

Exegetical Brief: Is Abba "Daddy"?

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One often reads that the Aramaic term which Jesus taught his disciples to use in addressing their Father in heaven is equivalent to the English term "dad" or "daddy." This statement is often made in order to support the claim that we may speak to God in a casual or informal manner. Is there any linguistic basis for this claim?

The Greek word ἄββᾶ is apparently a transliteration of the Aramaic אָבָא. This form appears to be the regular Aramaic word for father (אָב) with the definite article (אָ) added to the end of the word as it regularly is in Aramaic. In Aramaic this articularized form may serve as a vocative just as it does in Hebrew (Rosenthal 43, p 24).

The Greek translation of אָבָא in Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, and Galatians 4:6 (ὁ πατήρ) supports this understanding. This articularized Greek form may serve as a vocative just as the Aramaic does (Blass-DeBrunner 147, p 81). The New Testament never addresses God with any of the Greek diminutives (πάππας, παππίας) which are more equivalent to the English word "daddy."

אָבָא was the common term used by Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking children to address their father. There is no biblical evidence for use of a diminutive form of address. Although the term אָבָא reflects the greater intimacy of addressing God as "father" rather than "Lord," there is no linguistic evidence to support the claim that ἄββᾶ is an informal form of address. Except to those Jews who regarded any address of God as "Father" as too intimate and informal, the use of אָבָא would not have sounded either casual or disrespectful.

As Luther pointed out in his explanation of the Address to the Lord's Prayer, to address God as "Father" implies an intimate relationship with him. The claim that this implies that we address him as "daddy," however, rests more on modern notions of propriety than on any evidence from the New Testament text.