

Bible quotations are from NASB95<sup>1</sup> unless otherwise specified.

### **Adoption explains much about salvation.**

Understanding all that happens to a person and their soul upon salvation is a complex subject. Systematic Theology devotes a whole section called “soteriology” to it. Salvation occurs all at once as far as time goes. The process begins and ends in the same instant. A person is never partially forgiven of their sins. The terms “saved” and “born again” are often used to describe the end result of Christ work in a person with a single term whereas other terms refer to the logical events of salvation such as redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, justification, and forgiveness are each limited in the aspects of salvation they describe. It seems to us humans that one step should necessarily occur before the next even though it all happens at once. Referring to these steps as the logical events of salvation aid our own understanding of the work Christ accomplished for us on the cross.

The Bible uses the institutions of marriage and adoption to describe our relationship with God once we come to Christ. Adoption as “sons of God” covers much of what happens in us in a broad sense of salvation and parallels several topics found under soteriology such as the logical events of salvation. It is also useful to understand adoption as it was practiced in New Testament times as the New Testament writers did if one is to understand the biblical passages where adoption is used to explain our relationship to God.

### **Interpretation Considerations**

“There has been much discussion as to whether Paul’s understanding of adoption is informed by Jewish, Greek, Roman, or some other tradition.”<sup>2</sup> This study leans toward the influences of Roman tradition. We must be careful to limit our understanding of adoption in the New Testament to the time of the first century and the culture of the New Testament era. Additional information from other times and cultures are of value provided one is mindful of the culture and time period it represents. This study will also avail itself of these resources when it is helpful. The focus of this study is on the Roman law and practices concerning adoption in the Roman society of New Testament times.

### **The Father’s Authority in New Testament Family Life.**

Adoption during this time was different than ours today. The family unit was also different than what we know today or knew even a hundred years ago. The Roman state only recognized

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<sup>2</sup> Silva, M., & Tenney, M. C. (2009). In *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Q-Z* (Revised, Full-Color Edition, Vol. 5, p. 276). Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation.

marriages between two Roman citizens. Such legal recognition by the state provided rights and protections not provided to families with a non-citizen's spouse.<sup>3</sup>

The father who was a Roman citizen held absolute power over the family. Gaius once said of Roman fathers, "... virtually no other men have over their sons a power such as we have."<sup>4</sup> But this power over adult sons was beginning to wane by Paul's day.<sup>5</sup> Yet fathers remained master of the family until his death even though his sons had become grown adults with families of their own.

With the father's tremendous authority came great responsibility. The behavior of each member of the family fell under the umbrella of their father's responsibility. He supervised the family and managed the finances. He protected and maintained the honor of the family. Loss of honor in an honor-shame society such as this could affect the entire family in numerous ways, especially economically and marriage possibilities for his children. His responsibility also included protecting the honor of his daughters, so they remained marriable.

A father maintained his authority over his sons for as long as he lived. A son might gain property by earnings, gifts, or inheritance. The father owned everything that came into the son's possession. "It did not matter how old a son was, or to what honours and responsibility he had risen; he was absolutely in his father's power."<sup>6</sup> Because the father controlled the finances of the family and held all the authority, sons had nothing unless their father permitted them to have it. They would receive their portion of the family's wealth when distributed as an inheritance once their father died.

Roman law dictated that anyone under the age of seven was an infant and those under the age of twenty-five were minors.<sup>7</sup> If a Son was still a child at the time of their fathers passing, they were treated much the same as slaves with guardians and managers assigned over them until a time set by their fathers.<sup>8</sup>

One disciple approached Jesus with a request, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." (Matthew 8:21) This disciple was not concerned about his father's funeral. It is not because his father has died that he said this. No, it is because he is still under his father's authority and he does not think his father will allow him to leave his responsibilities or release him from his family contribution and permit him to follow Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffers, J. S. (1999). *The Greco-Roman world of the New Testament era: Exploring the background of early Christianity* (p. 238). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, D. J. (1999). *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (p. 60). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Barclay, W. (2002). *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (pp. 91–92). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>7</sup> Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Ed.). (1909). *Galatians* (p. 179). London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 4:1-2

Although Roman culture considered “to marry and to have children was regarded as the duty of all Roman citizens and no less of Greeks and of Jews”<sup>9</sup> men often could not support a household until later in life, probably after they received their inheritance. A man typically did not marry until the age of twenty-five to thirty years old<sup>10</sup>. He usually became established well enough to support a wife and family by this time. It is possible that their inheritance played a role in enabling them to support a household since fathers were typically thirty years older than their sons and lifespans were often shorter during ancient times.

