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# “ADOPTION” IN THE PAULINE CORPUS

by DANIEL J. THERON

**T**WO years ago we had the pleasure of printing a scholarly article on the word for “truth” (ἀλήθεια) in the Pauline Corpus, which was part of the thesis submitted by the author, the Rev. Daniel Johannes Theron, for the doctorate in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, U.S.A. Such word-studies supply an indispensable foundation for further theological work, and we are glad to give pride of place this year to a companion article by Dr. Theron, dealing with the word υἰοθεσία. Dr. Theron is a South African scholar, who holds the post of Assistant Professor of New Testament in Princeton Theological Seminary.

## I

**T**HE establishing and maintaining of a relationship between God and man has been described in various terms by the authors of the Old and New Testament. Paul employed a number of concepts in this respect—regeneration, redemption, justification, reconciliation, sanctification, salvation and fellowship. In addition to these expressions, which have been subjects of much investigation and writing, he also used the term adoption (υἰοθεσία) five times (Rom. 8:15, 23 ; 9:4 ; Gal. 4:5 ; Eph. 1:5). A similar concept is present where he employs the verb γεννᾶν of spiritual generation (Gal. 4:29) and where he speaks of τέκνα τοῦ Θεοῦ (Rom. 8:16, 17, 21, cf. 9:7f. ; Phil. 2:15), τέκνα ἐπαγγελίας (Rom. 9:8 ; Gal. 4:28), υἱοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ (Rom. 8:14, 19 ; 9:26 ; II Cor. 6:18 ; Gal. 3:26 ; 4:6f.), and θυγατέρες (II Cor. 6:18).

The question of the origin of the metaphor, adoption, is one of long standing especially because it was a common custom among the peoples of antiquity. In the main it has been a question whether it is Greek, Roman, or Semitic. Sir William Ramsay, *e.g.*, said that Paul had the Greek custom rather than the Roman law in mind in Gal. 3:6ff., but in Rom. 4:11ff. and 8:16 he based it on Roman law.<sup>1</sup> George H. Box and Paul Feine thought that the

<sup>1</sup> William M. Ramsay, *A Historical Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (New York, 1900), pp. 339, 343.

metaphor was Greek in its origin.<sup>1</sup> In recent years most scholars have regarded it as Græco-Roman. The inscriptions and papyri give ample evidence that adoption was a general practice in the Græco-Roman world. This, together with the fact that neither the substantive υιοθεσία nor the verb υιοθετεῖν occurs in the LXX, led to the general assumption that Paul was availing himself of a metaphor which did not root in the Jewish tradition. But adoption was a general practice in Babylonia and is also mentioned in the laws of Hammurabi.<sup>2</sup> Although neither of the above mentioned Greek words occurs in the LXX, nor has any Hebrew equivalent, a few instances of adoption are recorded in the Old Testament. It seems evident now that Eliezer, a slave born in Abraham's house, was his son, likely by adoption, and hence he was destined to be his heir (Gen. 15:2f.).<sup>3</sup> Moses became the son of the Egyptian princess (Ex. 2:10); Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, became the sons of Jacob (Gen. 48:5); Genubath seems to have been adopted by Pharaoh (I Kings 11:20); Mordecai took Esther as his own daughter (Est. 2:7). A slightly similar practice is found in the levirate marriage when a man took the widow of his brother and their first male child was named after and became the heir of the deceased (Deut. 25:5-10).<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament we find further that Israel's liberation from their Egyptian serfdom is closely related to Israel's birth as a nation and to its sonship (Ex. 4:22; II Sam. 7:23; Hos. 11:1ff.). God's fatherhood is clearly indicated (cf. Deut. 32:6; Ps. 82:6; Jer. 3:19; 31:9).

But God's fatherhood was not limited to the nation. It also included individuals (Deut. 14:1; 32:19, cf. Jer. 3:14, 22; 4:22). They are His sons and daughters and He dwelt among them (Lev. 26:11; Ez. 37:27f.).

Righteousness, salvation and sonship are combined in the Wisdom of Solomon in an eschatological sense (5:1-5).

