DID JESUS CALL GOD *ABBA*?

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Introduction

A persistently popular belief among Christians is that Jesus enjoyed a unique and especially intimate relationship with God signified by his use of the term *abba* when he addressed God in prayer. Consider one example of this belief taken from the commentary of Father Ronald Rolheiser (2004) on Mark's story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane:

> Jesus begins his prayer with the words: *"Abba, Father..."* Abba is a word which, at the time, a child would use affectionately for his or her father, roughly equivalent to our words "Daddy" or "Papa." Obviously, it connotes a deep connection, an intimacy beyond even friendship, a certain daily familiarity.

While one example proves nothing, this single example may provoke memories of catechists and religious educators who have presented similar themes to their students. For many, the idea that Jesus commonly addressed God as *abba* is a standard way of explaining Jesus' relationship to God. The common line has the following dimensions: *abba* is a term a) used by children and b) persistently used by Jesus that c) reveals his unique intimacy with God the Father which d) establishes his uniqueness compared to his (Jewish) peers.

The following discussion will examine the foundations for these beliefs and explore the scholarly challenges that have been advanced against them. From this examination of the scholarly literature, implications for catechists and religious educators will be considered.

Sources of the *abba* Tradition

The idea that Jesus persistently used the term *abba* in his address to God has a surprisingly brief history in Christian tradition. The interpretation of *abba* as signifying Jesus' unique intimacy with God can be dated to German scholar Gerhard Kittel who in 1933 proposed the idea that Jesus probably used *abba* at all times in his address to and about God. He argued that Jesus' use of the term *abba* "must have sounded familiar and disrespectful to his contemporaries because used in everyday life of the family." He characterised Jesus' use of the term as a radical break with previous Jewish forms of address: "Jewish usage shows how this Father-child relationship to God far surpasses any possibilities of intimacy assumed in Judaism, introducing indeed something which is wholly new" (1964, p. 6).

Kittel was a theologian and scripture scholar who taught at the University of Tubingen. Prior to joining the Nazi party in 1933, he enjoyed an international reputation. His reputation was enhanced by his editorship of the *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (German title, *Theologisches worterbuch zum neuen testament*) in 1933 which was published in English translation in 1964. His identification with the Nazis was "based on conviction, not career opportunism" (Rubinstein & Roth, 2003, p. 257). He was among a group of theologians on the faculty who subscribed to the pro-Nazi ideas of Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg. They argued "that Hitler was leading the German people beyond the individualism of the West, and also beyond the collectivism of the Soviet Union" (Krieg, 2004, p. 92). These scholars endorsed the antisemitic and nationalistic ideas of the Nazis, including their pseudo-scientific racial creeds. As late as 1943, Kittel wrote an article for Joseph Goebbels in which he argued that Judaism permitted Jews "full freedom to murder" non-Jews against whom they held a "deep-seated

hatred" (Rubinstein & Roth, 2003, p. 257). The work of Kittel and his followers forged the idea of a blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus who had no associations with his Jewish heritage.

The work of these scholars did not arise in a vacuum (Ericksen, 1985). The ground for these theological ideas had been prepared by writers such as the Anglo-German son-in-law of Richard Wagner, the publicist and playwright Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927). Chamberlain's 1898 book, *The foundations of the nineteenth century* argued that the "antiquity and the mobility of the Jewish nation illustrates that the confrontation between superior Aryans and parasitic Semites is the central theme of history" (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003, p. 274). A consequence of this assertion of Teutonic superiority was Chamberlain's claim that Jesus was not Jewish. Chamberlain distinguished the historical Jewish Jesus from the revealed Aryan Christ: "We certainly do the Jews no injustice when we say that the revelation of Christ is simply something incomprehensible and hateful to them. Although he apparently sprang from their midst, he embodies nevertheless the negation of their whole nature - a matter in which the Jews are far more sensitive than we" (Chamberlain, 1912, p. 338). The intention of opinion leaders such as Chamberlain and Wilhelm Marr was that Germany should attain a purity based on ancient religious, racial and cultural symbols.