Although Roman law set the minimum age for a girl to marry at 12 years old, a man would typically marry a woman in her mid to late teens,<sup>11</sup> making him six to seventeen years her senior. He would have the same authority over her, as well as any children they would have, as his father had had over his family of origin although he would also remain under the authority of a living father. Although by the first century A.D., women had much more freedom than earlier times.<sup>12</sup>

Building a family in the first century had its obstacles. One fourth of infants succumb to illness and only half of all children ever made it past the age of ten.<sup>13</sup> No doubt all this pain and sorrow caused parents to treasure their surviving children even more. As we will see below, these statistics also played a role in choosing who to adopt.

### **The Adoption Process.**

Adoption was also quite different than the adoption we understand. For instance, we think of adopting babies or young children. We think of adopting because of one’s desire to nurture and invest in another’s life. We think of sealed court records and the young child often unaware of their adoption status or the identity of their biological parents.

The ancient world thought of adoption as a solution to a problem of the adopting family. An Emperor may adopt a man as a son and designate the adoptee as heir to the throne if he considered his natural sons unsuitable for the task unsuitable for the task. A family without a son may adopt a son to lead the family’s religious rituals. A family may desire to have children to care for them in their aged years, to perpetuate their name, or care for the estate.

Adopting a child would not serve their purpose in adopting, because half of those born would not live to adulthood; therefore, it was more typical to adopt a post-adolescent adult. It was common to adopt someone that was already thirty years old. It was possible to adopt a person in ones’ will.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, D. J. p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, D. J. (1999). Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character (p. 52). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 86

<sup>14</sup> Silva, M., & Tenney, M. C., Vol. 1, p. 70.

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Adopting fathers adopted the adoptee to a position. It did not matter who the biological children of the adopting father were. A person adopted as the eldest son of a family with several already existing sons replaced the eldest son as the eldest son. He would possess the position and all rights of the eldest son regardless of their ages and the eldest son becomes just another son. If the Emperor adopted someone as an eldest son, he would become heir to the throne instead of his eldest natural son.

The father giving up his son to another often found motivation in financial incentives or the prospects of a better life for his offspring. This may seem incomprehensible to us, but survival was difficult at times and maneuvering for a better situation in life was part of living. Younger sons of families with many older sons had few prospects in their father's house and would benefit from adoption into another family with better prospects for them. The father who made the decision to allow an adoption would know the situation his son would have with his new father and the advantages to the son.

Even if the adoptee was an adult, the biological father still had to agree to the adoption since the son was still under his authority. Barclay describes the adoption process this way.<sup>15</sup>

The ritual of adoption must have been very impressive. It was carried out by a symbolic sale in which copper and scales were used. Twice the biological father sold his son, and twice he symbolically bought him back; he finally sold him a third time, and at the third sale and did not buy him back. After this, the adopting father had to go to the praetor, one of the principal Roman magistrates, and plead the case for the adoption."

The magistrate finalized the adoption when he approved the appropriateness of the adoption.

One should notice, adoption is not free to the adopting father, he paid a price to the original father. It is a "sale." One may consider if the adoption process may inform us on verses such as Acts 20:28 and 1 Corinthians 6:20<sup>16</sup> even though they could just as easily apply to the price of redemption or of a slave.

We know from Galatians 3:13, it is Christ who redeemed us and Acts 20:28 says, "... the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Therefore, Acts 20:28 indicates redemption rather than having adoption in mind. Bray<sup>17</sup> uses 1 Corinthians 6:20 "... bought with a price" to support the doctrine of adoption even though few scholars interpret it that way. Just as the

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<sup>15</sup> Barclay, W. (2002). *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (pp. 91–92). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>16</sup> Although Acts 20:28 is has no specified type of purchase, 1 Corinthians 6:20 specifies that we should "glorify God" using (δοξάζω) which means to enhance God's reputation or honor.(See BDAB) This is very much in line with the expectation of an son, adopted or not, of bringing honor to his father.

