



ABBA

FATHER

By Joe Beckler

OUR CONCEPT OF A FATHER is typically rooted in our experiences. For some, the word “father” conjures up thoughts of safety, security, firmness, and courage. Others use words such as painful, absent, unpredictable, and angry to describe their fathers. Jesus Himself employed the image of father to describe the relationship He enjoyed with God. His description of His Father tells much about God’s character. Paul, following Jesus’ lead, employed the idea of a fatherly relationship to clarify the nature of a believer’s standing in relationship to God.

New Testament writers used two words for father. The more common is the Greek *pater*. The other is *Abba*, which occurs three times in the New Testament. Jesus once used *Abba*, the Aramaic version of father (Mark 14:36); Paul used it twice (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). All three texts link *Abba* with *pater*, which translators render as “Abba, Father.”¹ Paul’s usage of *Abba* builds off Jesus’ prayer in Mark 14:36. Combining the Greek and Aramaic terms, making the phrase “Abba, Father,” carried deep meaning for New Testament audiences.

In the ancient world, recipients of the New Testament often shared a connection with Judaism. Thus, Jewish thought heavily influenced people’s understanding of the phrase “Abba, Father.”

Old Testament writings laid out an instructional framework for the Hebrews’ understanding of a father’s role. Families were the basic social component in Israel. Under one household, families could span three generations. The eldest Jewish father figure (or patriarch) behaved as the king of the household.² The father was responsible for the family’s well-being. Further, he was the family’s spiritual leader. His job was to ensure that the family observed the religious rites of Judaism. Fathers were also responsible for instructing and teaching children



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how they should live (see Prov. 22:6 and Deut. 6:7-9). Fathers provided for their families; failing to do so was a great offense (see Prov. 6:6-11). The father also defended his family’s rights before the judges (see Deut. 22:13-19).³

Abba is rooted in the Hebrew term for father, which is *ab* (pronounced as *av*). The use of the Aramaic *Abba* resonated with the Jewish communities’ usage of Hebrew. In the time of the rabbi Gamaliel, of whom Paul was a disciple, using “Abba” when referring to God was rare. The uses that do exist, however, always differentiated God from earthly fathers, emphasizing the Lord’s distance from humans. Judaic writings would thus refer to God as “Abba, who is in heaven.”⁴

Of the Gospels, Mark is the only to use the phrase “Abba, Father” (14:36).⁵ The meaning of this phrase is



**Two little girls
looking over a
balcony parapet
in the Old City of
Jerusalem.**

significant. Jesus emphasized closeness instead of distance. This was a radical shift in contrast to the Jewish religious leaders' practice of emphasizing the separation between God and humans. In the Mark 14:36 text, Jesus was facing a most trying moment, praying in the garden of Gethsemane. He approached the awful task of bearing humanity's sin—through crucifixion. In His intense prayer, He cried out to Abba, Father. His prayer indicated that God was intimately close to Him. This closeness both encouraged and strengthened Him. Sadly, Jesus' intimate usage of "Abba" would have been an offense to the religious establishment.⁶

Paul's use of Abba in Romans 8:15 encouraged believers, telling them that the Spirit of God was powerfully at work in each of them. It was not a "spirit of

slavery." Instead, followers of Jesus received a "Spirit of adoption," which literally conveyed the thought of being made a son (or daughter) of God! Instead of indebted slaves, believers took on the identity of family members! The difference between a slave and child was significant. Paul wanted believers to grasp the profoundness of being a child of God. As Paul skillfully wrote, believers had the right to relate to God as their Abba, Father. Just as Jesus knew God in a most intimate way, believers were adopted and had every right to cry out just as Jesus—"Abba, Father!"⁷

Galatians 4:6 mirrors the theme of Romans 8:15. Believers, because of Jesus, received the Spirit and had a family identity. Paul's letter to the Galatian believers reinforced the gift of adoption. Being a child of God, as



Left: Praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, "Abba, Father!" (Mark 14:36).

Below: Dated to the 1st cent. B.C., slabs that were part of a grave monument. On the left, two ladies and their servants (carved with less detail); on the right two men, a slave, the head of a horse, and a tree with a snake on it. According to Paul, rather than being slaves, Jesus' followers have been accepted as family members and thus can cry out to God as "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).



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well as enjoying the Spirit, could not be earned. These were graceful gifts from God.⁸

Believers of the early church understood Paul's reference to God's parental attributes based on what they understood culturally about fatherhood. Jewish believers, in particular, remembered what the Old Testament taught about a father's role. He was to provide, to look out for the well being of his children, to discipline, to teach, to protect, and to represent his children when they stood accused. Paul proclaimed that God was committed to His followers in the same ways an earthly father was to his children. God promised to watch closely over those whom He had adopted.

Abba, a word rarely occurring in the New Testament, packs great meaning for Christianity. As Abba, Father, God sets a tone of intimacy. Jesus, in crying out "Abba, Father!" was clearly revealing the closeness of God. As well, Paul was not flippantly describing God as close and intimate. Instead, these were radical pronouncements about God, statements that stood in contrast to all other religions past, present, and future. The New Testament proclaims that the way of Jesus is the only path towards intimacy and closeness with God. Once a stranger to God because of sin, those who follow Jesus and embrace His forgiveness are never deemed as debtors or slaves. Rather, they are children who enjoy the closeness of Abba, Father. **B**

1. Gerhard Kittel, "ἄββᾶ" (Abba, father) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT], ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 6.
2. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 36-37.
3. J.I. Packer, and M.C. Tenney, eds., *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 412-13.
4. Gerhard Kittel, "ἄββᾶ" (Abba, father) in TDNT, 5.
5. Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982), 297.
6. Walter W. Wessel, "Mark" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [EBC], ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 764.
7. Everett F. Harrison, "Romans" in EBC, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 92.
8. James Montgomery Boice, "Galatians" in EBC, vol. 10, 473.

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