

# Adoption

BY  
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## IN THE FIRST CENTURY

FOR PAUL, a simple description was inadequate for portraying his salvation experienced in Christ. That is why the apostle used different kinds of images and metaphors to express the blessings of knowing Christ. Under the Spirit's guidance, he mined the Old Testament and the culture around him to find ways to articulate an experience and reality that lay beyond words. With terms such as "reconciliation," "redemption," "justification," and "forgiveness," he attempted to parse the blessing of salvation and create a new type of theological grammar for the young church.

One of those metaphors, "adoption" (Greek, *huiothesia*), reflected a crucial element in his salvation experience. Adoption was a common part of family life in the Mediterranean world. Broadly speaking, adoption refers to the creation of kinship relationships between two or more people through legal and/or ritual means. It means literally "to make [someone] a son."<sup>1</sup> Paul used it to describe a change of status from an existence marked by slavery and fatherlessness to a new family or community characterized by freedom and the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

### A Historical Perspective

Human societies practiced adoption in one form or another since the beginning of recorded history. Archaeologists have unearthed adoption contracts and law codes that provide some information regarding its practice in ancient Babylon. While most adoptions were of a son or daughter, persons also could adopt a brother, sister, or father. Slaves were typically manumitted by adoption. In the Jewish community known as Elephantine, an Aramaic papyrus dated to 416 B.C. describes the manumission and adoption of a slave.<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:2-3 refers to the same practice when Abraham suggested his slave Eliezer would become his heir



ILLUSTRATION PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID ROGERS/FOGG ART MUSEUM/HARVARD UNIVERSITY (301-1)

unless God acted on his behalf. First Chronicles 2:34-35 indicates that a son-in-law could become an heir when there was no male descendant.<sup>4</sup>

When Pharaoh's daughter drew baby Moses out of the water, "he became her son" (Ex. 2:10).<sup>5</sup> Although this account appears to reflect Egyptian customs, the fact that Moses continued in Pharaoh's household indicates a change of family, a new kinship relationship had been formed. In Acts 7:21 Stephen retold these foundational stories and said: "Pharaoh's daughter took him away [adopted him] and nurtured him as her own son." Since Egypt and slavery had become synonymous, Hebrews 11:24 indicates that Moses refused to be called the son of the Pharaoh's daughter, choosing instead to identify with his own people. This statement makes sense only if Moses' family status was indeed "the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

Still adoption does not seem to have been a common practice in Israel since no biblical or postbiblical laws legislate it. We can cite four reasons: (1) the

**Left: Bronze figure from about 1500 B.C. of a man from Nuzi in an attitude of prayer. Nuzi, an agricultural city in Mesopotamia, is near the modern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Archaeologists uncovered at**

**Nuzi a palace and private houses from the 15th to 14th centuries B.C. Their findings include some 20,000 clay tablets mostly recording business transactions, including adoption records.**

### LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Romans 8:15-27

importance of natural or blood lineage; (2) the practice of polygyny (having multiple wives); (3) the custom of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10); and (4) the belief that barrenness reflected God's will and displeasure, a situation that adoption could remedy.<sup>6</sup> In other words, persons believed that if God preferred for a woman not to have children, adoption could violate God's will. Other reasons may have existed, but the four above seem sufficient to account for the fact that adoption appears rare among the people of Israel.

### A Pauline Perspective

Paul used the term "adoption" (*huiiothesia*) five times in his letters (Gal. 4:5; Rom. 8:15,23; 9:4; Eph 1:5). In each case the text refers to God's adoption, not of an individual, but of His covenant people. In one instance Paul described his "kinsmen according to the flesh" as "Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons (*huiiothesia*), and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law" (Rom. 9:3-4). His usage clearly reflects Old Testament terminology. Hosea 11:1 says: "When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son." Moses was to say to Pharaoh: "Thus says the LORD, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn'" (Ex. 4:22). So when Paul referred to Israel as having "the adoption as sons" (Rom. 9:4), he was echoing a long-standing tradition codified in the Old Testament.

The majority of Paul's references to adoption, however, refer to God's people of the new covenant. The apostle wrote: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (*huiiothesia*)" (Gal. 4:4-5). In Romans 8:15 he said: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons (*huiiothesia*) by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" Later Paul continued: "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons (*huiiothesia*), the redemption of our body" (v. 23). Among the many spiritual blessings "in the heavenly places" Paul included adoption: "He predestined us to adoption as sons (*huiiothesia*) through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (Eph. 1:5). These passages indicate that adoption was an important metaphor for Paul in describing the glories and blessings of salvation.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ/ GRECO-ROMAN MUSEUM, ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT (17-22-19)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO JAMES MCLEMORE (30-25-10)

**Left: Roman emperor Tiberius. Caesar Augustus adopted his stepson Tiberius in A.D. 4—when Tiberius was 46 years old. When Augustus died 10 years later, Tiberius became emperor.**

**Julia Caesaris marry his right-hand man, Marcus Agrippa. Having no male heir, Augustus then adopted their first two children, Gaius and Lucius, intending to make them heirs to the throne. Their early deaths, however, caused Augustus to turn his attention to his stepson, Tiberius.**

**Above: Reverse showing Gaius and Lucius. Augustus had his daughter**



**At Antioch of Pisidia, the 1st century A.D. temple was built to honor the emperor Augustus.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ  
(12-8-18)

In fact, Paul was the first Christian theologian to use “adoption” as a way to talk about the effects of Christ’s redeeming work on His people. So where did adoption as a theological concept originate?