<sup>17</sup> Bray, G. (2012). *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (p. 645). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

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adoptive father purchases the adoptee from their natural father. The price paid for us is an area where the doctrines of redemption and adoption can overlap.

Once adopted, they considered the adoptee a new creature.<sup>18</sup> Adoption broke all ties with their old family. They were no longer responsible for the debts of their old family. Their honor became based on the honor level of the new family and the honor of the old family no longer affected the adopted person. The adoptee had a new family, new status, and new responsibilities, with an allegiance to their adopted family. Their possessions became the adopting father's property. An adoptee's possessions came under the control of their adopted father even if they had already received their inheritance from their natural father or had great wealth. It may be difficult for us to understand why someone would give up control of their wealth like this, but a person would agree to the adoption if the overall benefit appeared great enough.

### **Our Current use of the word brothers.**

The children of the adopting father become the siblings of the adopted son. The existing sons become their brothers. In this way all Christians would be brothers in God's family. One would think the reason Christians call each other brothers and sisters comes from our adoption into the family of God, but this is not the reason we do so. The word for brother (ἀδελφός) was used in the Ancient Near East pretty much as it is today in English. It can refer to a male sibling, a fellow member of a group, or the status relationship between two people. Mark 3:33-35 serves as an example of the term brothers referring to members of a group when Jesus uses it to refer to those doing the will of God. Union halls and lodges provide a modern example of the use of the word brothers.

### **Adoption in the Old Testament times.**

The writings of the Apostle Paul, written to the Gentiles, contain most of the clear mentions of adoption. St. John<sup>19</sup> also references adoption as do the Gospels<sup>20</sup>.

Some people say that the Jews did not practice adoption; however, there is evidence that Jews practiced adoption during some periods in their history. It is also clear that they were aware of adoption from neighboring nations since adoption language refers to King David's adoption by God.<sup>21</sup> Several New Testament verses allude to adoption of people who will be called, or will be, "sons of God"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15f

<sup>19</sup> Rev 21:7

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 5:5;19:25 makes reference to the inheritance of eternal life which comes through adoption as sons by God.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Samuel 7:14

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 5:9, Luke 20:36

The Johannian literature, which scholars generally consider as not supporting adoption mentions the “children of God.”<sup>23</sup> John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:1–5 speaks of people as being born “of God” which is not a reference to adoption while 1 John 3:1-3 speaks of the hope which is the inheritance that comes through adoption as well as the promise<sup>24</sup>.

There are several mentions of the Christian’s adoption, inheritance, or that God is our Father in non-Pauline texts and shows the doctrine of adoption spans further than Paul’s writings. New Testament Jews understood adoption.

Available sources of information relating to adoption in Old Testament times come from a range of regions and a vast span of time. A person cannot distill a generalized set of rules for adoption as the laws and practice of adoption differ by region and times. Ancient contracts provide us the most insight into adoption during OT times. Yet their limited usefulness stems from their lack of sufficient information concerning the circumstances surrounding the contract and purpose of the adoption. (see AYBD<sup>25</sup>)

The Israelites did not practice adoption under the Mosaic Law. Their tribal possession laws combined with Levirate laws or polygamy rendered adoption unnecessary. There are no biblical Hebrew words for adoption; However, there are several possible cases of adoption in the Old Testament.

#### **Pre-Mosaic-Law adoptions in the Old Testament.**

Although I suspect Genesis 24:7 is a covenant, Braaten<sup>26</sup> believes it “reflects adoption customs.” Another possible place adoption language appears is in Genesis 48:5 when Jacob tells Joseph,

Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are.

It is unclear in what sense they were adopted, and it may have been Jacobs way of giving Joseph a double portion of their inheritance as indicated in Genesis 48:22, “I give you one portion more than your brothers”. Exodus 2:10 uses adoption language as it refers to Pharaoh’s daughter and Moses, “he became her son.” Of course, this occurred in Egypt and before the Mosaic law. Another case during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Ezra wrote, “the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name.”<sup>27</sup> Adoption of Barzillai is indicated by his being called by the name of his wife’s family. Again, Esther 2:7 applies adoption language to Esther, “Mordecai took her as his own daughter.” This adoption was outside of Israel

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<sup>23</sup> John 1:12, 1 John 3:1-2, 1 John 3:10, 1 John 5:2

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 6:12

<sup>25</sup> Knobloch, F. W. (1992). Adoption. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 1, p. 77). New York: Doubleday.