All this evidence kept the possibility alive that adoption as Paul applied it to man's relationship to God was basically a Jewish rather than a pagan concept. This position has recently been set forth ably by William H. Rossell on the basis of the Nuzu accounts

<sup>1</sup> George H. Box, "Adoption (Semitic)", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, I (1908), 114; Paul Feine, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (8. durchgesehene Auflage; Berlin, 1951), p. 227, 1.

<sup>2</sup> §§ 185-194.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. William H. Rossell, "New Testament Adoption—Graeco-Roman or Semitic?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXI, iv (December, 1952), 233f.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. H. Box, *op. cit.*, 115.

of adoption and on the basis of the survival of the Semitic word "Abba" in connection with adoption in Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6.<sup>1</sup>

In the Synoptic Gospels we find Jesus portrayed as the Son of God (Matt. 3:17 ; 16:16 ; 17:5 ; Mark 1:1 ; 3:11 ; Luke 1:32, 35 ; 4:41 ; 9:35). Sonship, however, is not limited to Him. God's fatherhood, of which He spoke, implies man's sonship also (Matt. 5:48 ; 7:11, cf. Luke 15:11-32). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made sonship dependent, among other conditions, on the fulfilment of certain ethical requirements and gave what may be an eschatological note to it: the peacemakers shall be called sons of God (υἱοί, Matt. 5:9). "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may become sons (υἱοί) of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:44f.; Luke 6:35). In Luke 20:34ff., the answer of Jesus to Sadducees makes sonship definitely something eschatological: in the resurrection there is neither marriage nor death, for those who share in it are sons (υἱοί) of God.

In the writings of John the sonship of Jesus has a unique character and the appellation "The Son" became virtually a proper name (3:36 ; 5:19ff.; 6:40 ; 8:35f.; 14:13 ; 17:1, cf. I John 1:7). John gave the expression "children of God" (τέκνα τοῦ Θεοῦ) a rather prominent place with more emphasis on being born out of God (γεννηᾶν) than is found in Paul's writings. The death of the Son is regarded as advantageous for the children of God who are scattered abroad (11:52). Those who received the Logos, the true light, were given power to become children (τέκνα). They were born out of God (1:12f., cf. I John 3:9 ; 5:1).

In the heat of the dogmatic struggle of the patristic period the Fathers devoted a great deal of thought to the nature of Christ as the Son and of necessity adoption was touched on too. So, e.g., Irenæus based it on friendship, concord, and fellowship which the Mediator effected between man and God.<sup>2</sup> Eventually adoption was linked to baptism: "For He has bid us to be baptized, not in the name of the Unoriginate and Originate, not in the name of the Uncreated and Created, but in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for with such an initiation we too are made sons verily . . ."<sup>3</sup>

In spite of its importance adoption has failed generally to gain much prominence in the great treatments of systematic and biblical theology. Its discussion frequently ended with an investigation of

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> *Adversus haereses* III. 19. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *De decretis* VIII. 31; cf. further Suicerus, *Thesaurus ecclesiasticus* (1682), s.v.

its relation to regeneration, justification, and sanctification. Consequently it was treated as a minor aspect of the way of salvation.

The Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper, mentioned adoption under justification,<sup>1</sup> but finally treated it as part of regeneration by which man is born into the divine family.<sup>2</sup> John L. Girardeau, who was Professor in the Theological Seminary, Columbia, North Carolina, dealt with it at rather great length.<sup>3</sup> His insights in the whole doctrine, and particularly in the relations between regeneration, justification, and sanctification, on the one hand, and adoption, on the other, are most penetrating. Clarence A. Beckwith regarded adoption as a synonym of justification. It makes man an heir of the Kingdom of God, a participant of the fatherhood of God, and part of the body of Christ (Rom. 8:29f.).<sup>4</sup> Paul Feine, however, regarded adoption, redemption, sanctification, regeneration, etc., as parallel concepts of justification.<sup>5</sup> Adolf Deissmann concurred with Feine to some extent but called these terms synonyms: "There are other synonyms, but the following five are the most important: justification, reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, adoption."<sup>6</sup> Thornton Whalling, in an article on adoption, followed Girardeau to a large extent.<sup>7</sup> It seems, however, as if Archibald A. Hodge, long before these scholars, had a more correct understanding of adoption when, writing on it as related to regeneration and sanctification, he said: "Adoption includes both. As set forth in Scripture, it embraces in one complex view the newly-regenerated creature in the new relations into which he is introduced by justification."<sup>8</sup>

