Jesus Praying in Gethsemane, painting by Harry Anderson

Why Is *Abba* in the New Testament?

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What is the Aramaic word *abba* doing in the Greek New Testament, and what does it signify? It appears in Mark 14:36 and in two other verses.[1] Specifically, the question has been raised whether *abba* means something formal and respectful, like "father," or something more intimate and familiar, like "daddy." Early twentieth-century scholarship and some contemporary, popular notions point to the latter.[2] More recent academic literature points to the former. I will suggest that *abba* is both deeply intimate and profoundly respectful. But first I will give a very brief overview of the academic literature. Then, I will discuss why I think the scholarly evidence used to justify both the familiar and the formal positions misses the mark. I will conclude that the correct interpretation of *abba* grows out of Christ's relationship with His Father and not from any linguistic analysis.

In the last century, the biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias proposed and made popular the view that *abba* "had a very familiar and intimate tone," based less on the passage and more on his understanding of the origin of the Aramaic word.[3] "In other words, putting this into English, it was somewhat like saying 'Daddy,' though Jeremias seems to have stopped short of saying this explicitly"[4] and later in his life even repudiated any use of "Daddy."[5] Nevertheless, explicit or not, Jeremias and his followers seem to be responsible for the current fashion of translating *abba* as "daddy."[6] This popular view prompted James Barr to publish an article in which he demonstrated that *abba* cannot mean "daddy" but can mean only "father."[7] Let us look at the historical and linguistic evidence.

In Mark 14:36 and in the other two Greek New Testament occurrences, *abba* (αββα in Greek) is followed by the Greek translation *ho patér* (ὁ πατήρ), literally, "the father." No one questions the fact that both the Greek and the Aramaic words have something to do with the word for "father/daddy." It is also clear from the context that Christ was addressing His "Father." Therefore, regardless of what the particular grammatical form may be, the only possible translation of both the Aramaic and Greek words is as a vocative—that is, as "O Father/O Daddy," or "my Father/my Papa," or something similar, such as the King James Version "*Abba*, Father."[8] The only question that remains is, what are the forms?

Abba in Aramaic is a bit ambiguous because it can mean "the father" or even, as in later rabbinic sources, "my father" or "our father."[9] The Greek word is not quite as ambiguous as the Aramaic because it clearly means "the Father" or "my Father."[10] Thus, although it is not clear which exact grammatical meaning is to be attached to the Aramaic and the Greek words, it is clear that Mark records Christ as addressing God with an Aramaic and a Greek word that has something to do with "father/daddy." But this does not help settle the issue of whether *abba* in Mark 14:36 means "father" or "daddy."

It is my thesis that with regard to the question of whether *abba* means the rather formal "Father" or the decidedly familiar "Daddy," any straightforward linguistic analysis of the form misses the mark. Whether *abba* is the familiar "Daddy" or the more formal "Father" depends rather on the manner in which languages express the familiar and the formal.

Early Modern English (the language used in the King James Bible) had both the grammatically familiar forms and the vocabulary to produce the sentence, "Daddy, hast thou a dollar?" In this sentence, "daddy" represents a familiar form of the word "father," and "hast thou" is a grammatical form expressing familiarity. Thus, "Daddy, hast thou a dollar?" is doubly familiar. However, in contemporary English (Modern English), the grammatical familiar has all but disappeared, leaving only certain vocabulary words and colloquialisms to express familiar speech patterns, such as "Mommy, gimme a dollar," where "Mommy" is familiar and "gimme" is a familiar colloquialism for "give me."

Yet Modern English has retained some remnants of the grammatical formal "ye" and the grammatical familiar "thou" of Early Modern English literature, as is widely evident from a casual reading of Shakespeare. "Ye," as the grammatical formal, was used when speaking with respect, usually to someone of superior rank. "Thou," as the

grammatical familiar, was used when speaking with close friends, with close family members, and often with people of lower rank.[11] By the time the King James translation was made, however, these forms had already begun to lose their formal and familiar usage. Today, with few exceptions, most speakers of Modern English are not acquainted with the grammatical formal and familiar as they were used in Middle and Early Modern English.

Aramaic and Greek have no grammatically familiar forms. To put this in terms of Early Modern English, there is no way in Aramaic or in Greek to make a distinction between the formal "ye/you" and the familiar "thou,"[13]—that is, between "Can you help me?" and "Canst thou help me?" Therefore, the grammar of Aramaic and Greek cannot provide any evidence one way or the other about the formality or familiarity of the Greek text in which Aramaic *abba* occurs.

