

God: *Abba* or *Rabb*?



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Abba of the Bible

Christians refer to God as Father in their creeds, prayers, and liturgy. God, the Father, is seen as one of the three persons of Trinity. They believe that the Father has a Son, Jesus. Christians think they alone have a personal relationship, both with the Father and the Son. *Abba* is said to be the transliteration of the Aramaic word for father. It is always used as a direct address to God the Father. It appears three times in the entire NT and only once in a gospel. In Mark 14:36 (“*Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee*”). The other two occurrences are in the letters of Paul, in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6.

A great debate exists between Jewish and Christian writers about the nature of God as a father or *abba* (the Aramaic word for father). The debate started with what a German Lutheran scholar, [Joachim Jeremias](#), wrote in his book, “The Prayers of Jesus,” translated by John Bowden. His essential argument was repeated in slightly modified forms by most Christians. [Edward Schillebeeckx](#) made it popular among Roman Catholics in his book, “Jesus.”

What Jeremias basically stated was that, firstly, “abba” represents a special use by Jesus that was central to his teaching; second, that for Jesus it expressed a special kind of intimacy and tenderness deriving from the origin of the word ‘abba’ from baby talk; third, that it was distinct from the practice of Judaism. His point was that Jesus referring to God as Abba is not derived from the OT or from his Palestinian Jewish background. Instead it represents his unique relationship with the “Father.” Therefore, some Christian writers went on to say that God can be referred to as ‘daddy,’ most saying it is too informal and lacks

respects. Interestingly, feminist Christian writers had a serious problem with the idea of God as a male and have written several critical books.

While most in contemporary Church simply repeat the above points and base popular theology on it,^[1] it has been severely criticized. Mary Rose D'Angelo highlights evidence against it in her article 'Abba and "Father": Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions'^[2] Several Jewish authors like Alon Goshen-Gottstein^[3] and Gerald Friedlander^[4] have brought evidence that rabbis and Jews have used 'abba' to refer to God.

S. Vernon McCasland of the University of Virginia wrote, 'The expression "Abba, Father" occurs just three times in the New Testament... (it) presents a challenge because of the way it has defied the translators from the very beginning right up to our own day. The following 27 translations which I have consulted illustrate the problem... Almost without exception it has been simply transliterated. Yet Abba is not an English word, nor is it Latin, German, French, or Spanish; and no reader in most cases, unless he happens to be a Semitist, could do more than to make a vague guess as to what it means. It strikes the uninformed reader like the unintelligible formula of some magical incantation. Most of the translators have left it as it were charged with a deadly mana.'^[5]

Rabb of the Quran

When we turn to the Quran, it clarifies that neither God has a son nor is God a father. Many a Christian when they hear this from me, they think we have no relationship with God because Christians relate to God in human terms of father and son. They see Christians as having a 'personal' relationship with Jesus and the Father, but "Allah" seems like a distant being to them.

The Muslim relationship with God is expressed in *Rabb*, or more properly *ar-Rabb*, one of the most frequently repeated Names of God in the Quran, the Muslim scripture. It is the most common Name with which God is invoked by prophets and the prayer's of the pious. The Name is clear in its meaning and beautifully captures the deep relationship with God.

Linguistically, according to by Ibn Faris^[6] the ancient Arabs used the word *rabb* to mean:

- Fixing what's broken and maintaining it. *Rabb* is the master, creator, and maintainer.
- Sticking close to something.
- Joining something with another.

In the Quran, the word *Rabb* when applied to God means^[7]:

1. *Rabb* is the Master who has no equal, a Master who completely surrounds His creation with His gifts.^[8]
2. *Rabb* is the Nurturer of His creation, yet He is not their father. *Rabb* nurtures His people, taking them from one phase of life to another, showering them with His blessings, and sustaining their lives all along. *Rabb* provides His creation with their livelihood as He alone controls the treasures of the heavens and the earth.
3. *Rabb* nurtures the hearts, souls, and the character of His loved ones.^[9] The prayers of the prophets and the pious in the Quran invoking the Name *Rabb* makes this meaning clear:

The Prayer of Abraham: **“O my *Rabb*, grant me wisdom and join me with the righteous (enter me in their ranks).” (Quran 26:83)**

The Prayer of the Pious: **“O my *Rabb*, forgive (our sins) and show mercy (towards us). Undoubtedly, You are the Best of those who show mercy.” (Quran 23:118)**

Prayer of Adam and Eve: **“O our *Rabb*, we have wronged ourselves and if You were not to forgive us we will certainly be of the losers.” (Quran 7:23)**

Prayer of Noah: **“O my *Rabb*, forgive me and my parents.” (Quran 71:28)**

Lastly, the word *ar-Rabb* is repeated in the Quran as the *Rabb* of ‘all the worlds,’ ‘of everything,’ ‘of Moses and Aaron,’ ‘of the Great Throne,’ ‘of the heavens and the earth,’ and ‘of the East and the West.’

Footnotes:

[1] See entry ‘Fatherhood of God’ in Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology.

[2] Mary Rose D’Angelo, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 111, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 611-630. Published by: The Society of Biblical Literature.

[3] See “God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 38:4, Spring 2001.

[4] See “The Jewish Sources Of The Sermon On The Mount” published by Kessinger Publishing, LLC (January 11, 2005).

[5] See “Abba, Father” by S. Vernon McCasland, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 72, No. 2 (Jun., 1953), pp. 79-91. Published by The Society of Biblical Literature.

[6] Abu al-Husayn Ahmad b. Faris b. Zakariyyah b. Muhammad b. Habib became known, in view of his expertise, as 'lexicographer/linguist' (*al-Lughawi*). For the title of his book incorporating the concept of 'Law of the Language' he may be regarded as the 'Father of Linguistics.' He studied in Qazwin, gained prominence in Hamadan and died at Rayy in 395 H (1004/1005 CE). The main contribution of Ibn Faris consists in his important works in the cognate areas of etymology, philology, lexicography and linguistics, such as

(i) *The Book on the Principles of Language (Kitab Maqa'is al-Lugha)*

(ii) *The Book of Generalities/Synthesis in Language (Kitab al-Mujmal fi al-Lugha)*

(iii) *Al-Sahibi (The Law of the Language and the Usages of the Language and the Usages of the Arabs in Their Speech)*. (<http://islamicencyclopedia.org/public/index/topicDetail/id/107>)

[7] *Shar' Asma il-Allahi Ta'ala al-Husna* by Dr. Hassa al-Saghir, p. 123-125

[8] cf. Tafsir Ibn Jarir and Tafsir Ibn Kathir

[9] *Taisir al Karim al-Rahman*, vol5, p. 485