Kittel's attempts to describe an "Aryan" Jesus distinct from Jewish culture and heritage conformed to these cultural stereotypes and provided impetus and support for those who appropriated them in order to advance the goals of National Socialism. Kittel's theological writings influenced the members of the pro-Nazi German Christian Movement, whose intentions included replacing Christian doctrines with ancient Aryan beliefs. Students of Kittel were leaders in this Movement that saw that the "redemption of Christianity was at stake, and could only be accomplished by purging Jesus of all Jewish associations and reconstructing him as he allegedly really was, an Aryan" (Heschel, 1999, p. 68).

Joachim Jeremias, 1900-1979

Kittel's ideas did not fall out of favour completely with the demise of Nazism. The notion of a "wholly new" relationship between Jesus and God, unknown to Judaism, caught the attention of other scholars who pursued the theme and extended and popularised Kittel's ideas, particularly in the English-speaking world, in the 1960s and 1970s. The most significant scholarly interest in Kittel's suggestions came from Joachim Jeremias who claimed that "Jesus frequently used 'Abba' as a form of address to God" (Jeremias, 1967, p. 55). In support of Kittel's original contention, he further observed that "there is no instance in Jewish prayer literature of the vocative *abba* being addressed to God" (Jeremias, 1967, p.

60). For Jesus therefore to "take this step was something new and unheard of" and so "Jesus' use of *abba* expresses a special relationship with God" (Jeremias, 1967, p. 62).

Jeremias was a scripture scholar of unique significance and accomplishment in the twentieth century. His adoption of these ideas proved influential given his reputation as a scholar with unparalleled expertise in semitic languages and culture. But some were ready to challenge his motives. The respected scholar E.P. Sanders openly questioned the antisemitic tendencies in Jeremias' work. He claimed that what Jeremias handed down to trusting scholars and students "was the Judaism so beloved by so many New Testament scholars: a bad religion" (Sanders, 1991, p. 463). Others offered strong defence of Jeremias and saw no such antisemitic traces in his scholarly work (Meyer, 1991). This scholarly squabble is an untidy though necessary reminder that such issues go to the heart of ideologies that stained twentieth century history in such devastating terms. It ought to prompt religious educators to be particularly sensitive to the portraits of Jesus within his Jewish context.

Jeremias' popularisation of *abba* was followed by other influential scholars who perceived that his insights provided a useful interpretive tool. Edward Schillebeeckx wrote a well received book (in Dutch in 1974 with English translation in 1979) that identified the "*abba* experience" as the centerpiece of Jesus' religious consciousness. In an extended discussion in a sub-section titled, "Jesus' Original Abba Experience, Source and Secret of His Being, Message and Manner of Life," Schillebeeckx claimed to uncover the core of Jesus' personal religious experience, encapsulated in his use of *abba* (Schillebeeckx, 1979, pp. 256-71). He claimed that, "Jesus' very conspicuous (and historically no longer debatable) custom of calling God his *abba*" was distinctive of his religious experience and not to be found in either "rabbinical literature nor yet in the official late Jewish literature of devotion" (Schillebeeckx, 1979, p. 259). Scholarly challenges to these assertions soon arose, as will be discussed below. In any case, Schillebeeckx perhaps did more than anybody to spread the idea that Jesus' use of *abba* was unique, familiar and distinctive.

Edward Schillebeeckx, 1914-2009

By the 1970s, two themes had lodged in the thinking of scholars. First, Jesus' use of *abba* is to "be regarded with certainty as a mark of Jesus' manner of speech." Second, this usage is to be understood as "unthinkable in the prayer language of contemporary Judaism" (Hahn, 1969, p. 307). These themes were eagerly taken up by some liberationist and feminist scholars who saw opportunities to position revised images of Jesus over and against traditional models that emphasised hierarchical and patriarchal

structures (Boys, 2000, p. 134). The image of the child-like and intimate approach to God – supposedly modeled on Jesus' own experience – was seen as an antidote to masculinist and oppressive imagery that legitimised unjust ecclesial and social structures. The central theme in many of these studies was the demonstration of the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, which represented legalism, coldness and lack of intimacy with God.

