

Adoption

Contents

Introduction	1
Application	2
I. General Legal Idea	2
In the OT	2
Greek	2
Roman	2
II. Paul's Doctrine	3
Liberty (Galatians)	3
B. Deliverance from Debt (Romans)	3
III. The Christian Experience	3
In Relation to Justification	3
In Relation to Sanctification	4
In Relation to Regeneration	4
IV. As God's Act	4
Divine Fatherhood	4
Its Cosmic Range	4

Introduction

The word adoption in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word **huiothesia**, which means “the placing of an adult son” and refers to the formal act of recognizing the maturity of an adult son. The word is found in five New Testament passages: Rom. 8:15,23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5.

The new-born baby is **brephos**, as in “the babe (**brephos**), lying in a manger...”. The word sometimes refers to the fetus, as in “...the babe (**brephos**) leapt in her womb...”. The believer is also called **teknon**, a child which is growing up

but which is still under parental care. Hence John 1:12, “...to them gave He power to become the sons (**teknon**) of God.” But the believer is also in union with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is called **huios**, “an adult son”. So, in union with Him, we are said to be adult sons also, although we may be **brephos** or **teknon** by experience. To the people living in the predominantly Greek and Roman culture of the 1st Century A.D., the word **huiothesia** would bring to mind the ceremony of *toga virilis*, in which a 14-year-old boy went through an investiture ceremony with the adult male members of his family. At this ceremony, speeches of challenge to the youth would be made, and offerings would be made to the gods. Then, the boy would stand in the center of

the group and take off the child's garment that he wore. A new adult man's robe, or toga, would be placed on him. This was the toga virilis, the "robe of a man".

At this time, the 14-year-old was given adult privileges and responsibilities. He could conduct business in his own name, could buy and sell property, could marry, could vote in the Assembly, and in many other ways could carry on as an adult citizen. Of course, he was not mature enough or wise enough to exercise all of the privileges he had; and he was not experienced enough to live up to all of the responsibilities. But the seriousness of his position as a citizen was impressed on him; and if he was intelligent and hard working, he would grow up to be an adult having integrity and character.

Application

The spiritual use of the word "adoption" signifies the placing of a newborn child, in the spiritual sense, into the position of privilege and responsibility attached to an adult son. The question arises as to why a naturally born child needs to be adopted. Are we not, after all, "born again"? It is here that the true meaning of "adoption" comes in; because in the New Testament, "adoption" refers to a positional advance. The new believer is advanced positionally to his majority, even though at the time of salvation he is spiritually immature, a "babe in Christ".

Because spiritual adoption takes place at the moment of salvation, there is really no period of childhood experience recognized for believers. The Christian has been placed into the privilege, liberty, and duty of a full-grown adult. Spiritual adoption imposes the same way of life on all children of God. This requirement is reasonable because the Christian life is to be lived in the sustaining and upholding power of the Holy Spirit. And this provision is available as much for one person as for another.

From the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

ADOPTION; SONSHIP [Gk *huiothesia*]. The Greek term occurs in the Bible only in Paul's Epistles (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5); for extrabiblical usage see MM, pp. 648f The AV and RV have "adoption" throughout. The RSV has "adoption" in Rom. 8:23; Gal. 4:5, and "sonship" in Rom.

8:15; 9:4; in Eph. 1:5 the RSV reads "to be his sons." The NEB in each instance uses a phrase such as "to make us sons" or "to attain the status of sons."

I. General Legal Idea

The custom prevailed among Greeks, Romans, and other ancient peoples (including the Hurrians; see ABRAHAM III); but it does not appear in Jewish law.

In the OT

Three cases of adoption are mentioned: of Moses (Ex. 2:10), Genubath (1 K. 11:20), and Esther (Est. 2:7, 15); but it is remarkable that they all occur outside of Palestine—in Egypt and Persia, where the practice of adoption prevailed. Likewise the idea appears in the NT only in the Epistles of Paul, which were addressed to churches outside Palestine. The motive and initiative of adoption always lay with the adoptive father, who thus supplied his lack of natural offspring and satisfied the claims of affection and religion, and the desire to exercise paternal authority or to perpetuate his family. The process and conditions of adoption varied with different peoples. Among oriental nations it was extended to slaves (as Moses), who thereby gained their freedom; but in Greece and Rome it was, with rare exceptions, limited to citizens.

