

PRAYING OUR FATHERS: THE SECRET MERCIES OF ANCESTRAL INTERCESSION

BY KEITH MASSEY, PHD

INTRODUCTION

You pray. Or maybe you wish you prayed more than you do. But when you pray, it's because you love your God and in prayer you spend time with the very source of our life and existence.

And you also pray because God Himself tells you in Scripture to approach Him as to a loving Father with all your needs. And you accept that God answers your prayers, giving you what you truly need, all according to His Divine Will.

But what if you've been missing something? Something huge. What if God Himself wills for you and for your good a source of spiritual blessing that you have never heard of?

What if an important type of prayer once thrived among the People of God and then somehow faded into near oblivion in almost every community of the Judeo-Christian Tradition? And what if this type of prayer is still a valid and valuable way to bring the blessings of God and His tender mercies into your life?

In this book, I will share with you the story of how I discovered the secrets of a nearly lost and forgotten type of prayer. I will explain to you that this form of prayer, called "Ancestral Intercession," is a source of "secret" mercies simply because it faded from common practice. I write this book in the hope that it will not be a secret to future generations, who will benefit from the blessings this practice can bring them.

Now, before I begin, you certainly have the right to know a little more about me and why my background might give me the credentials to make my research and opinions on a biblical topic worthy of your time.

About Keith Massey, PhD

I was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin. I have my PhD in Biblical Hebrew and Semitic Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My minor was in Arabic. After 9/11, I served for four years as an Arabic linguist at the Top Secret National Security Agency. I was awarded the Global War on Terrorism Civilian Service Medal for service performed in Iraq in 2004.

My undergraduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison were in Latin and Classical Greek. I have a Master's Degree in Old Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

After I left the NSA, I became a Latin teacher at a public high school. I am the author of Intermediate Arabic for Dummies, from Wiley Publishing. I have also published numerous academic articles on matters theological, biblical, and linguistic. (For a full and detailed list of my academic publications, as well as my fiction novels, please see my website: www.keithmassey.com)

All that said, I wouldn't expect you to believe anything I tell you on the basis of my credentials alone. You want to learn the whole truth, see the biblical and historical passages where I made my discovery, and then come to your own conclusions.

I am a Christian, writing this book from a Christian perspective. That said, the discovery I will describe here is something Christians, Jews, or potentially a member of any faith tradition could claim as a component of their spiritual lives.

The matters I will explore in this book, and the claims I will make, are controversial in some faith communities. It is very possible that your faith leaders will disagree vigorously with the assertions I will make here. But I will always provide you with full citations to the biblical and ancient sources I reference. Check up on me! Make sure that what I tell you is really true.

You have my respect, dear reader, and you deserve nothing short of the whole truth. And I urge you, therefore, to consider carefully the opinions of those who disagree with me. I will present the arguments they will likely make and I will tell you why I personally believe they are mistaken. In the end, you must judge for yourself what you believe is true.

If you are ready to begin a spiritual adventure, in which we will explore a mystical mystery, turn the page. We are about to travel more than three thousand years into the past. There I will tell you the story of how I uncovered the secret mercies of Ancestral Intercession.

CHAPTER ONE: **THE SECRET MERCIES OF** **ANCESTRAL INTERCESSION**

The story I will tell you began, as many mysteries do, with a chance encounter. Or maybe God was guiding me to make this discovery. At any rate, it would lead, by journeys through the yellowed and tattered pages of history, to the rediscovery of a nearly lost form of prayer!

As a practicing and curious Christian, and as a scholar of biblical languages and history, I read widely in topics spanning the totality of scriptural studies. I happened one day to be browsing in the Jewish Talmud. Now, Christians can and should view Jewish Rabbinical Literature as a source of information about the beliefs of 1st century Jews, certainly, but even potentially as a way to better comprehend early Christian thought.

And I stumbled there across a strange tale. Perhaps you know the story of how Moses sent spies into the Promised Land in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 13:1-33. God had brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt, led by Moses. And now they approached the land He had promised to give them. The LORD told Moses to send a representative from each of the twelve tribes to spy out the land in advance of their invasion.

When the spies returned, they reported that the land was full of high-walled cities and giants for men. They brought back a cluster of grapes so large that it took two of them to carry it on a pole. And ten of the spies declared that the land and its people were too mighty for Israel to conquer. Only two of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, declared that Israel could triumph.