From this time on, then, it became common for religious educators and catechists when discussing Jesus to draw students' attention to the idea that Jesus enjoyed a uniquely intimate relationship with God symbolised by his constant use of the term *abba* whose meaning was something close to the English word "daddy". The explanation typically continued to point out that this usage would have been heard scandalously by Jesus' Jewish peers who would never dare to approach God in such familiar terms. Thus, Christianity as a religion was founded on an understanding of the God of love who could be approached in the same familiar fashion demonstrated by Jesus. This understanding carried with it the implication that Christianity had replaced an image of the God of Judaism who was cold, punitive, distant and dictatorial.

From the 1980s, scholars began to challenge this broadly accepted understanding of Jesus and *abba*. These revisionist scholars focused on whether Jesus actually used the term *abba* in his discourse with God, the actual meaning of the term, and whether Jewish contemporaries of Jesus also used the term. A brief overview of this revisionist scholarship is offered below.

Did Jesus Use the Term, *abba*?

Scholars have considered the degree of certainty we can have in accepting that the use of the term *abba* can be ascribed to the historical Jesus. The first challenge to confront is the fact that the term *abba* is placed on the lips of Jesus only once in all four gospels. In Mark's gospel (14:36) it is used in the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "He said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will.'" No other attribution appears in the four gospels. In the parallel scenes, Matthew and Luke use different renderings of Jesus' prayer. Matthew 26:39, has Jesus say, "My Father". In Luke he says simply, "Father" (Luke 22:42).

The fact that the sole reference in the gospels occurs in Mark did not bother the advocates of the *abba* tradition. Schillebeeckx, for example, acknowledged the sole reference in Mark but claimed that it "was in fact a persistent habit of his, and that we should supply this same Aramaic word behind the Greek 'Father'" whenever it is mentioned in the gospels (Schillebeeckx, 1979, p. 260). This view has the support of John Meier who holds that "despite the doubts of some recent scholars, Jeremias was probably right in maintaining that the laconic, almost disconcerting "Father" (Luke's *pater*) probably reflects Jesus' striking use of the address *abba*" (Meier, 1994, p. 294).

James Barr countered these opinions by arguing that in the parallel scenes in the Garden of Gethsemane, both Matthew and Luke "altered the diction away from Mark's...and rewrote his rather unusual Greek as a vocative" (Barr, 1988, p. 44). Barr thought that it is "possible that all cases in which Jesus addresses God as Father derive from an original *abba*, but it is impossible to prove that this is so" (Barr, 1988, p. 46). The point of this suggestion is that all three gospel renditions are not different translations of the one word *abba*, as Jeremias and his followers contended, but rather, "different expressions of the generally received tradition that Jesus addressed God as Father" (Barr, 1988, p. 44). That is, all three gospel authors agree that Jesus used father-language, but only Mark expresses this father-language by the use of *abba*.

The term, *abba*, appears twice more in the New Testament, both times in the letters of Paul. In Galatians 4:6, Paul wrote: "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba'! Father!" In Romans 8:15 he wrote: "When we cry 'Abba'! Father! It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Mary Rose D'Angelo sees significance in this use. She argues that it is difficult to attribute the use of *abba* to Jesus "with any certainty." However, she

thinks that the term was certainly of significance "in the early Greek-speaking Christian communities of Paul and Mark, where it expressed empowerment through the spirit" (1992, p. 630). According to this perspective, the attribution of *abba* to Jesus may have arisen in the Greek-speaking Church at some time in the life of the new and developing Christian movement within Judaism. The practice of using *abba* in address to God may have come about in the Greek-speaking Christian communities after the time of Jesus and cannot therefore be tied to a specific Semitic origin.

So, while it may be the case that the historical Jesus originated the use of *abba* to address God the available evidence does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn one way or the other. Further, the direct biblical evidence for Jesus' use of *abba* is slender. Why did Mark, who identifies the use of *abba* with Jesus, not give other examples of him using the term? Why did both Matthew and Luke, if they had read Mark before writing their own accounts, choose to alter Mark's sole example? The evidence to pronounce definitively on these issues does not currently exist. Therefore, caution must be the quality that characterises discussions.

What Does *abba* Mean?