<sup>26</sup> Braaten, L. J. (2000). Adoption. In D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck (Eds.), *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible* (pp. 21–22). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>27</sup> Ezra 2:61

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since Mordecai lived in the Persian empire of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) in 479 BC. Adoption language appears before the Mosaic Law and after the exile to Babylon indicating the practice existed among the Israelites during times they lived outside of Israel.

A phrase search<sup>28</sup> reveal things called by God's name, for example: His house (1 Kings 8:43, Jerimiah 7:10-11) and the Ark of God. (2 Samuel 6:2, 1 Chronicles 13:6). "The house of the Lord" or "The house of God" is common phraseology "in the Ancient Near Eastern world for a structure used to accommodate a deity or his servants."<sup>29</sup> This may indicate ownership.

When used of people, to be call by someone's name indicates a familial relationship and one's position under the authority of the father. Many commentators explain the phrase "called by my name" and similar phrases as indication of ownership by God. Although scripture refers to His people as His possessions<sup>30</sup> and this may seem like a good explanation, it is not entirely correct. Ownership of something generally indicates the right to control who possesses it. Possession indicates who has control of it.

Whenever the situation applies to people<sup>31</sup> with which God has made a covenant with a promise of adoption, one must understand it within the context of the Father-son relationship formed through adoption. Just as the man who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite was "called by their name" was adopted, those who are called by the name of the Lord are adopted and have a familial relationship with the Lord. One called by the name of the Lord does not simply indicate God's ownership of them, but rather it emphasizes His authority over us and His relationship with us. The authority held and exercised by human fathers should model in some fashion the ultimate authority held by our heavenly Father. Merrill<sup>32</sup> list the following verses in support of the adoption of Israel, Exodus 4:22-23; 2 Chronical 7:14; Isaiah 63:19; Jeremiah 14:9.

Not only did adoption exist at various times within Israel's history but Israel was aware of adoption throughout their history from the history of Moses and interactions with foreigners who practiced adoption. Though Israel clearly understood God as their father it remains unclear exactly how they understood the formation of this relationship with God.

One would think the concept of spiritual adoption weighed on the minds of New Testament Jews since three times in the gospels "eternal life" appears to be associated with an spiritual inheritance as someone approached Jesus with the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal

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<sup>28</sup> Searching NASB95 Old Testament passages for "called by the name of the Lord" OR "called by my name" OR "called by your name" yields 19 verses that refer to the temple, nations, cities, and people being called by His name.

<sup>29</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). House of God. In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible (Vol. 1, p. 1007). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 19:5, Deuteronomy 7:6, Deuteronomy 14:2, Deuteronomy 26:18, Psalm 135:4, Malachi 3:17

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 28:10, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Isaiah 4:1, Isaiah 43:7, Isaiah 63:19, Isaiah 65:15, Jeremiah 14:9, Jeremiah 15:16, Daniel 9:19, Amos 9:12

<sup>32</sup> Merrill, E. H. (1994). Deuteronomy (Vol. 4, p. 354). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

life?”<sup>33</sup> However, this is weak reasoning for several reasons. First the Greek for inheritance (κληρονομέω) can carry either the meaning of “to be an inheritor/inherit” or “obtain/to come into possession of something.”<sup>34</sup> Most modern translations use inherit while 20% of them use something like “obtain” or “receive.” Furthermore, even though they understood adoption in the New Testament, adoption in the spiritual sense as discussed in this article is not used by the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, The Mishna, nor the Pseudepigrapha; however, the apocryphal book of 4 Ezra written around 100 CE seems to have a veiled reference at 4 Ezra 7:14-16<sup>35</sup> to a spiritual “inheritance.”<sup>36</sup>

Their use of the word “inherit” (κληρονομέω) could also carry either of the two meanings listed above. Although the New Testament Jews understood adoption, they did not write of spiritual adoption and probably did not readily think in terms of adoption in relation to a spiritual inheritance. Therefore, when one asked how they can receive or inherit eternal life they most likely intend the meaning of “receive” instead of “inherit.”

In ancient times inheritance usually implies sonship unless it involves a person’s final will. Since Jesus Christ is the only natural son of God all other sons of God are adopted.