Paul's concept of adoption seems to be better understood if it is kept in mind that for him the Kingdom of God was made up of a family of God's sons and daughters. Closely related to this is, in the first place, the typological sonship of Israel, which he applied to the Church with special emphasis on the individual members in accordance with the stress already put on the personal relationship with God in the later authors of the Old Testament. In the second

<sup>1</sup> *Locus de salute (Dictaten Dogmatiek, n.d.)*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Discussions of Theological Questions*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Richmond, Va., 1905), pp. 428-521.

<sup>4</sup> "Adoption," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. S. M. Jackson et al., I (New York, 1908), 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 221-231.

<sup>6</sup> *Paul, a Study in Social and Religious History*, translated by W. E. Wilson (second edition; London, 1926), p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> "Adoption," *The Princeton Theological Review*, XXI (1923), 221-235.

<sup>8</sup> *A Commentary on the Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 261.

place, as pointed out by Thornton Whalling,<sup>1</sup> adoption is closely related to his teaching of the first and second Adam, with each one having a particular influence on man's relationship to God (cf. Rom. 5:12ff.; I Cor. 15:23, 45ff.). The first Adam forfeited the fulness of his sonship which he originally possessed. He became alienated from God and subject to death. In Adam all mankind inherited this alienation and is in need of liberation from slavery and in need of restoration to full sonship. Through the second Adam, who was Himself the Son of God, this restoration became possible (Rom. 1:3f.; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:13).

## II

*Paul conceived of the restoration to full sonship as a process with various aspects.* It begins with regeneration<sup>2</sup> which fits man potentially for full sonship. This is followed by redemption, justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, sanctification, salvation, and fellowship. Adoption would be incomplete without any of these, and it seems a matter of logical inference that adoption is neither a synonym nor a parallel concept of any of these, but the more inclusive experience which the others help to perfect.

1. *Redemption* (cf. ἀπολύτρωσις, ἐλευθερία, ἐλευθεροῦν, ἐλεύθερος).

The common denominator of adoption and redemption for Paul is the abrogation of the state of bondage (Rom. 6:17, 19f.; 8:15, 23; I Cor. 7:22; Gal. 4:4f.; Eph. 1:5-7; Tit. 3:3). In redemption man appears before God as a slave in bondage and in need of emancipation. His bondage consists of sin (Rom. 6:16-20; Tit. 3:3), the law (Gal. 4:5; 5:1), things that are by nature no gods (Gal. 4:8f.), his carnal body (Rom. 8:23), and death (Rom. 6:16; 8:21, cf. Eph. 4:30). He came into this state by the forfeiture of his original sonship. To restore this sonship the law came as a temporary arrangement (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19). But man was still subject to sin from which he had to be freed. He was in need of forgiveness as based on the price of redemption. Ultimately he had to be liberated from the body and eternal death before his adoption could finally be consummated (cf. Rom. 8:23). The price (τιμή) which was due for redemption is evidently the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 1:7, cf. I Cor. 6:20; 7:23).

In man's own experience the Holy Spirit is the earnest and seal of redemption (Eph. 1:13f.; 4:30, cf. II Cor. 3:17); and in the same way as redemption of a slave was a prerequisite for his sonship, so redemption is actually a step toward adoption. To be adopted is

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, 224.

<sup>2</sup> For a comparison of regeneration and adoption cf. John L. Girardeau, *op. cit.*, pp. 473 ff.; Thornton Whalling, *op. cit.*, 228 ff.

more than to be redeemed out of slavery. Although the reference to a price paid might be reminiscent of Græco-Roman practices of Paul's time, it is quite likely that he had in mind the rounding out of a typological comparison with the liberation of Israel out of bondage in Egypt (cf. *supra*, Deut. 32:6). Neither adoption nor redemption is fully completed in this life in all that they encompass. Rom. 8:23 puts both side by side in an eschatological setting: “. . . but we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, we ourselves also groan in ourselves anticipating adoption, the redemption of our body.”