But the Talmud's telling of this story includes a Jewish legend not recorded in the Old Testament itself.

According to Tractate Sotah 34b of the Babylonian Talmud, as the spies traveled in the Negev (an arid region in southern Israel), Caleb left the group and went alone to the area of Hebron. The Old Testament, in the original Hebrew text from Numbers 13:22, does indeed contain a curious change from a plural verb to singular in the passage in question:

And **they** went up into the Negev, and **he** [Caleb alone?] came unto Hebron.¹

And so, according to the Talmud, why did Caleb go there? He went there because he knew that in Hebron he would find the Cave of Machpelah, where the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as their wives, were buried.² Caleb already knew that the other spies were conspiring to make a bad report to Moses and the Children of Israel about their prospects for victory. And he needed help in order to resist them. And so we read in the Babylonian Talmud Sotah 34b:

He went and he prostrated himself upon the graves of the Fathers. He said to them, “**My Fathers, seek mercy on my behalf that I may be saved from the plan of the spies.**”

Caleb then held strong and resisted the plan of the others. His faithfulness was rewarded and only he and Joshua from their generation were able to enter the Promised Land after their forty year sojourn in the Wilderness.³

But I was dumbfounded to find a story like this in the Jewish Talmud. I believed that Jews did not engage in the practice known as Saint Intercession, that is to say, the living asking the deceased to pray for them.

I would have thought that a story which describes a practice generally condemned in the Jewish Tradition would have been edited out of the Talmud!⁴ The fact that this account was not removed was a sign of the story’s antiquity. However embarrassing the story was to later generations, just deleting it, erasing it, seemed somehow

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translations from ancient languages in this book are my own. I will tend to translate literally in order to best represent the meaning of the original text.

² With the exception of Jacob’s second wife Rachel. According to Genesis 35:19-20, “And Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave. That is the pillar of the grave of Rachel to this day.”

³ Numbers 14:30.

⁴ In Chapter Three I will describe passages from the Talmud and other early Jewish writers that argue against Saint Intercession.

unacceptable.

And then I noticed what ended up being the most important point of all. Caleb had not asked Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to pray for him because those men were “saints.” Rather, he addressed them as “My Fathers.”

He asked for their intercession *because* he was their descendant and they were his ancestors. And so I wondered, might this tale point toward some wider practice in early Judaism—and potentially early Christianity—in which people regularly asked their departed ancestors to pray for them?

In this book, I will be using the term **Saint Intercession** to refer to the more general practice of a living person asking a deceased person, whether they are a relative or not, to pray for them. But Ancestral Intercession is something different. I will be using the term **Ancestral Intercession** to describe the practice of asking a departed direct ancestor to intercede precisely ***because they are your ancestors***, not because they are saints.

Still intrigued by this curious passage from the Talmud, I set out into the earliest records of Judaism and Christianity, to see if this story about Caleb was an isolated account or whether it was part of a bigger story.

Ancestral Intercession: The Search for Further Evidence

I was familiar with the concept of the living asking the deceased to pray for them. And this usually took the form of straightforwardly asking someone “to pray.” For instance, in Latin, the prayer known as ***The Hail Mary*** includes the line:

Ora pro nobis nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.
Pray for us now and in the hour of our death.

But the story from the Talmud in which Caleb asked his ancestors to pray for him contained a particular and curious idiom. Rather than saying, simply, “Pray for me,” Caleb had asked them to:

“Seek” (verb: ***baqqshu*** [בָּקַשׁ])

“Mercies” (noun: **raḥamim** [רָחֲמִים])
“On my behalf” (preposition: ‘**alay** [עַלְיָהוּ])

I was interested in whether these particular words were used together elsewhere in the Old Testament or the Talmud to describe asking someone to pray for you. Now, we live in a world in which research that once took me months of labor in a library when I first got my PhD, now takes me mere minutes using online tools.

I searched for that precise phrase and was shocked to quickly find that the Talmud described early Jews as using that **exact same idiom** to ask their own departed loved ones to pray for them, just as Caleb asked his ancestral fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Here’s what I found. We read in the Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 16a, in answer to a question posed as to why people go to visit graves:

In order that the dead should **seek mercies on our behalf**.