One of the most frequent comparisons in the OT is that between the father/child and the God/Israel relationship.<sup>37</sup> The earliest indication of God’s adoption of Israel appears in Exodus 4:22 “Israel is My son, My firstborn,” where Israel is adopted as God’s firstborn. Again, referring to the exodus out of Egypt, “When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.” (Hosea 11:1) A declaration of the Father-son relationship appears in Jeremiah 31:9, “For I am a father to Israel, And Ephraim is My firstborn.” There is a recognition of God as their Father in Isaiah

For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and  
Israel does not recognize us. You, O LORD, are our Father, Our  
Redeemer from of old is Your name.”

Isaiah 63:16

The Lord again indicates a father-son relationship with Israel through the prophet Malachi<sup>38</sup>, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor?” The Jews understood the Father-son relationship they had with God, for the Jews said to Jesus, “We have one Father: God” (John 8:41).

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<sup>33</sup> Mark 10:17, Luke 10:25, Luke 18:18

<sup>34</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 547). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>35</sup> Charlesworth, J. H. (1983). The Old Testament pseudepigrapha (Vol. 1, p. 537). New York; London: Yale University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Charles, R. H. (Ed.). (1913). Commentary on the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (Vol. 2, p. 580). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>37</sup> Silva, M., & Tenney, M. C., Vol. 2, p. 546.

<sup>38</sup> Malachi 1:6



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God's adoption of King David is clearly indicted with the adoption formulas, "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me" (2 Samuel 7:14), "I will be his father and he shall be My son" (1 Chron 17:13), and similarly in (1 Chron 22:10, 1 Chron 28:6). Other examples are in the footnotes.<sup>39</sup>

Paul explained doctrinal truths with common life situations just as Jesus explained the truths of the Kingdom with parables understood by most people. In Ephesians<sup>40</sup> the common sight of the Roman soldier in armor develops into a guideline for a model Christian. Likewise, the widespread practice of adoption among the Romans served him well in explaining our salvation and relationship with God.

Adoption effectively explains our new birth by which we become a new creation<sup>41</sup> along with describing the eternal life we gain through Christ. Our adoption is more than a just metaphor because we have a father-son relationship with God, and He is indeed our father and we are his sons. The New Testament mentions two adopted people. They are Gallio mentioned in Acts 18:12 and Tiberius of Luke 3:1. We are not told in scripture they were adopted but this is known from history because they were both government officials: a proconsul and an emperor, respectively.

There are several Bible verses that tell us about the adoption of Christians as sons of God. Paul tells us something about how God chose us.

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:5–6

Predestination has in view the purpose of pre-appointed Christians.<sup>42</sup> We find our purpose is to be adopted through Jesus Christ with all the rights and benefits that accompanying being a member of God's family, sons of God. This right is extended to everyone who comes to Christ as John says,

<sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, ...  
John 1:12

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<sup>39</sup> Exodus 4:23, Numbers 6:27, Deuteronomy 28:10, Deuteronomy 32:6, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Proverbs 14:26, Isaiah 43:6, Isaiah 63:8, Isaiah 8:18, Jeremiah 3:19, Jeremiah 31:20, Hosea 1:10

<sup>40</sup> Ephesians 6:10-24

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 6:15 f

<sup>42</sup> Graham, G. (2008). An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians (2nd ed., p. 25). Dallas, TX: SIL International.

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Adoption comes through faith just as salvation does, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26) We join God’s family as sons. God adopted us to the position of a son in His family. Adoption as sons speaks to our inheritance. The inheritance generally passes on to sons in ancient cultures. In heaven there is no male or female<sup>43</sup> so gender is not meant by “sons” but rather conveys the position of an heir.

### **Conformity and Sanctification**

Our adoption brings praise to God. “It is according to the kind intention of His will” that God even predestined us to be His sons. God adopted us for our benefit. God has good things planned for us in this life and the next. We see in Romans

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

Romans 8:29

God predestined us not only to adoption, but also to “become conformed to the image of His Son.” This “conformed” means to appear in “similar form”<sup>44</sup> rather than similar behavior. Just as an adoptee in ancient times, those who joined a new family as a son had all the rights of a natural son, we as Christians have all the rights of a natural son of God. Our honor comes from God’s family now instead of our former family enslaved by sin. We also have responsibilities to our new family. As Romans tells us:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

Romans 8:12–17

### **The obligations of the adoptee**

As adopted sons we are all “under obligation” to the Father. Some commentators and translations have “a debt” or “we are debtors.” Granted that is one definition of obligation

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<sup>43</sup> Luke 20:34-36

<sup>44</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W., p. 958.

