

A Brief Study of New Testament Usage of Father: Pater and Abba

By Bob Young

Consider how many names or descriptions of God appear in Scripture. (One author identifies 72.) Each description captures an aspect of the essence of God. Yet, with all the names and descriptions available, Jesus prays, "Father, I thank you..." He teaches his disciples to pray, "Our Father..." As he teaches his disciples to pray, the name that is to be revered and holy is "Father." Again and again, Jesus refers to God as Father.

Didn't his Jewish disciples know how to pray? They were faithful Jews, intimately familiar with Torah, frequently reciting psalms. Why did they ask about prayer? The answer may be in the intimate relationship they saw between Jesus and the Father. Through Jesus, they saw that Father God was more than the remote God of Judaism.

Father is Pater in Greek, Abba in Aramaic. These words, both in Greek and Aramaic, were used by adults to address their earthly fathers. Abba is not more intimate than Pater and the claim that Abba should be translated as "daddy" is misleading.

Father, whether Pater in Greek or Abba in Aramaic, reflects the intimacy and care of a loving Father. Abba never occurs in the New Testament without Pater. Look more closely at the three occurrences of Abba. In the garden, under great stress, Jesus used both Abba and Pater (Mark 14:36). In other passages about the crucifixion, we find Pater (Father forgive them, Father into your hands I commend my spirit). When Paul says Christians speak or cry out to God with the Spirit's help (Gal. 4:6) – in a book that seeks to resolve Jewish-Greek conflicts – he uses both terms, Abba and Pater. When Paul teaches that Christians receive the spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15), he says we cry "Abba, Father" (Abba, Pater). In the context of Romans 7-8, a passage contrasting the Old Testament Law and New Testament Spirit, Paul uses both words.

In the New Testament, Aramaic words and Greek words are used side by side. Aramaic phrases are retained and translated. Jesus is Rabbi / Teacher. God is Abba / Father. Caution is in order as one seeks understanding of the New Testament words for Father. Above all, may we see our unique, intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father as holy and valuable!

"Our Father in Heaven, may your name be kept holy and treated always with reverence!"