Notice the startling parallel between this passage and that found in the story of Caleb. In both passages, people ask the dead:

Talmud Sotah 34b: “seek mercies on my behalf”
Talmud Taanit 16a: “that they seek mercies on our behalf”

And in each case:

“Seek” = **baqqash** (בָקַשׁ)
“Mercies” = **raḥamim** (רָחֲמִים)
“On Behalf Of” = ‘**al** (עַל)

As a trained linguist, this intrigued me. Indeed, as a linguist who had worked in the Top Secret National Security Agency, searching for patterns to detect terrorist plots, this struck me as beyond pure coincidence. These passages provide us, through their common vocabulary, with the precise words that early Jews used to ask others, including their departed ancestors, to pray for them.

What Does It Mean to “Seek Mercies”?

What exactly does the word “mercies” (**raḥamim**) really mean in Hebrew? The word itself is plural, though usually rendered by the singular English word “mercy.” It is derived from the common Semitic root that conveys the concept of “compassion” and “gentleness.” The Hebrew word for womb (**reḥem**) is from this same root.

Our first instinct is usually that the word “mercy” is primarily associated with the forgiveness of sin. We have done something wrong, for which we deserve punishment. And so we ask for “mercy,” meaning that we pray not to receive so harsh a response as we deserve.

And that meaning of “mercy” is indeed found in the Old Testament. For instance, we read in Psalm 79:8:

Do not remember the iniquities of the forefathers against us; may **your mercies** (**raḥameka**) come quickly to meet us.

But “mercy” in the Bible goes way beyond just asking for forgiveness of sin. Many verses point to the idea that, when you seek mercy, you can also be asking for some protection, blessing, or guidance.

Notice that when Caleb asked his ancestors to “seek mercy” on his behalf, he then immediately made a petition, “That I may be delivered from the plan of the spies.” He was not seeking mercy for the forgiveness of sin at all.

Mercies for Blessings

The Bible describes “mercy” (**raḥamim**) as being the source of blessings:

According to **all that the LORD has granted us**, and His **great goodness** to the house of Israel, **which He has granted them**, according to His **mercies** (**raḥamav**). (Isaiah 63:7)

Mercies for Guidance

We also read in the Old Testament that, when the king of Babylon had troubling dreams, he was about to kill all the wise men who could not interpret these dreams to him. Daniel asked his companions:

...to seek mercies (*raḥamim*)⁵ of the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

Then to Daniel, in a vision of the night, **the mystery was revealed.** (Daniel 2:18-19)

Two very important things happen in this passage from the Book of Daniel. Notice that Daniel and his friends “seek mercy” **about a mystery.** And then the answer comes from God. So this is an example of **seeking mercy** meaning the same thing as **praying for guidance on an important matter.**

But notice also that the prophet Daniel here does not consider just praying on his own to be enough. He asks three friends to also “seek mercy” from God. When it comes to prayer, there is apparently strength in numbers.

Matriarch Rachel Prays For Her Children

We read in the Mishnah, Bereishit Rabbah 82:10:

And Rachel died and was buried in the direction of Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. Why did Jacob our father bury Rachel in the direction of Ephrath? Because our father Jacob foresaw that the exiles would pass by there. Therefore he buried her there, **so that she would seek mercy on their behalf** (***mibaqqeshet ‘alayhem raḥamim***).

Once again, the exact same idiom appears to describe the manner in which the dead are interceding for the living, seeking mercies on their behalf.

⁵ This section of Daniel was written in Aramaic. The Aramaic (and Arabic) plural ending has an ‘n’ instead of an ‘m’. But this is the same word.

It would seem that the Book of Jeremiah is also alluding to the intercessory role of Rachel in the passage quoted by the Evangelist Matthew regarding the Slaughter of the Innocents:

A voice in Ramah is heard—lamentation, bitter weeping. **Rachel weeping on behalf of her children.** (Jer 31:15, quoted in Matt 2:18)

Why Ancestral Intercession?

What have we learned so far? The Talmud suggests that some ancient Jews asked their deceased ancestors to “seek mercies” on their behalf. In the next chapter I will show you yet further evidence that this is true. But before we go any further, let’s explore *why* asking our ancestors for prayer is something valuable. To do that, let’s really get into the mind and heart of Caleb as he was prostrated over the grave of the biblical Patriarchs, asking them to “seek mercies” on his behalf.

