knew in the delivery room. I was a little Arab from the start. Dark hair, nearly black eyes, and olive skin. But she admitted nothing. Trust being crucial in marriage, this made for a bad beginning. Dad wasn't stupid, and later when my little sister was born, the comments by Dad's friends started: "Milkman stop by when you were away?" My sister and I did not look like sisters. Sometime during my childhood my mother blurted out in the middle of a blowup, "OK. She's not your kid! Does that make you happy?"

I didn't know any of it. I only knew two basic things about growing up in my family. My father loved me. And my mother didn't. In the work I've done since to sort through it all and forgive as Christ requires, I think of her, pregnant and seventeen, scared to death. It was all so doomed.

She was not abusive in the way that lands kids in the ER. She ignored me. She didn't like to look at me. I was her sin walking around on knock-kneed legs. Aladdin must have been knock-kneed like me, because no one else had them.

"Mom, will you show me how to work the sewing machine?"

"Can't. I'm busy."

"Mom. Can you help me make brownies?"

"Don't have time."

Most of the time, being ignored is not life threatening. Just enraging. I felt a great deal of anger at my mother. Diary pages of "I hate my mother!" in neat rows.

There was just one fact that didn't fit with the otherwise bad soap opera script. My father didn't care that I wasn't carrying his genes. He had decided to be my father. I see now that he adopted me—a *de facto* adoption. He made me his from the beginning. He never took out his anger at my mother's betrayal of him on me. Because I was his daughter.

Like a duckling imprinting on Momma duck, I imprinted on my father. I absorbed his likes and dislikes, his taste in music, his politics,

his love of reading and education, and even his bent for writing. To me he seemed to know everything worth knowing. So all my little neurons did their darnedest to line up and fire just like his: I got good grades, wrote a lot, read everything from the cereal box in the morning to the under-the-cover-with-the-flashlight library book at night. He was a Democrat and voted for Adlai Stevenson. I proudly wore my Vote for Adlai button to school in Shreveport, Louisiana. I tried to *be* him.

I was bathing seven times in the river of my father's mind—except for one last dip. Some guardian angel held me by the heel, and I did not get immersed in my father's religion. That religion was the one taught at Berkeley and most other universities in the '40s after the war—Darwin, Freud, Marx, Joyce, Kinsey. It was modern and therefore sophisticated, and it scoffed—politely in those days—at anything that made religion real and concrete, whether that was the Virgin Mary appearing at Lourdes or the angel Moroni handing a boy golden plates to translate.

When I was eleven, we moved near my maternal grandparents, who loved me too. They were active in the LDS Church. I took the streetcar to their house. I had lots of questions about life, death, and God. I think I was born a theologian.

That was the year my parents gave my sister and me a Time-Life book for Christmas called *The Origins of Life*. There were dramatic pictures of lightning flashing over moody ammonia seas, doing the Darwinian equivalent of thundering, "Let there be life!" The book was filled with dinosaurs and protohumans. It was my parents' attempt to proselyte for their agnosticism. If they worried about their oldest daughter's odd propensity to think about God, I'm sure they thought that time and a college education would cure the malady.

I loved my dad with all my heart, but it was not my fate to absorb modern agnosticism from two parents who had rejected the religions of their youth. I had a not-to-be-denied hunger to know if there was a God and, if there was, what he was like.

From my grandparents I heard the plan of salvation for the first time. Actually, my grandmother drew it for me on the blackboard in her kitchen: a circle for premortality, a wavy line for the veil of forgetfulness, another circle for earth, and so on. I also checked out a series of books from the library called *Why I Am a _____* (*Methodist, Lutheran, and so forth*). You see, one of my father's predominant traits was intellectual honesty. I was not about to believe what my grandparents believed just because it sounded so right and I hoped it was true. My father's daughter felt an obligation to gather data and to be careful.

Perhaps the most important thing my grandparents taught me was that if you asked God a question he could and would answer you. That seemed like a reasonable thing, a good test. I began to pray. I would sit in my backyard and talk to God, if there was a God, and ask him, if he could hear me, to answer me, if he would, by letting me know he was there, if he wanted to. Finally I stopped equivocating and proposed a bold plan that he could show me he existed by letting the giant concrete cross on Mt. Davidson appear through the fog the next morning. I ended up asking for this sign more than once because one clear day could be just a coincidence.

Some days were foggy and some days weren't. I kept praying and began to be less dogmatic. "Please just let me know if you're there!"

One day, while I was riding the streetcar in San Francisco, God talked back. I simply had a download of the Spirit into my eleven-year-old heart that was undeniable. Like the moment when the Blue Fairy touched a wooden puppet and Pinocchio turned into a real boy, nothing after that was ever the same. I looked up startled and had to resist a momentary urge to run down the streetcar aisle yelling, "God answered me! He's real!"

I think I was prepared to accept the gospel precisely because of my relationship with my father. Fathers were wonderful things. A Heavenly Father was more of the same on a grander scale, with infinitely greater power to provide, protect, and defend. At eleven I asked to be baptized. My parents humored me and said okay, assuming I would grow out of this religious phase.

As a teenager it was obvious that my Mormonism wasn't wearing off. My mother railed against her parents for brainwashing me, and my father just seemed confused. "How can a bright girl like you believe in angels and golden plates?" My mother told me she would help pay for college as long as I didn't go to BYU. So, of course, I went to BYU.

I went there in the early '70s. I graduated, married, and raised four children in the Church. I now have the pleasure of watching them raise their own children in the faith. Once I had a blessing from my grandfather in which he pronounced that I would "do a work for [my] real father's people." The phrase "real father" made not the slightest dent in the relationship that had been my anchor. I already had a real father, and like the Velveteen Rabbit, it was love that made him real.