2. *Justification* (cf. δίκαιος, δικαιοσύνη, δικαίω, δικαίωμα, δικαίωσις).

Justification comes through redemption which is in Christ (Rom. 3:24). Man's serfdom to sin makes him guilty and in need of justification. Adoption and justification, in addition to their common dependence on redemption, are further related insofar as those whom God chose to be His children He also justified (cf. Rom. 8:29f.; Eph. 1:5-7). In redemption man stands before the Great Master as a slave in bondage. In justification he stands before the Judge as an accused person in need to be pronounced justified, and so righteous.<sup>1</sup> In adoption he stands before a Father, as a prospective heir. To be justified, to become a subject of moral government, does not of necessity involve sonship and inheritance which constitute the ultimate purpose of God's choosing and of adoption. Thus to be adopted as a son is more than to be justified, and it can safely be said that justification is not a synonym of adoption, but serves to complete the process of adoption. Righteousness depends on fulfilment of the law, but this is beyond man's natural ability and so the need for justification arises (Gal. 3:10f.). By the grace of God, through redemption in Christ, whom God has set to be a propitiation (ἱλαστήριον), and through faith, man obtains righteousness and is justified (Rom. 3:24ff.; 5:9; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:5). Justification is the ethico-juridical side of adoption. The liability which man has incurred in the first Adam is removed in the second Adam.

<sup>1</sup> Justification and redemption are inseparable. The former becomes necessary because of sin, transgression, and guilt. The latter becomes necessary because there is a price to be paid, a debt is involved. And in Judaism of Paul's time the guilt of transgression, which made justification imperative, was regarded as a debt (cf. Matt. 6: 12; Luke 11: 4). Thus the paying of a price in redemption seems to be synonymous with the act of forgiveness. And so the question of the recipient of the price (τιμῆ, I Cor. 6: 20; 7: 23) becomes void.

3. *Reconciliation* (cf. καταλλαγή, καταλλάσσειν, ἀποκαταλλάσσειν).

Reconciliation is related to adoption by virtue of its close relationship to justification (cf. Rom. 5:9f.; II Cor. 5:19ff.; Eph. 2:15f.).

Before man attains to the state of adoption he is not only estranged from God, because he broke His commandments, but he is allied to His enemy as well, weak, ungodly, and in bondage to evil (cf. Rom. 5:6ff.; Eph. 2:15f.). In the Son hostility is potentially ended and man can be at peace with God. The change from one state to the other is called the καταλλαγή. Without reconciliation with its social-juridical emphasis man would be unfit for adoption.

4. *Sanctification* (cf. ἁγιασμός, ἁγιάζειν, ἅγιος, ἁγιωσύνη, ἁγιότης).

In the Old Testament holiness was a supreme demand for Israel under God (Lev. 11:44). The same holds true for adoption. In his natural state man is unholy, unacceptable for the presence of God, and so not fit for adoption (II Cor. 6:14-18). Sanctification involves a process that goes back to regeneration and forestalls a relapse into the same state which necessitated justification and reconciliation. By sanctification man is being moulded into the image of the Son and without it adoption will not attain to its ultimate confirmation.

5. *Salvation* (cf. σώζειν, σωτήρ, σωτηρία).

Paul regarded regeneration, justification, reconciliation, and sanctification as prerequisites for salvation (Rom. 5:9f.; II Thess. 2:13; I Tim. 2:15; Tit. 3:5). Salvation became necessary because man's natural state makes him subject to divine wrath and to perdition. Full sonship is impossible unless man is saved from his perilous condition (cf. Rom. 5:9; 9:27; II Cor. 2:15; II Thess. 2:10; I Tim. 1:15; Tit. 3:3ff.). Although salvation is a rather inclusive experience, and one might almost say a synonym of adoption, it does not *per se* mean restoration to a filial relationship. To be adopted as a child is more than to be saved.

6. *Fellowship* (cf. κοινωνεῖν, κοινωνία, συγκοινωνεῖν).