Caleb in Crisis

As we read above, Caleb had been sent on the mission to spy out the Promised Land as the official representative of the House of Judah.⁶ And he had become aware that ten of the other spies had a plan to make a bad report back to Moses and the Children of Israel about whether they could successfully invade and conquer the land which had been promised as an everlasting possession to the descendants of Abraham.⁷ So just imagine the turmoil in his heart as all that now hung in the balance. He must have been under enormous pressure from the others, or else he would not have asked specifically “that I might be saved from the plan of the spies.”

So why go to the ancestors for help? Why did Caleb not just ask God in the silence of his heart to give him strength to resist the “plan of the spies” and then, with God’s help, make a good report? I think we can safely assume Caleb did so!

Have you ever had such a pressing need in your life that, while you did indeed pour out your heart to God, you then also asked a friend to pray for you? That’s where Caleb

⁶ Numbers 13:6.

⁷ Genesis 17:8.

was that day. He knew that there were other people he could ask to pray for him who were just as concerned about the success of the Children of Israel as Caleb was—the Parents of Israel themselves. And Caleb is not asking them to pray for him because they are holy men. But they are parents who, as parents, love their children and their grandchildren and even love unconditionally, as parents, the generations they will never see.

Let's also recall that Caleb in that moment was a sojourner in a strange land he had never seen. And it would be natural to be afraid. But he knew his ancestor Abraham had followed God's call to leave his own country and travel to the Land that God would show him.⁸ And so these ancestors also know the feelings of fear and apprehension that Caleb was experiencing.

How far removed was Caleb from the people buried in the Cave of Machpelah? If you piece together Caleb's genealogy from biblical sources, Caleb was the great-great-great-great grandson of Abraham.⁹ Some people might consider that distant, but I don't. Let me explain just how close a great-great-great-great grandfather is by introducing you to someone very important to me.

My Abraham: Wright Massey

I was born and raised in Wisconsin. But that fact flows in part from the decision of a man long ago who, like Abraham, left his land and became a sojourner in a distant place.

In 1819, a man named Wright Massey was born in Hollingsworth, England. In 1848, he married Betty Warhurst. They left England and moved to America in 1855, eventually settling in Moscow, Wisconsin. Their first son Joseph was born that same year. Wright Jr. was born in 1858, followed by Edward in 1860, and finally Cornelius in 1864.

⁸ Genesis 12:1.

⁹ Caleb's genealogy is quite complicated, but it can be reconstructed out of passages primarily from 1st Chronicles. Judah, the son of Jacob and grandson of Abraham, was the father of Perez (1 Chron 2:4). Perez was the father of Hezron (1 Chron 2:5). Hezron was the father of Jerahmeel, Ram, and Chelubai (1 Chron 2:9). The man named Chelubai here is the Caleb sent as a spy. We know this because a Caleb, brother of Jerahmeel, is also called the father of Achsah in 1 Chron 3:42 and 3:49. Caleb son of Jephunneh is also called the father of Achsah in Josh 15:17. So how can this one man be both the son of Hezron and the son of Jephunneh? We read in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sotah 11b: "The son of Hezron? He was the son of Jephunneh (*ypnh*; יְפָנֵה)! He was a son who turned (*panah*; פָּנָה) from the plan of the spies." This passage interprets "Jephunneh" as a title honoring the fact that he rejected and "turned away" from the bad report the other spies gave to the Children of Israel.

Wright Massey passed away in 1866 from “quick consumption” (probably Tuberculosis), leaving Betty to raise four young boys on her own. She did admirably and lived to see them all grown up and with families of their own when she passed on in 1900.

Their son Edward married Mary Diamond on January 2, 1882. Their first child, William, was born in December of that year. William married Rose Roethlisberger in 1906. Their son William Allan was born in 1912. William Allan married Helen Adler in 1935. Their second son, William Frederick, was born in 1939.

William Frederick Massey married Nancy Dodge in 1958. My twin brother Kevin and I are their third and fourth sons respectively, born in 1966.

And so, Wright Massey is my great-great grandfather. He is to me what the Patriarch Isaac was to Caleb. But Wright Massey was the Abraham to the large clan of Masseys descended from him here in the United States. He and Betty bravely came to America seeking a better life for themselves and the family they would have.