When we examine vocabulary that can express familiarity, as far as written Aramaic is concerned (the only form of Aramaic we have from the New Testament period), we find that Aramaic has no separate words for "daddy" and "father."[14] Aramaic must use the same word, either *ab* or *abba*, both for the familiar and for the formal.[15] Therefore, as with the grammatical forms just discussed, an appeal to Aramaic vocabulary cannot yield a definitive answer because, with only one word for both "daddy" and "father," no distinctions can be made on the basis of word usage.

Unlike Aramaic but similar to English, Greek does have the vocabulary to make a distinction between "daddy" and "father."[16] Therefore, when Mark opted to render *abba* into Greek with the formal expression *ho patér* (ὁ πατήρ) he might have been attempting to indicate to his Greek-speaking audience that he believed *abba* was also a formal expression and not a familiar term of endearment.

The choice of a more formal Greek translation for *abba* may have settled the issue for Greek-speaking Christians. But the nuanced meanings of Aramaic *abba* cannot be definitively determined by an appeal to Greek vocabulary. In fact, it is extremely rare that a word in one language can be captured in all of its nuances by a single word in another language. The fact that Greek does have the vocabulary for both the familiar "daddy" and the formal "father" and that Aramaic does not means that any translation into Greek of Aramaic *abba* must decide whether to use the Greek familiar word or the formal word. The fact that a Greek translation is forced to decide between "daddy" and "father" tells us more about how the translator felt about the Aramaic than about any actual formality or familiarity of the Aramaic word.

In fact, the main problem that underlies the scholarly debate seems to be precisely the unspoken assumption that respect (formality) and intimacy (familiarity) are mutually exclusive—that is, a word or a phrase must be either familiar or formal. This either-or situation results less from any innate conflict between respect and intimacy and more from the blinders that modern scholars wear because of their knowledge of languages, such as English, that require a distinction with regard to the formal and the familiar.[17] That is, if the modern languages a scholar knows make a distinction between familiar and formal, the scholar is forced to impose an interpretation on the text that is not present either in the grammar or vocabulary of the Aramaic or in the grammar of the Greek. Applying this to the text at hand, though *abba* is neither innately familiar nor formal, translators must render the word as familiar or formal in any target language, such as English, that makes a distinction between "daddy" and "father." Such impositions cannot be avoided.

On the other hand, even though Aramaic lacks both the grammatical means and the vocabulary, it still seems very strange to me, even contrary to mortal experience, for Aramaic not to be able to express the familiarity and intimacy that exist in family settings. Surely Aramaic possessed means, both verbal and nonverbal, of expressing familiarity. Tone, intonation, posture, facial expressions, and other subtleties can be used to distinguish between formal and familiar speech, even in languages that already possess familiar and formal vocabulary and grammatical distinctions. Because these subtleties cannot be reduced to writing, any attempt to determine the formality or familiarity of *abba* on the basis of grammar or vocabulary must fail.

The only possible way to discern the nuances of *abba* must begin with an analysis of the context. In the case of Mark 14:36, only a correct understanding of who Christ was and the situation in which He used *abba* can lead to a correct understanding of the nuances attached to *abba*.

From the Latter-day Saint point of view, Christ was and is the Son of our Heavenly Father in a much more profound way than we are. As the Firstborn (see Hebrews 1:6) in our premortal existence and as the Only Begotten (see John 1:18) in mortality and the Son of the Highest (see Luke 1:32), Christ enjoyed a more intimate and personal relationship with our Heavenly Father while on this earth than any other mortal.

Christ is also at the same time the steward, or servant, of our God (see Jacob 5); and, as such, He is directed by and reports back to His God.[18] In His role as "the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2)—that is, as Savior and Redeemer—He was the executor or ser-

vant of the Father's plan for His children, a role that no other mortal could have taken upon himself. As such, "the accomplishment of the Father's will was never lost sight of as the object of the Son's supreme desire" through the terrible ordeal of Gethsemane and Golgatha.[19]

Given the dual relationship between Christ and His Father,[20] we can now turn to Christ's use of *abba* in Mark 14:36. The context is within Christ's "great intercessory prayer," reported in more detail in John 17. In His role as the steward or Suffering Servant (see Isaiah 53) in God's plan of redemption, Christ used *abba* in His final mortal report. It seems to me that in this context of a stewardship account, He would have used *abba* with the greatest of formal respect for His God.