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(ὀφειλέτης [opheiletēs]) but another definition is “one who is obligated to do something”<sup>45</sup> and this is the proper definition here. Just as the ancient adoptee was obligated to obey his new father and fulfill his new responsibilities, we are obligated with a new loyalty to God and the responsibility to live holy lives that honors Him as He requires of us.<sup>46</sup>

Once adopted into a new family, we must live as members of our new family. Living as a new creature<sup>47</sup> since the old has passed away. (See 2 Cor 5:17), or at least it should pass away. Paul tells us we must die to sin.<sup>48</sup> We must die to the master of our old family as though it never existed and live for our new master of the house. Our obligation is not only in deeds but also in the attitude by which we do the things we do. We become conformed to the image of Christ,<sup>49</sup> becoming more Christ like. This way we are children of God who represent the honor of God and do not disgrace him when we live a life above reproach.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,

Philippians 2:14-15

We accomplished this change with the help of the Holy Spirit. Through His help we have life and the ability to live for God. Once adopted, we are to live as a son of God and not as a slave to sin. This is such a good thing that we cry out terms of endearment to God, “Abba! Father!” We even have the testimony of The Spirit that “we are children of God” already yet

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, the redemption of our body.

Romans 8:23

“Waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” seems to say, we are still waiting to be adopted while other verses clearly state we are already “sons.” If we back up a few verses to Romans 8:19 for the context, “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.” When the Greek word for “waits eagerly” [ἀπεκδέχομαι (apekdechomai)] is always used of “Christian Hope” in the Bible.<sup>50</sup> The Christian Hope refers to the resurrection to eternal life. God reveals the new sons of God at the resurrection. Some people prefer to say that our adoption is complete upon salvation and the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 742

<sup>46</sup> God commands us to be holy: Exodus 22:31, Leviticus 11:44, 11:45, 19:2, 20:7, 20:26, Numbers 15:40, Deuteronomy 23:14, Ephesians 1:4, 5:27. God desires us to be holy 1 Peter 1:15-16

<sup>47</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15f

<sup>48</sup> Romans 18:13, Romans 6:7, 1 Corinthians 15:31, Colossians 2:20, Colossians 3:3, 2 Timothy 2:11.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 8:29

<sup>50</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W., p. 100.

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only thing lacking is the public announcement of the adoption which happens at our resurrection; However, there is nothing lacking. Paul explains our current position as sons of God in Galatians.

<sup>1</sup> Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, <sup>2</sup> but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. <sup>3</sup> So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, <sup>5</sup> so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup> Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:1–7 (NASB95)

These verses in Galatians refers to those under the law as a child, meaning a minor.<sup>51</sup> We are no longer minors once we have Christ and the salvation He provided for on the cross. We are sons without managers. Galatians 4:6 says, “you are sons” and verse Galatians 4:7 “you are no longer a slave, but a son.”

It can become confusing, are we sons now or do we become sons at the resurrection? It will help clear things up if we think of the short-term benefits and the long-term benefits of our adoption. In the short-term an adoptee would gain freedom from the burdens of their old life, just as adoption freed us from our bondage to sin. One also gains the honor associated with the adopting family, the family of God. We gain the fellowship and support of many brothers. Another short-term benefit we now have due to our adoption by God is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which “testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” (Romans 8:16) God gives the Holy Spirit to us as a down payment or pledge<sup>52</sup> (ἀρραβών) and obligates God to make further payments. In this case the “further payments” is our promised inheritance, the resurrection to eternal life.

<sup>13</sup> In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, <sup>14</sup> who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 1:13–14

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<sup>51</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W., p. 671

<sup>52</sup> Also see Ephesians 1:13-14, 2 Corinthians 1:21, and 2 Corinthians 5:5

1 John 3:2a<sup>53</sup>, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be,” clearly states we are children of God now but there is something more to come. What is to come is the inheritance. It is easy to read “inheritance” sprinkled throughout the New Testament and understand it simply as something that comes sometime later; however, an understanding of adoption brings the concept of an inheritance for the children of God to a new awareness. It is called an inheritance because we are His children, and we are His children because of His adopting us as His own. We would have not inheritance without adoption.