Among the first to question the meaning of the term was scripture scholar James Barr who pointed out that *abba* in fact was not a child's term for a father. He suggested that *abba* was the normal Aramaic word used by adults to render the meaning of father. Therefore, it was not possible to argue that the use of *abba* showed a child-like familiarity; it was simply the common Aramaic speech of an adult. His point is strengthened by the evidence of the gospel text: Mark the evangelist thought the word meant "Father" (Pater) which is the word he gives as the direct Greek translation after the use of the Aramaic term *abba* in Mark 14:36. Barr claimed that if Mark had wanted to convey a meaning like "daddy" he had access to terms such as "papas" or "pappas", words that "can hardly have been unknown to New Testament writers" (Barr, 1988, p. 38).

John Meier thinks the term can best be rendered, "my own dear Father: which conveys warmth and endearment, but not an exclusively child-like usage" (1994, p. 297). Whichever nuance is given, the point appears to have been generally accepted by scholars: none seems to support the view that *abba* was a diminutive, childish term for a father that popular spiritual commentators persist in claiming.

Was *abba* a Unique Form of Address?

Geza Vermes was among the first to counter the claims of exclusivity in Jesus' use of *abba* to address God. He showed how, despite the customary use of "Lord of the Universe" in post-biblical Jewish prayer, "one of the features of ancient Hasidic piety is its habit of alluding to God precisely as Father." He argued that it "appears that, for the charismatic, as for Jesus, God is *Abba*" (Vermes, 1973, p. 211). Vermes provided a number of examples contemporary with Jesus of usages of *abba*. The consequence of this criticism is that if Jesus did in fact employ the term "Father" in his prayer, he did so in concert with his Jewish peers, not in contradiction to them.

The issue of uniqueness goes to the heart of modern perceptions of Jesus as an observant Jew. Teachers need to be careful in understanding the meaning of uniqueness. For example, John Meier is cautious about claims that any person, regardless of how talented or accomplished, can claim to be uniquely different from all other persons. He prefers to emphasise what is "strikingly characteristic" or "unusual" rather than unique (Meier, 1991, p.174). Following this criterion, Meier argues that the most plausible explanation is that "*abba* represents a striking usage of the Aramaic-speaking Jesus, a usage that so impressed itself on the minds of the first disciples that it was handed on as a fixed prayer-formula even to the first Gentile believers" (Meier, 1991, p. 266).

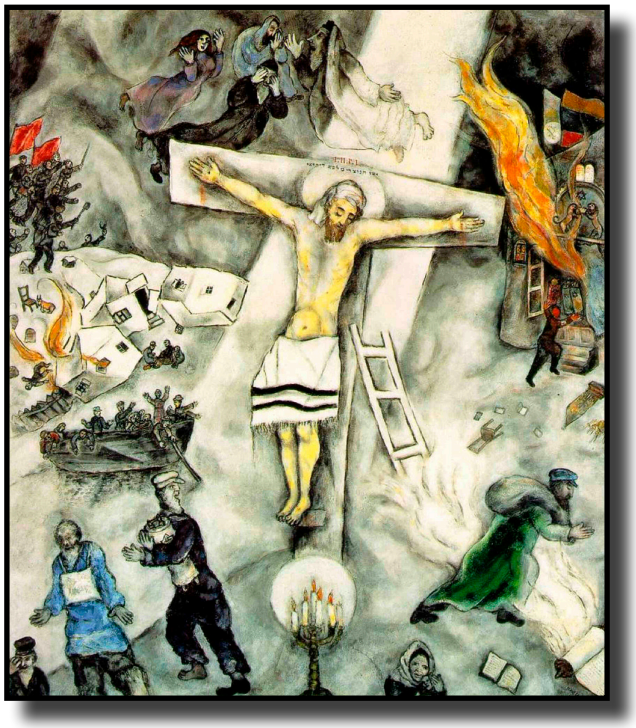
Raymond Brown (1997, p. 827) contends that some methodological approaches to understanding the historical Jesus would "leave us with a monstrosity: a Jesus who never said, thought, or did anything that

other Jews said, thought, or did and a Jesus who had no connection or relationship to what his followers said, thought, or did in reference to him after he died." Following this proposition, we can suggest that if Jesus did indeed use the term *abba* in his address for God, that he did so in accord with other observant Jewish contemporaries. The focus on uniqueness compels a caution about attempts to situate Jesus over and against Judaism and his Jewish contemporaries. Whichever side of the debate one takes, the arguments need to be pursued with the understanding and acceptance of Jesus as an observant Jew. It is possible, for example, that the use of *abba* was strikingly characteristic of Jesus, without creating the "monstrosity" (to use Raymond Brown's term) that he was the only Jewish person up until that time to do so.