Greek

In Greece a man might during his lifetime, or by will, to take effect after his death, adopt any male citizen into the privileges of his son, but with the invariable condition that the adopted son accepted the legal obligations and religious duties of a real son.

Roman

In Rome the unique nature of paternal authority (*patria potestas*), by which a son was held in his father's power, almost as a slave was owned by his master, gave a peculiar character to the process of adoption. For the adoption of a person free from paternal authority (*sui juris*), the process and effect were practically the same in Rome as in Greece (*adrogatio*). In a more specific sense, adoption

proper (*adoptio*) was the process by which a person was transferred from his natural father's power into that of his adoptive father; and it consisted in a fictitious sale of the son, and his surrender by the natural to the adoptive father.

II. Paul's Doctrine

As a Roman citizen the apostle would naturally know of the Roman custom; but in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus, and again on his travels, he would become equally familiar with the corresponding customs of other nations. He employed the idea metaphorically much in the manner of Christ's parables; and, as in their case, there is danger of pressing the analogy too far in its details. It is not clear that he had any specific form of adoption in mind when illustrating his teaching by the general idea. Under this Figure he teaches that God, by the manifestation of His grace in Christ, brings men into the relation of sons to Himself, and communicates to them the experience of sonship.

Liberty (Galatians)

In Galatians Paul emphasizes especially the liberty enjoyed by those who live by faith, in contrast to the bondage under which men are held who guide their lives by legal ceremonies and ordinances, as the Galatians were prone to do (5:1). The contrast between law and faith is first set forth on the field of history, as a contrast between both the pre-Christian and the Christian economies (3:23f), although in another passage he carries the idea of adoption back into the covenant relation of God with Israel (Rom. 9:4). But here the historical antithesis is reproduced in the contrast between men who now choose to live under law and those who live by faith.

Here three figures seem to commingle in the description of man's condition under legal bondage—that of a slave, that of a minor under guardians appointed by his father's will, and that of a Roman son under the *patria potestas* (Gal. 4:1–3). The process of liberation is first of all one of redemption or buying out (*Gk exagorásē*) (4:5). This term in itself applies equally well to the slave who is redeemed from bondage, and the Roman son whose adoptive father buys him out of the authority of his natural father. But in the latter case the condition of the son is not materially altered by the process: he only exchanges one paternal authority for another. If Paul for a moment thought of the

process in terms of ordinary Roman adoption, the resulting condition of the son he conceives in terms of the more free and gracious Greek or Jewish family life. Or he may have thought of the rarer case of adoption from conditions of slavery into the status of sonship. The redemption is only a precondition of adoption, which follows upon faith, and is accompanied by the sending of "the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, Adoption 3 crying, Abba, Father," and then all bondage is done away (4:5–7).

B. Deliverance from Debt (Romans)

In Rom. 8:12–17 the idea of obligation or debt is coupled with that of liberty. Man is thought of as at one time under the authority and power of the flesh (8:5), but when the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell in him, he is a debtor no longer to the flesh but to the Spirit (vv 12f), and debt or obligation to the Spirit is itself liberty. As in Galatians, man thus passes from a state of bondage into a state of sonship which is also a state of liberty. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these [and these only] are sons of God" (v 14). The spirit of adoption or sonship stands in diametrical opposition to the spirit of bondage (v 15). And the Spirit to which we are debtors and by which we are led, at once awakens and confirms the experience of sonship within us (v 16). In both places, Paul conveys under this figure the idea of man as passing from a state of alienation from God and of bondage under law and sin, into that relation with God of mutual confidence and love, of unity of thought and will, which should characterize the ideal family, and in which all restraint, compulsion, and fear have passed away.