Roman law states heirship is formed upon birth or adoption and the son remains an heir as long as the father lives.<sup>54</sup> One typically receives their inheritance when the family wealth is distributed among the sons once the father dies. Yet God will never die. But we are not forever heirs never receiving an inheritance. God has not given us an empty promise of an inheritance only for us to wait all eternity and never receive it.

The parable of The Prodigal Son provides evidence that a father could grant possession of the inheritance to a son at any time he chooses. The death of the father was not mandatory for a son to receive his inheritance.<sup>55</sup> We cannot consider God any less able to do so for us at the resurrection.

God has designated that we receive our inheritance at the resurrection and that inheritance is eternal life. That is when we receive our imperishable bodies which last us all of eternity. That is when we see God as He is, and we will be like Him. For “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” (1 John 3:2b)

### **Changing our spiritual family.**

Think of one’s unsaved condition as a slave to sin or a member of the devil’s family. We have no spiritual family if we simply leave the devil’s family. This is similar to the condition of an emancipated slave. They began a new family with no relatives when they are freed.<sup>56</sup> This makes for a tough life; however, a slave’s master could free them and adopt them in the same documents, thereby the freed slave gains a family with relatives. If God did not adopt us, we would not have a spiritual family upon salvation.

Existent contracts from the intertestamental period emancipate and adopt a person in a single document. Often in a will. God frees and adopts us upon salvation. God freed us from our bondage to sin and adopted all at once when we become saved. One possible unhappy situation for those in the “once saved always saved” camp is the fact that, unlike today in the

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<sup>53</sup> John usually speaks of children of God who are born of God. With Revelations 21:7 being a clear exception where both adoption language and inheritance appear. 1 John 3:2a is less clear, yet it refers to the inheritance of the believers.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, D. J. (1999). *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (p. 65). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>55</sup> Luke 15:7

<sup>56</sup> Fantin, J. D. (2012). Review of *Adoption in the Roman World* by Hugh Lindsay. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 169(673–676), 496.

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United States, adopted children could also be disinherited just as easily as natural children could be. But to balance it out and avoid extremes, it really takes a lot for a parent to disinherit children. Of course, there are many verses to consider along with this aspect of spiritual adoption and the possibility exist that God's adoption plan does not parallel Roman adoption laws and practice in every way.

### **Conclusion**

Although Israel did not practice adoption under the Law, they understood adoption. God used adoption to describe the relationship He desired to have with Israel. He adopted Israel. God desires to have a father-son relationship with us also. We have found adoption language such as "called by My name," "I will be his Father and he will be My son" in the Bible similar to that found in ancient contracts. We can now recognize the adoption related context of a passage having learned of adoption language.

Adoption is a substantial doctrine of the Bible; however, the doctrine of adoption is frequently overlooked or passed over quickly with but brief notice. Through this doctrine we understand what God has done for us through Christ with a new appreciation. We also learn of our obligation of loyalty and honor to God and of the father-son relationship He desires to have with us.

Adoption in New Testament times served as a solution to a problem rather than an opportunity to nurture an unfortunate soul. God adopts us to solve the problem of sin in our lives so we can have fellowship with Him. Because of His love, God wants to free us from our bondage to sin and bring us into his family. The adoptee benefitted by gaining a better position in life severing all ties and responsibilities of their old life and becoming a "new creature" in their new family. Once adopted into a position within the family, they gained new responsibilities, benefits, and loyalties. God has chosen to adopt us. He adopted us into the position of sonship. Being in the position of a "son" in God's family entitles us to a pledged and sealed inheritance. We receive our inheritance of eternal life at the resurrection. The benefits of adoption are both short term and long term. The short-term benefits free us from the bondage of our life of sin now. We have access to God our Father now and forever. Meanwhile, we know our future holds our resurrection and eternal life with God.

Two important things in our new family are our loyalty to God and our obligation to honor Him. By our loyalty, there is no other that we serve. Only God. We must constantly remind ourselves of the honor-shame society of the Bible and to avoid reading it and living it in our own guilt-innocence culture instead. As a member of God's family, we must bring honor to the family as a whole and to the Father in all that we do. This is our obligation to God.