Implications for Religious Education and Catechesis

The preceding discussion provides sources for reconsidering some of the received traditions about Jesus. The foundational concern is that Christian focus on Jesus' use of *abba* has been used as a means of devaluing Judaism. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) teaching has been that Christianity has replaced inadequate Jewish conceptions of God and religious practice. As a first step in repairing such misconceptions, teachers need to be circumspect in their discussions of Jesus and *abba*. Further, teachers can also be proactive in their presentations of Jesus as an observant Jew, and explore the possible implications of this for Christian belief and practice.

Biblical scholars are in broad agreement that *abba* was not a childish term for a beloved father. The term was the normal Aramaic word that adults and children would use to address their fathers. So, no implications can be drawn about the level of familiarity or intimacy that might be indicated by Jesus' supposed use of the term. Can relative levels of intimacy be measured, in any case? Whether or not Jesus did in fact use the term, it was a feature of Jewish cultural and prayer practice, at least for some sections of the population. To continue the practice of identifying Jesus as unique in comparison with his peers in his use of *abba* is to risk presenting Jesus as alien to his own (Jewish) cultural and religious context.



Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, 1938

Teachers need to find ways to present Jesus within his Jewish context, not as separate from it. Images of an "Aryan Jesus" (blond hair, blue eyes, European features) are only useful as resources for critically evaluating cultural representations of Jesus in different historical eras. They ought not to be offered as standard representations of the historical Jesus. Images of Jesus as an observant member of Judaism need to be located and presented to students. For example, Marc Chagall's painting, *White*

Crucifixion, completed in 1938 depicts Jesus as an observant rabbi nailed to a cross, wrapped in a tallith and encircled by images derived from pogroms against Jews: burning houses and synagogue, fearful people and unruly mobs. The BBC-TV series, *Son of God*, presents reconstructed images of Semitic contemporaries of Jesus using modern forensic techniques. A range of images is possible – and necessary – given the lack of certain corroborating evidence.

Students might pursue the idea of Jesus' clothing and what it might indicate about his religious experience. For example, the imagery of Jesus' clothing as presented in Luke 8:44 might be a place to begin such a study. The woman seeking healing touches the fringe of Jesus' cloak. This fringe, known as the *tsitsit* (pronounced, zeet-zeet), was part of the tallith or shawl worn by observant Jews as a sign of liberation, faithfulness and holiness as outlined in the book of Numbers 15:37-41: "Speak to the Israelites and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them...and you shall be holy to your God." What might we deduce about Jesus from his wearing of a symbol of liberation and holiness? Why might Luke be drawing attention to this aspect of Jesus' healing ministry?

Students, according to their ability-level could be assigned the task of researching the Nazi era, especially the relationship between the Nazi party and Church theologians and officials. They can find examples of compliance and persecution. They can seek insight into the consequences of Nazi ideologies for Christians and Jews. They can consider why some theologians such as Gerhard Kittel might have seen points of convergence between Christian theology and National Socialism.

Conclusion

Religious educators and catechists work in an environment that is now far more sensitive to the issues involved in the relationship between Christians and Jews. While some of the more egregious examples of anti-Jewish and antisemitic ideas no longer form part of the way Christianity is presented, there is still need for vigilance about some of the more subtle images that are legacies of a time of decreased sensitivity, even hostility, towards Jews and Judaism. In the new era of repair and reconciliation, religious educators and catechists have a front line responsibility. Attention to the use of images such as Jesus' use of *abba* is an example where the intervention of teachers in Christian communities is invaluable and timely.

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