

# 'Abba'

## "Father"

This Aramaic word 'Abba', "Father," has always been a significant word in the spiritual life of believers. It was used in the Old Testament to describe the spiritual relationship between believers and God; but it became more pronounced in the New Testament in the light of Jesus' instructions on prayer and the apostolic teachings. But today there is little clear understanding of what the description means; moreover, it is being defined and used in a way that was not intended. The word, then, calls for closer scrutiny.

### The Origin and Meaning of the Word

'Abba' is clearly cognate with the Hebrew word 'ab (pronounced 'ahv), "Father." More specifically, it would be cognate to the Hebrew word with the definite article, *ha'ab* ("the Father"), because the ending -a' on the Aramaic makes it a determined or definite noun. Hence, the translation could be "the Father" or "my Father" of just "Father."

A number of years ago the reliable scholar Joachim Jeremias explained that the word had a very familiar and intimate tone to it; he said it was the kind of term that a child would use within the family. From this general statement others have taken the emphasis on intimacy and carried it much further, teaching that 'abba' means "Daddy," an idea that Jeremias never included. This has become popular today--but is it correct? Would people in the first century have thought of that when they heard it? The answer is clearly "no," as the evidence shows (see further James Barr, "'ABBA' ISN'T 'DADDY' [*Journal of Theological Studies* 1988]; Geza Vermes, *Jesus in the World of Judaism* [1983], pp. 41, 2). Their arguments and several other observations are important to the clarification of this understanding.

First, we have to consider the several explanations given for the origins of the form. The first explanation, mentioned above, is the most likely, that the word is the Aramaic word with the determinative ending; it would mean "Father" in the emphatic state, that is, "the Father," and this determinative in turn took on the functions of pronouns, "My Father." A second explanation is that the word as it stands is a vocative and has nothing to do with the emphatic state or determinative ending; it is a word derived from children's speech. A third explanation, closely related to the second, is that it started with a babbling sound. (If this were true it should have the English analogue "Da-da," not "Daddy").

We cannot say for certain that the word itself, 'ab, is Aramaic or Hebrew; for that distinction we rely on the suffixed ending and its meaning. In view of that the word 'abba' is Aramaic. But whether it is Hebrew or Aramaic the question of its meaning remains the same, for it is still the word for "father." However, some folks argue that if it was Aramaic, it was from the later developed colloquial use of the language, the common language in the days of Jesus, and

not the more formal or higher liturgical style of Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> And yet *Mishnaic* Hebrew, the language of the great teachers recorded in the *Mishnah*, was popular Hebrew. So we have the same result.

Moreover, the general conclusion that it is probably Aramaic because it ends with *-a'* (the letter *'alef* after the vowel *a*) is not completely compelling either, because we do not know if the spoken word did end with this letter. Both the ending *a + the letter alef* and *a + the letter h* sound exactly the same; and from the spelling of our word in the Greek New Testament we could not tell what the spelling of the Semitic word would have been for sure. In other texts like Neofiti the spelling with the letter *h* (*he'*) also appears. And Hebrew personal names in the Old Testament like *'Ezra'* also end with the long vowel *a with the letter 'alef*. All of this to say that the spelling of the word in the New Testament does not compel us to assume it was Aramaic, or that it was a later development in Semitic languages for homely speech. It probably is Aramaic, even though we cannot be completely sure of that; but even if it was Aramaic, it is clear that the form and its use existed at an earlier time than the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we have to consider the extended theory that the word developed from the "babbling" of a child. We may say at the outset that there is no evidence at all for this, in any of the languages. In fact it is clear that "father" (especially with the rendering *pater* in the New Testament) had a social value in the cultures, and was connected with religion and mythology; its aspect of solemnity caused people to use more familiar words in its place. Besides, are we to believe that children babbled *pa* or *ma* in their talk, and that up to the Gospel times there were no words for father or mother? In fact, it is the adult who "hears into" these sounds and creates the baby-language that they consider is fitting (D. Abercrombie, *Elements of General Phonetics*). That infants of Aramaic-speaking families should have babbled in forms that have such close morphological analogies with the grammar of their parents' language is unlikely. The theory of infant babbling as the explanation of the origin is nonsensical.

But finally, what about the translation "Daddy"? In more general terms, what evidence do we have for the interpretation of this expression? First, the words "father" and "mother" as used by children are the same words as those used by adults. Even if one could argue that *'abba'* originated with children, by Jesus' time it was the word of adults just as much.

Second, the Jewish *Talmud* itself talks about the child learning to say *'abba'* and *'imma'* (B. Ber. 40a). The words the child was to learn are the normal words of the language--correct and grammatical adult language. The word did not have one sense of "daddy" when children said it, and another for "father" when adults said it.