At the age of forty-seven, he lay on his death bed, leaving behind his dear wife Betty and four young sons, ages ten, eight, five, and two. He must have been so overwhelmingly concerned with their future safety and wellbeing. Wisconsin in 1866 was no easy place to eke out an existence. And he passed from this life, with a heart full of love and concern for them.

And where did that love go?

Love is stronger than death (Song of Songs 8:6)

That love lived on in a soul that joined eternity, wishing health, happiness, and prosperity upon his children and his children’s children whom he never met in life.

Wright Massey’s son Edward died the same year my own father was born, which shows you that what may seem like multiple generations are not so very far apart. Edward’s own son William, Wright’s grandson, died one year *after* I was born and I have been told that he held his twin great-grandsons in his arms.

Which brings us back to the point. These people I have been describing care for me because I am one of them. Wright Massey knows me and wants what is best for me just as much as for those four boys he left behind.

I've described my ancestor Wright Massey as going into eternity with love and concern for the young children he left under the care of his beloved Betty. Can't we just assume our ancestors pray for us? Why do we have to *ask* them to "seek mercies" on our behalf?

One answer is, that's how relationships work. We may know in our heart of hearts that someone loves us, but it sure still feels good to hear it! If I never asked my ancestor to pray for me because I just assumed they were already doing it, I would not experience the communion of spirit that such a request can build between us. And it may even be that my ancestor, whose knowledge of me is solely dependent on the grace and power of God, cannot pray on my behalf *unless* I ask him.

There is obviously much we will simply never know on this side of eternity about the nature of the heavenly realm. What we *know with our minds* may be a collection of verses from the Bible about the matter. And I will get to all of those later in this book.

But another answer for why we need to ask them to pray for us, and I think it's the most important reason of all, is that the need to continue speaking with them is something *we feel in our hearts*. If you have lost a loved one, someone you frequently spoke with and cherished, you did not want that relationship to end. And yet death inevitably takes people from us. What I am saying is that death does not have to *end* that relationship. It changes it, to be sure.

But the very fact that we still want to talk to those people teaches us that we *should*. We have the promise in Scripture that our hearts are where we shall find God's law:

I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts (Hebrews 8:10, quoting Jeremiah 31:33)

In the New Covenant, Truth is instilled within the hearts of the believers. Inside of Christian history, asking the departed saints to pray for us became a common and fully accepted practice. And this fact alone gives us the assurance that asking the departed to pray for us is within God's Will.¹⁰

¹⁰ I explore this concept in more detail in the Appendix.

Praying for them and asking them to pray for us is how our relationship with the dead continues. Talk to your beloved dead. Ask them to “seek mercies” on your behalf. Ask God to have mercy on them. In so doing, we remain in relationship with those whom we love, even after they pass into eternity.

But Isn't Saint Intercession Wrong??!!

If you come from a faith community that rejects and condemns the idea of asking the deceased to pray for us, perhaps you may want to skip right ahead to the Appendix of this book, entitled “Should You Ask the Dead to Pray for You?” There you will find a discussion of the verses of Scripture quoted by those who disagree with Saint or Ancestral Intercession. I will show you in the Appendix that Saint and Ancestral Intercession is supported by biblical evidence. Then, when you are more comfortable with asking the deceased to pray for us, you can better appreciate the further evidence in the next chapter that Ancestral Intercession was a common and accepted practice of earlier generations and should be still today.

But I repeat. Listen to your heart. If the love you feel for someone who has died prompts you to talk to them, why would you stifle that because someone quotes a Bible verse *they* say means you shouldn't be doing that?

If you are true to your heart and your conscience, you will continue speaking to your beloved dead unless they show you a place in the Bible where it literally says “Thou shalt not speak to your beloved dead. And the only things that are true are what's in the Bible.” You'll find that what I just quoted is not, in fact, in the Bible at all! I explain all the verses they *will* quote you in the Appendix.

My Community is Fine with Saint Intercession, But I Want More Proof on Ancestral Intercession!

If you would like yet more evidence from Scripture and early Jewish and Christian writers that Ancestral Intercession was really practiced, continue to the next chapter. There I will describe New Testament proofs for the practice, as well as showing you passages from early Jewish and Christian writers which demonstrate an awareness and practice of Ancestral Intercession in the early centuries AD.