Many interpreters of the Bible think Paul took “adoption” as a legal category from contemporary Greco-Roman family life. That makes sense for two reasons. First, in the Roman world adoption was commonplace. So both Paul and his audiences would have been familiar with the practice even if it were unusual among the minority population of Jews in the empire. Second, inheritance rights were an essential component of adoption in Roman society in terms of both property and power. Likewise, Paul connected the believers’ adoption with their spiritual inheritance obtained through faith in Jesus. In Romans 8:17, the apostle claimed that God’s adopted children are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ”; and in Galatians 4:7 he affirmed that an adopted believer is “no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.” So it may well be that adoption practices in the Greco-Roman world provided Paul and his audiences with a ready-made image to describe the baptized believers’ inclusion into God’s eternal family. But there may well be another place from which Paul adapted this image.

As suggested above, the Old Testament indicates that God looked on His covenant people as “son” or “sons.” This was one of the ways Scripture described God’s unique relationship with Israel that began with the exodus (for example, Ex. 4:22). The Old Testament formula of sin, exile, and restoration became the framework of the covenantal relationship. The basis for believing in a restoration and adoption as a part of that relationship comes from 2 Samuel 7:12-14: “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me” (HCSB, NASB).<sup>7</sup> Paul, having a mind steeped in Scripture, reflected the same notion in Romans 9:4, writing that God had adopted Israel as His son (*huiiothesia*). But earlier in Romans the apostle used that exact term to refer to the new status of believers in Messiah Jesus, believers both Jew and Gentile.

This means some Jews during Paul’s day expected God to establish them as sons. Paul shared this conviction but found its fulfillment in what God had already accomplished in Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection. The Old Testament and its later interpretation provided the apostle with the “adoption” motif that he applied to the sons and daughters of the new covenant (compare 2 Cor. 6:16-18).



**Above: Obverse showing Agrippina, mother of Nero and fourth wife of Claudius. Agrippina persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero, which put him in succession to rule the empire (A.D. 54-68).**

**Below: Obverse showing Nero, bust right, Laureate; “P” in front, from Damascus.**



## Jesus and Adoption

Important to note is that Paul never used the word “adoption” (*huiiothesia*) to refer to Jesus’ Sonship. He referred to Jesus as “the Son of God,” “His Son,” or simply “the Son” (for example, 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:28; Rom 1:3-4; Gal. 2:20; 4:4). This indicates two truths: (1) Jesus’ Sonship is unique and of a different order than ours, and (2) our “adoption as sons” derives from Jesus’ life and work. We cannot be adopted into God’s eternal family without relying on Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul explained our sonship in two stages, present and future. In Romans 8:15 the apostle contrasted our prior condition of slavery (to sin, death, and malevolent spiritual forces), animated by fear, with our present experience of “adoption as sons,” animated by the Spirit of God.<sup>8</sup> The Spirit brings about this adoption by uniting people with Christ through the gift of faith. Indeed, only by the Spirit can we cry out, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Still our salvation has a “not-yet” component to it, as does our adoption. That is why Paul wrote that those who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan along with the rest of the created order as we wait for “our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (Rom 8:23). This is another example of the already/not-yet feature of Paul’s Christian hope. As James Scott noted: the “present and future aspects of *huiiothesia* [adoption] in Romans 8 reflect successive stages of participation in the Son by the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, God adopts into His forever family all who believe in Christ; but the fullness of our inheritance awaits us when Christ returns. Then the living and the dead will be raised, the new creation will be complete, and all God’s family will be home again. **B**

1. Peter Wülfing von Martitz, “*huiiothesia*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel, ed., G. W. Bromiley, trans., vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 397-398.

2. See C. F. D. Moule, “Adoption” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 48-49.

3. See Frederick Knobloch, “Adoption” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, David Noel Freedman, editor in chief (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 76-77.

4. Other biblical examples may include Naomi’s adoption of the son of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:16), but by the laws of levirate marriage the son was already her descendant. Mordecai also adopted the orphaned Esther (Esth. 2:7, 15).

5. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

6. Knobloch, 79.

7. See J. M. Scott, “Adoption, Sonship” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 17.

8. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 186.

9. Scott, 17.

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