

God as Santa: Misreading the prayer of Jabez

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Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked. (1 Chron. 4:10, NRSV)

Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* rode the top of *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Times* bestseller lists for many months after its 2000 publication. This little book, easily read within an hour, centers on two short and obscure verses in 1 Chronicles. In marketing and sales terms, it has been a huge success. The book has not only sold millions but has spun off ancillary markets, including Jabez bracelets, posters, videos and shirts, and who knows how many other commodified talismans. It is safe to assume that hundreds of millions of dollars have been made. Bless me, indeed.

But Christian commercialization is an easy target. Besides, Wilkinson has pumped copious funds into the admirable Bible study program he founded and leads, Walk Thru the Bible Ministries. The back cover of Wilkinson's book describes Walk Thru the Bible as "an international organization dedicated to providing the finest biblical teaching."

It is on the basis of "biblical teaching" that we would challenge *The Prayer of Jabez*, for it seriously distorts that teaching. One of the most striking features of Wilkinson's book is the way the focus on Jabez's prayer displaces the Lord's Prayer. Wilkinson rightly mentions the Lord's Prayer as "the model prayer" for Christians, but mention it is all he does, and only once. Otherwise, those for whom Wilkinson's book is their first encounter with the Christian faith can only assume that Jabez's petition is the central or exemplary Christian prayer.

We are told in the preface that this is "a daring prayer that God always answers" and "the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God." We are soon also informed

that Jabez's prayer has "revolutionized [Wilkinson's] life and ministry the most" and that "the Jabez prayer distills God's powerful will for your future." By the end of the book we are exhorted to intone the Jabez prayer every morning, to tape a copy of the prayer on our Bible, day-timer or bathroom mirror, and to pray the prayer for our "family, friends, and local church." The Jabez prayer emerges not only as a "key" distillation of God's will but on the level of practical piety it shoves aside the Lord's Prayer.

Do we read the Jabez prayer through the Lord's Prayer, or the Lord's Prayer through the Jabez prayer? Since the Lord's Prayer was given as the exemplary pattern of Christian prayer, all other prayer should be shaped by it, not vice versa. Here we will simply note the two different trajectories of the Lord's Prayer and the Jabez prayer as Wilkinson presents it.

First, the Lord's Prayer is a corporate prayer. It is prayed in the first-person plural ("Our Father . . . , Give us each day our daily bread . . ."). We pray primarily as members of the community of Christ's followers, where our individual identity, purpose and welfare are nested. Indeed, the scope of the Lord's Prayer is (most clearly in Matthew's version) cosmic: the plea is that God's kingdom come, God's will be done, "on earth as in heaven." There can be no spiritual cocooning. There is no escaping politics, economics, conflict and other messiness of history.

The Jabez prayer, as set forth by Wilkinson, is markedly individualistic and insulating. The genealogical context in which the prayer appears emphasizes that Jabez is part of a people (Israel) and a particular, complicated history. But Wilkinson lifts Jabez out of that context and presents his words as "principles" and "steps" the 21st-century individual can directly claim and practice. The "you" addressed throughout the book is singular and coached to center the Jabez prayer on individual circumstances: "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory . . ."

In fairness, Wilkinson discourages using the Jabez prayer for self-aggrandizement, and he defines enlargement of territory in terms of ministerial opportunities—expanded occasions for evangelism and godly influence. But the individual is put front and center, and in Wilkinson's examples the individual is always (if incidentally) made more prosperous or comfortable. Individuals should pray for the growth of their stock portfolios and businesses (pp. 31, 46). If the individual prays the Jabez prayer for 30 years, like Wilkinson, he may find himself evangelizing in agreeable circumstances such as cruise ships (pp. 36-39) and cross-country train trips (p. 42). His teenaged children may be protected from bad

company (pp. 45-46). He may pray, when a plane is late, that a connecting flight be delayed; and then, perhaps partly to redeem any hardship caused to other fliers, he might witness to a woman traveling to divorce her husband—a woman who, faced with the unfailing and relentless power of the Jabez prayer, will of course convert and decide to save her marriage (pp. 79-82).

Readers of *The Prayer of Jabez* may come to imagine God as a cosmic Santa Claus, merrily doling out gifts to any individual who asks. And asks. And asks. Indeed, one illustrative “fable” explicitly puts it in just those terms. A certain Mr. Jones dies and goes to heaven. He finds St. Peter outside an enormous warehouse sheltering the only secrets in heaven—contained within row after row of “white boxes tied in red ribbons.” Just like a child on Christmas morning, Mr. Jones tears open his package, and there he finds “all the blessings that God wanted to give him while he was on earth. . . . But Mr. Jones had never asked.”

This Santa-fication of God points to the second difference between the Lord’s Prayer and the Jabez prayer. The Lord’s Prayer, especially with its settings in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, posits a God alien to human, individualistic whims, predilections and comforts. To be sure, this God is expected to give petitioners daily bread, forgiveness from sin and protection from temptation; but this God is not a vague and benignly amorphous dispenser of “blessings” defined on the petitioner’s terms. The God of the Lord’s Prayer is the Father of Jesus Christ, whose “name” or identity is to be honored and who sets the terms of any encounter or graceful engagement. Indeed, meeting and praying to this God will not change God, but will conform those who meet and pray to God’s ways; they will not only be forgiven their own debts, but begin to become people who forgive others who are debtors to them.