Yes, I have somewhere a biological father who passed on his physical DNA—the knock-knees, large dark eyes, my height (I'm taller than my father). Then I have the father who loved and nurtured me. He is ninety years old now, his Irish wit still charming. I have proudly carried his name through my life.

But I bear more than his name. In many significant ways I have become like him. I have taken into myself his ideas, his character, and his thought patterns. My children asked for stuff and I lectured them: “A man is rich to the degree that he can walk through the marketplace of life and say, ‘I don’t need that. I don’t need that.’” But really it was Dad’s philosophizing. A guest in my home breaks a dish and I say, “People are more important than things.” But it is really my father talking to them. I am “the word” of my father. I reflect him outwardly to my children and in every association I ever have in this life. I owe everything to his name.

One day at my health club I heard a stunning echo of this thought. I was listening to an audio course on the history of ancient Rome to numb the boredom of the treadmill. Suddenly I heard something that galvanized me. I never took Roman history in school. What I knew was mostly from toga movies. I didn’t know that when Mark Anthony read Caesar’s will to the people of Rome, they learned he named a grandnephew, Gaius Octavius, as his adopted son. It was news to the boy as well as the public. He was eighteen years old, practically a baby by Roman standards.

Here is what the professor¹ said about Octavius: “He wasn’t of particularly august origins. His natural father was a local from a town north of Rome, so he really didn’t have any great connections. He had met Caesar once. Caesar had obviously been impressed about some qualities that he saw in the young man for he adopted him as his son in the will and made him his chief heir. Now, I should point out that in Roman eyes the legal adoption of a person gave that person every claim not just to the property and patrimony of the adopting party, but also to the heritage, the political connections, the name, the *dignitas*, everything else that came with the adoption. The Romans really made no serious distinction between a natural and an adopted son. It wasn’t considered like the adopted son was an imposter or some kind of a late claimant. He was simply considered as if he had been born of the adopting party. And so Gaius Octavius, at that time, when he became adopted, took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus.”

Historians refer to him as Octavian, but he called himself Caesar, son of Caesar, and that name made all the difference. The men who had been loyal to Caesar flocked to him. Slowly his power grew. Inevitably Mark Anthony and Octavian clashed, fought, and Anthony was beaten. Octavian became Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Rome, the man who ordered the census that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Fascinating!

It was Cicero who recorded Mark Anthony’s comment on their fates. Octavian was “that boy, who owes everything to a name!” The phrase reverberated in my mind and heart. Didn’t I owe everything to a name?

Hadn't my father given me the good life I had by making me his, by adopting me?

It was later that I discovered the Apostle Paul's use of the term adoption in reference to our relationship with Christ. The word adopt or adoption does not appear in the Old Testament, with its kinship obligations to orphans, nor is it found in the Book of Mormon, whose laws and social customs were derivative of Mosaic Law. But Paul understood the implications of being an heir by adoption. He, though a Jew, was a Roman citizen in a Roman world. And he used the implications of Roman law to explain to the gentiles the inheritance they might receive through the gospel's new covenant in Christ's blood. "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).

Until I listened to that tape on Caesar's adoption of Octavian as his heir, this scripture puzzled me. Adopted by God? Weren't we, after all, his natural children? He was the real—"biological," if you will—father of our spirit bodies. We didn't need any adoption process to become God's children. I found Ephesians 1:5 later. "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself." Ah. It all began to make sense, especially to me, that child who was brought in out of the cold by a father who made me his.

It is Christ who makes us his heirs. He becomes our father, as King Benjamin explains: "Because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; . . . ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). That is why, contrary to the persistent but false doctrine we find popping up like a whack-a-mole in gospel doctrine classes, we do not "earn" exaltation. The word earn is never used in scripture to refer to the process by which men and women become exalted. To quote exactly from the lds.org scripture search engine, "There were no occurrences of the word EARN found in the Text of the Scriptures." The word is "inherit." Stick the word "inherit" in the search box and you get 251 hits.

Once I saw it, I saw it everywhere. Earning implies a *quid pro quo*, Latin for "something for something," and "indicates a more-or-less equal exchange of goods or services."² An employee "earns" his wages, because his work is worth twenty dollars an hour to his employer. But I did not earn my father's love. And Octavian did not earn the title of Caesar. Those who give the inheritance set the terms.

In our poor fallen humanness, what can we do that "earns" us the magnificent gift of eternal life? To earn something puts someone in

our debt. But as King Benjamin made clear, God is never in our debt (Mosiah 2:21–22).

The inheritance is Christ's to give. He alone truly did earn it. His perfect life, without spot or blemish, with its complete submission to the will of his Father, earned "a fulness of the glory of the Father; and he received all power, both in heaven and on earth" (D&C 93:16–17). In all ways, he earned his exalted state. The miracle is that he is willing to make us his children, heirs of all he has.

To qualify, we covenant to obey him, take his name, and always remember him. He said, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Rev. 21:6–7).

I cling to these promises that make sense to me through the lens of my own life. My own father's love was a redeeming force for good in my life. That love makes it easy to believe in the redeeming love of our Savior, to whose name we owe everything.

This essay by Lynda Mackey Wilson (lyndalmw@gmail.com) won first place in the *BYU Studies* 2008 personal essay contest.

1. Garrett G. Fagan, Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and History at The Pennsylvania State University, "History of Ancient Rome," recording by The Teaching Company.

2. Wikipedia, "Quid pro quo," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quid_pro_quo.