Fellowship is one of the most central tenets of Paul's theology, and no matter which aspect of his teachings is taken as a point of departure, it is almost invariably related to fellowship. So also adoption would be incomplete without fellowship—fellowship with the Father and the Son (I Cor. 1:9), with the Holy Spirit (cf. II Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1), and, on the basis of a common brotherhood with the Son, also with other believers (Rom. 8:29). In mystic fellowship as described by the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ the believer follows the path which He had gone before. Objectively this fellowship



is sealed in baptism. “For we are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26f.).<sup>1</sup> While baptism takes place once, the eucharist would among other things be a continual expression of man’s own sonship. Subjectively fellowship embraces the life of Christ spiritually applied to the life of the believer. He suffers with Christ (Rom. 8:17), is crucified with Him (Rom 6:6 ; Gal. 2:19f.), is baptized with Him into death and dies with Him (Rom. 6:4ff.; cf. Col. 2:12), is buried with Him (Rom. 6:4 ; II Tim 2:11), is raised up with Him (Rom. 6:5 ; Eph. 2:6 ; Col. 2:12 ; 3:1), is made alive with Him (Eph. 2:4f.; Col. 2:13), is glorified with Him (Rom. 8:17), inherits with Him (Rom. 8:17), and will reign with Him (II Tim. 2:12). Fellowship, as described here is part of the transformation from the old to the new man, and as such it becomes an integral part of the preparation before adoption can be fully realized.

### III

In addition to the organic relationships which exist between adoption and the various aspects which contribute to its fulfilment, they further share a common origin insofar as God takes the initiative in His eternal counsel and in His action in history to bring them about, and insofar as they are realized in Christ through the Spirit and faith.

Adoption is both present (Rom. 8:15 ; Gal. 4:5f.; Eph. 1:5) and eschatological (Rom. 8:23). In its present form adoption becomes manifest through the actual experience of redemption, justification, etc. It is present in the fellowship with Christ and in the indwelling of the Spirit of adoption by which man can cry “*Abba, Father*” (Rom. 8:14f.; Gal. 4:6). In spite of the fact that adoption becomes a reality in man’s awareness of a new life, its final consummation is yet to come. Although he has the first fruits of the Spirit, he groans within himself waiting for the adoption, the redemption of his body (Rom. 8:23). This futural element comes out in various other aspects of adoption also. So, *e.g.*, the Holy Spirit is the seal of future redemption (Eph. 1:13f.; 3:4ff.; cf. II Cor. 3:17). Final justification will come beyond this life (Rom. 2:13 ; Gal. 5:5; cf. Rom. 5:19 ; II Tim. 4:8). The eschatological element stands out very clearly in salvation. On the day of

<sup>1</sup> It seems as if the expression ἐν Χριστῷ had its origin in the idea that the believer puts Christ on as a garment. This putting on of Christ, in turn, seems to have had its origin in certain practices of the mystery religions where the devotee went through a rite of this kind. If so, however, it is quite clear that Paul’s Christ-mysticism is unique in its content and emphasis on the spiritual.

testing man shall be saved (I Cor. 3:15; cf. 5:5). Paul's own salvation is regarded as future (II Tim. 4:18). Salvation is so much a matter of the future that Paul could say "we are saved by hope" (Rom. 8:24) and could speak of the "hope of salvation" (I Thess. 5:8). The eschatological element of adoption comes out very clearly in Paul's Christ-fellowship. As children men are fellow-heirs with Christ, which in itself points to a future inheritance (Rom. 8:17; cf. Gal. 3:18 ; Eph. 1:14, 18 ; 5:5 ; Col. 3:24). Glorification, which is part of man's fellowship with Christ, is still to come in its fulness (Rom. 8:17f.). Man's fellowship—and so his adoption—is incomplete until he reigns with Christ.

Summarizing it can be said that there hardly seems to be any doubt that Paul's metaphor of adoption roots in the Jewish rather than in the Græco-Roman, or other traditions. It might even have been derived from Israel's deliverance out of bondage in Egypt. Adoption seems to be the most comprehensive concept that Paul employed of man's restoration. Adoption involves a crisis in the life of the believer followed by a process and it points to an eschatological completion. The ultimate purpose of adoption is the restoration of man to freedom and to a harmonious relationship with God his Father.

*Princeton Theological Seminary*