The God of Wilkinson’s Jabez prayer never lets a petitioner “come in second”; the God of the Lord’s Prayer knows there are “losers” and never forgets them—those without wealth, or health or power. Jabez finished his life pleasantly (or, as we will suggest, fat and happy), while he who taught the Lord’s Prayer died on a cross.

Let’s look at the text of the Jabez prayer itself. The ironic playfulness of the text is impossible to preserve smoothly in English translation. Awkwardly but accurately, however, 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 might be rendered as follows:

And it came about that Jabez was more honored/heavier than his brothers.
And his mother called his name “Jabez,” or “Ouch!,” saying, “Because I bore him in pain.” Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, “Oh that you

would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and pain.”

That is it for Jabez in the Bible (except for a mention in 1 Chronicles 2:55 of a village called Jabez, where lived the “Kenites who came from Hammath, father of the house of Rechab”). Given this paucity of information, the Jabez prayer truly is obscure. It is hard to say much about it without moving into speculative territory. Freely admitting its opacity, we turn to a close reading of the text.

The Jabez prayer crops up in a lengthy section of rough genealogy. Rather suddenly, at 4:9, the genealogy pauses and Jabez receives attention inordinate to any of the names preceding his. Jabez shows up within the specific genealogy of Judah, the royal house of Israel (1 Chronicles 2:3-4:23). Yet even if we find him within the family line, we should be careful not to make him too important. He does not lie directly and clearly in the royal line. He appears after the main line of the descendants is listed in a continuous family tree branching far into the family of David (2:3-55). Jabez and the rest of the names given in 4:1-23 are not directly linked to the family of David. They are long-lost relatives, belatedly remembered and included in the genealogy, distantly and unclearly related to David within the larger family of Judah. So they are subordinates within the messianic family. They are among the ranks that “serve the king,” bit players assigned parts to make the star (David) shine even brighter.

The text also provides Jabez no father, which, within a patrilineal and patriarchal society, allows no shift of focus from the son to the father. Jabez’s brothers and mother are mentioned but not named. In show-business parlance, when it does mention him the text clearly spotlights Jabez. But why?

The only clue to Jabez’s significance within the text itself is the ambiguity of the verb in v. 9 (nkbd) and the pun volleyed between the name “Jabez” (y’b) and “pain” (‘ b). The Hebrew root, kbd, can mean either “was honored” or “was heavier”—or both. The text gives inordinate attention to Jabez, so we will grant that he was honored. It also tells us that Jabez’s birth was especially painful to his mother—she called him Jabez (y’b -or, in the modern English colloquialism, “Ouch!”) to remind her of her pain (‘b), presumably caused by bearing a son heavier than his brothers. To put it bluntly, Jabez was a fat baby.

The double entendre continues in Jabez’s prayer as an adult, “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you

would keep me from hurt and harm” (‘ b, “my affliction,” “my ouch,” that is, his obesity). On this reading, Jabez’s corpulent affliction continues into adulthood, meaning he needs increased amounts of food (and so more arable property) to sustain his girth and, in his anxious and hungry eyes, his very life.

The multivalence of the text may invite us to recall the village or family of Jabez mentioned in 2:55. Perhaps the Judean village of Jabez had an enlarged estimate of itself, gobbling up the surrounding countryside from other villages or families for its own hearty appetite. If so, the text gently mocks the Jabez family’s insatiable hunger while acknowledging, nonetheless, that God heard and responded for its provision.

With this reading, 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 is something of a comic aside, a brief respite from the genealogies Wilkinson labels “boring!” There is a satirical edge to it. But its punning need not be read as hateful mockery or dismissal. Jabez, as man and as village, may be allowed some real respect (kbd/honor), yet also come in for some affectionate yet revealing ribbing.

Given this interpretation, the Jabez prayer (the Ouch! prayer) may then be taken as an indication that God can sometimes bless God’s servants with prosperity. Yet the text simultaneously distances itself from any easy or absolute identification of blessing with earthly wealth and human striving for self-worth and power. Jabez is honorable, to a degree and in a way; we may even take him as a kind of hero. But if he is a hero, he is really a comic hero—he and his “blessing” of prosperity are not to be taken with final or ultimate seriousness. Were *The Prayer of Jabez* made into a movie, big, adorable funny men (modeled after John Candy or Jackie Gleason) might be perfect for the part. Jabez is certainly likable, but to be admired only with ironic qualification.

Admittedly, this is not a terribly pious reading—but then the Bible itself is often not too pious. Solely on textual terms, it is hard to make much more of Jabez and his prayer. It is more edifying to read the Ouch! prayer as a wry leavening of scripture than as a motivational mantra or a magical success formula. Besides, the church already has a model prayer.

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