At the same time, as the Son, in His extreme hour of need, He also cried out to His Father. It seems to me that in this context as the Only Begotten Son, His use of *abba* is deeply intimate, the tender and personal expression of a Son to His Father at the time when His "suffering caused [Christ], even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit" (D&C 19:18).

Therefore, it may not be out of place to suggest that *abba* is at once profoundly respectful, the deferential language of the Servant reporting to His God, and at the same time is deeply intimate in a way that no other mortal could have used the word. Respect and familiarity seem to come together in *abba*. Perhaps the very reason that Mark retained the Aramaic word was to preserve the ambiguity that *abba* allowed—namely, the formal vocative "O Father!" and the familiar "My Father"—and thereby convey to the reader the respect that Christ had for His God and the intimacy He shared with His Father. RE

Notes

1. The other two verses are Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. Because Romans and Galatians are either dependent on Mark, or Mark is dependent on Paul's usage, or all three are dependent on a third source, such as early Christian liturgy, and because whatever I say about Mark can be applied to Romans and Galatians, I will not single out Paul's usage of the term for independent treatment.

2. For a short summary of the question and a rather lengthy answer, see James Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 39 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 28–47.

3. Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 28. On the same page, Barr also states that "it was Jeremias who most insisted on the point, built it into a cornerstone of

his theological position, and repeated the arguments again and again." Compare Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 41–43, especially his statement in this context on page 41 that "much has been written about the significance of the use by Jesus of the title *abba*, especially by Jeremias and his followers." See also The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. A–C, 7.

4. Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 28.

5. Jeremias stated in his book, *Abba: Studien zur neutstamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 63–64, that to assume *abba* is "the babble of a child addressing his Heavenly Father . . . would be an inadmissable bagatelle" (my translation).

6. Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 28, "Few will question the assertion that Jeremias is the person behind the vogue of [translating *'abbā* as]'Daddy.'" Perhaps some of the popularity of reading *abba* as "daddy" stems from Modern Hebrew usage. Because Hebrew lacks a word for "daddy," the regular Aramaic word for "father," *abba* was borrowed into Modern Hebrew with the nuance of "daddy." This is, of course, a late construct and cannot be used as evidence that *abba* was used for "daddy" in the Hebrew or Aramaic of the New Testament period.

7. See Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 28–47.

8. See Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 1:172. After a discussion of various suggestions, Brown states that *abba* is "an emphatic form used vocatively." See also John Ashton, "ABBA," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:7.

9. See "Abba," *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 3. Here it is stated that *abba* is "the definite form of the Aramaic word for 'father' (lit. 'the father')." A. Wikgren, "ABBA," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, et al., vol. A–D (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3, states that *abba* is "a term meaning properly 'the father,' but used as the equivalent of 'my father' or 'our Father' chiefly in prayer in the later rabbinic literature." Gerhard Kittel, "ἀββᾶ," *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 5–6, admits the meanings ["the father,"] "my father," and "our father." Note, however, that *abba* could also be Hebrew, for which see Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 30. Though I will limit the discussion below to Aramaic, every point I make about Aramaic can also be made about Classical Hebrew.

10. Even though the definite article is used, it can still be translated as if the possessive pronoun were there because, as in German and Spanish, it is usual in Greek that when the context is clear, the definite article can be used instead of the possessive pronoun. In contrast, English normally requires the possessive pronoun. Therefore, ὁ πατήρ can be translated as "the father" or "my father," depending on the context. In the case at hand, it is clear that Christ is addressing "His Father," and therefore the translation "my Father" is proper. No doubt for this reason, Martin Luther in his German translation rendered the Greek as "mein Vater," which remains the standard translation in the modern German Luther Bible.

11. There were always exceptions. In some titled circles in Europe, some parents required their children to address them with the formal but would reply to those same children in the familiar. In addition, it was considered an insult to address someone of higher rank with whom you were not intimately acquainted with "thou." When a person was speaking with someone of lower rank, speaking in

the familiar could be seen as condescending, patronizing, or even insulting.

12. The King James Version translators seem to have simply used the familiar form "thou" in its various forms whenever the Hebrew or the Greek contained a singular and "ye" in its various forms whenever there was a plural. Thus, in the exchange between Paul and Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul and Agrippa both address each other with "thou," even though much of the rest of Paul's address to Agrippa is rather formal in its expression.

13. "You" in English (or, in Early Modern English, "ye") is historically a plural form, and "thou" is historically singular. In Middle English, "ye" was used for the formal and "thou" was used for the familiar. The distinction I am making here, however, is not between plural and singular but between the familiar "thou" and the more formal "you."