Third, the *Targums*, which translate the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, use *'abba'* where the Hebrew has "father" or "my father." A survey of those uses is sufficient to show that they occur in contexts that are adult, serious, and religiously solemn. One would be trivializing the text to translate, say, Genesis 22:7 as, "And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'Dad'"; or for Genesis 31:42 to say, "The God of my Daddy, the God of Abraham . . . ." One must also remember that in many of these uses the speaker is over 100 years old! No further comment is needed here.

Fourth, the Greek word used in the New Testament to translate our word is always the normal word *pater*, and never a diminutive such as *papas*, *pappas*, or *pappias*, all of which existed at the time. Words that expressed "daddy" were available, but they are not found in biblical Greek--because they were not suitable for biblical style. They used '*abba*' because it meant "father" and not "daddy."

So, in the first part of this study, then, we may conclude that '*abba*' does not mean "Daddy," but "Father." Now we must consider the significance of referring to God as "Father."

### **The Significance of Calling God "Father"**

Since the word was used in the Bible as a critical part of the faith, we need to look more closely at the usage to determine the significance. Whenever Jesus used the word to refer to God, it was "the Father" or "my Father"; but he taught others to say "our Father." This specification singled the word out as a highly significant term for theology. In the three places in the New Testament where "'*Abba*', Father" occurs (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) the Greek has the nominative with the article: *abba, ho pater*. The consistency of this indicates that it was a literal rendering of the idea in the original, and that it understood the noun to be in the emphatic state and to mean either "the Father" or "Father" specifically. It also had the vocative function, "father" (as "O Father").<sup>3</sup>

What, then, does the term "Father" for God mean for use? First, to call God Father is to speak of him as the **absolutely sovereign God of creation**. Even in the pagan pantheons the highest God is called "the father of the gods," not to indicate that he procreated them all, but that he was sovereign among the gods. But in the Bible since Yahweh God created everything by himself, he alone is sovereign; and what he created he governs. There are no other gods; he has no rivals. Thus "Father" is a high title indeed. And no other designation would do what this metaphor does to reveal God as the Sovereign Creator.<sup>4</sup>

Second, to call God "Father" is to use **covenant language**. In all of God's covenants, the people are "sons" or "children" by their adoption into the covenant. Even in the secular world this was so; one of Israel's kings became a "son" of Pul (Tiglathpileser) when he became his vassal. But in the biblical covenants we find this most clearly expressed. In Exodus 4:22, 23 Israel is called God's son because Israel has a covenant with God (the Abrahamic Covenant was in place, and the Sinaitic Covenant was about to be built on it). Playing on the word "son," God told Pharaoh through Moses to let his son (Israel) go, or he would kill Pharaoh's son. Later, Hosea repeats this usage when he records how God called his son out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1).<sup>5</sup> Israel was God's "son."

In 2 Samuel 7:13, 14 we have the use of the word "son" for the king of Israel. This chapter is the Davidic Covenant. And in that covenant God will be a father to the king, and the king will be his son. Thus, when the king was coronated, he would publicly declare by what right he ruled by quoting this covenant: "The LORD said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'" (Ps. 2:7). Every anointed son of David could claim this title, "God's Son." Thus, even Peter could easily say, "You are the Son of God," not knowing entirely what he said. For the words of the psalm again find their fullest meaning in Christ Jesus who would be more than an anointed

king. He is the eternal Son of God, fully divine as well as fully human. In fact, Isaiah anticipated this in his oracle of the names of the coming king (Isa. 9:5,6) by reversing the wording of the Davidic Covenant, making the promised Son the Father. That would be confusing to people until Jesus declared that He and the Father were one and the same (John 10:30).

But the point is that the human recipient of the Davidic Covenant was normally called God's son, and God was his Father.

Likewise in the New Covenant this same language of Father and son is used. We who have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have been given the right to be called the sons of God (John 1:12, 13), sons by adoption (Rom. 8:15, 16). And so the Spirit of God prompts us to say, '*Abba*', *Father*, because we are members of the New Covenant. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven."<sup>6</sup>

Third, for us to call God "Father" is indeed to acknowledge a close personal relationship with him; it is after all a family term. It is fair to say that in Jesus' time the word was colloquial but respectful, even in human families; but it was not a childish expression like "daddy."<sup>7</sup> To call God "Father" is to affirm that we have been born into the family of God, that we are joint heirs with Christ, that we belong to him forever and will dwell with him. But he is still the sovereign and holy Lord God; and the significance of the word "Father" is one of a reverent, respectful and solemn adult address of God.