III. The Christian Experience

As a fact of Christian experience, the adoption is the recognition and affirmation by man of his sonship toward God. It follows upon faith in Christ, by which man becomes so united with Christ that His filial spirit enters into him, and takes possession of his consciousness, so that he knows and greets God as Christ does (cf. Mk. 14:36).

In Relation to Justification

It is an aspect of the same experience that Paul describes elsewhere, under another legal metaphor, as justification by faith. According to the latter, God

declares the sinner righteous and treats him as such, admits him to the experience of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace (Rom. 5:1). In all this the relation of father and son is undoubtedly involved, but in adoption it is emphatically expressed. It is not only that the prodigal son is welcomed home, glad to confess that he is not worthy to be called a son, and willing to be made as one of the hired servants, but he is embraced and restored to be a son as before. The point of each metaphor is, that justification is the act of a merciful judge setting the prisoner free, but adoption is the act of a generous father, taking a son to his bosom and endowing him with liberty, favor, and a heritage.

In Relation to Sanctification

Besides, justification is the beginning of a process which needs for its completion a progressive course of sanctification by the aid of the Holy Spirit, but adoption is coextensive with sanctification. The sons of God are those led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), and the same Spirit of God gives the experience of sonship. Sanctification describes the process of general cleansing and growth as an abstract process, but adoption includes it as a concrete relation to God, as loyalty, obedience, and fellowship with an ever loving Father.

In Relation to Regeneration

Some have identified adoption with regeneration, and therefore many Fathers and Roman Catholic theologians have identified it with baptismal regeneration, thereby excluding the essential fact of conscious sonship. The new birth and adoption are certainly aspects of the same totality of experience; but they belong to different systems of thought, and to identify them is to invite confusion. The new birth defines especially the origin and moral quality of the Christian experience as an abstract fact, but adoption expresses a concrete relation of man to God. Nor does Paul here raise the question of man's natural and original condition. It is pressing the analogy too far to infer from this doctrine of adoption that man is by nature not God's son. It would contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere (e.g., Acts 17:28), and he should not be convicted of inconsistency on the application of a metaphor. He conceives man outside Christ as morally an alien and a stranger from God, and the change wrought by faith in Christ makes him morally a son and conscious of his sonship; but Adoption 4 naturally he is always a potential son because God is always a real father.

IV. As God's Act

Adoption as God's act is an eternal process of His gracious love, for He "foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5).

Divine Fatherhood

The motive and impulse of Fatherhood which result in adoption were eternally real and active in God. In some sense He had bestowed the adoption upon Israel (Rom. 9:4). "Israel is my son, my first-born" (Ex. 4:22; cf. Dt. 14:1; 32:6; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). God could not reveal Himself at all without revealing something of His Fatherhood, but the whole revelation was as yet partial and prophetic. When "God sent forth his Son" to "redeem them that were under the law," it became possible for men to receive the adoption; for to those who are willing to receive it, He sent the Spirit of the eternal Son to testify in their hearts that they are sons of God, and to give them confidence and utterance to enable them to call God their Father (Gal. 4:5f; Rom. 8:15).

Its Cosmic Range

But this experience also is incomplete, and looks forward to a fuller adoption in the response, not only of man's spirit, but of the whole creation, including man's body, to the Fatherhood of God (Rom. 8:23). Every filial spirit now groans, because it finds itself imprisoned in a body subjected to vanity, but it awaits a redemption of the body, perhaps in the resurrection, or in some final consummation, when the whole material creation shall be transformed into a fitting environment for the sons of God, the creation itself delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). Then will adoption be complete, when man's whole personality shall be in harmony with the spirit of sonship, and the whole universe favorable to its perseverance in a state of blessedness.

Bibliography.—comms in loc, esp W. Sanday on Romans (ICC, 14th ed 1913) and J. B. Lightfoot on Galatians (1900); RTWB (R. H. Fuller); TDNT, VIII, sv (Wülfing von Martitz, Schweizer).

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