14. See Barr, "'Abbā Isn't 'Daddy,'" 36.

15. Aramaic *ab*, אַב, and *abba*, אַבָּא, are lexically identical, though in a strick sense, the former is indefinite and the latter is definite. As pointed out earlier, the latter can mean "the father," "my father," or "our father." The former means simply "father." Aramaic can also represent "my father" with *abī*, אַבִי.

16. Barr, "'Abba Isn't 'Daddy,'" 38, suggests, among other possibilities, πάππας.

17. All European languages with which I am familiar, except English, make grammatical distinctions between familiar and formal; and all, including English, make lexical distinctions.

18. I am aware that some Church members read Jacob 5 differently. Nevertheless, other texts clearly indicate that Christ is directed by and reports back to His Father.

19. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), 614. This passage is on page 569 in more recent printings.

20. Perhaps Christ alluded to these two relationships, His sonship and His stewardship, when after His resurrection He said to Mary, "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17). If a paraphrase of Paul is allowed, though Christ stood in a unique role as God's Son, "yet [as the servant of God's will] learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

20 And they straightway left *their* nets, and *followed him.

21 And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James *the* son of *Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he *called them.

22 And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

23 ¶ And Jesus went about all *Galilee, *teaching in their synagogues, and *preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and *healing all manner of *sickness and all manner of disease among the people.*

24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with *devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the *palsy; and he *healed them.

25 And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and *from* Decapolis, and *from* Jerusalem, and *from* Judæa, and *from* beyond Jordan.

CHAPTER 5

Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount—Its teachings replace and transcend some aspects of the Law of Moses—Men are commanded to be perfect like their Father in heaven.

*AND seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

3 *Blessed *are* the *poor in spirit: for theirs is the *kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed *are* they that *mourn: for they shall be *comforted.

5 Blessed *are* the *meek: for they shall inherit the *earth.

6 Blessed *are* they which do *hunger and thirst after *righteousness: for they shall be filled.

7 Blessed *are* the *merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

8 Blessed *are* the *pure in *heart: for they shall *see God.

9 Blessed *are* the *peacemakers: for they shall be called the *children of God.

10 Blessed *are* they which are *persecuted for *righteousness' sake: for *theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Blessed are ye, when *men* shall *revile you, and persecute *you,* and shall say all manner of *evil against you falsely, *for my sake.

12 *Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your *reward in

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20a TG Commitment.
21a John 21: 2.
   b TG Called of God.
23a Luke 4: 44.
   b Matt. 9: 35.
   c D&C 71: 1.
   d TG Healing; Miracles.
   e TG Sickness.
   f JST Matt. 4: 22 . . . which believed on his name.
24a Matt. 8: 16 (16, 28, 33); 9: 32 (32–34).
   b GR paralysis.
   c Mosiah 3: 5 (5–6).
5 1a 3 Ne. 12: 1 (1–48).
3a The Latin *beatus* is the basis of the English 'beatitude,' meaning ' to be fortunate,' 'to be happy,' or 'to be blessed.' TG Blessings.
   b IE poor in pride,

humble in spirit; 3 Ne. 12: 3 reads ' . . . the poor in spirit who come unto me.' James 2: 5 (1–9); D&C 56: 18 (18–20); 88: 17. TG Contrite Heart; Humility; Poor in Spirit.
   c TG Kingdom of God, in Heaven.
4a TG Mourning; Sorrow.
   b TG Comfort.
5a GR gentle, forgiving, or benevolent; the Heb. in Ps. 37: 11 characterizes as the humble those who have suffered. TG Meekness.
   b TG Earth, Destiny of.
6a 3 Ne. 12: 6.
   TG Teachable.
   b TG Good Works; Righteousness.

7a TG Mercy.
8a TG Chastity; Cleanliness; Purity.
   b TG Heart.
   c TG God, Presence of; God, Privilege of Seeing.
9a TG Contentment; Peace; Peacemakers.
   b TG Sons and Daughters of God.
10a TG Affliction; Persecution.
   b TG Righteousness.
   c D&C 6: 37; 10: 55.
11a TG Malice; Reviling.
   b TG Backbiting; Slander.
   c GR on account of me.
12a 2 Ne. 9: 18. TG Joy.
   b D&C 84: 38.
   TG Reward.

A passage from the Sermon on the Mount shows the use of italic text by the King James Version translators (1979 LDS edition).