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Adoption as a Metaphor for Salvation

The apostle Paul sometimes uses the word “adoption” as a metaphor for salvation:

- “we wait for adoption” (Rom. 8:23)
- “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption” (Rom. 9:4).
- “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5).

The metaphor is developed in two passages, one from Galatians and one from Romans:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal. 4:4–7)

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint

heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom. 8:14–17)

Thus Paul indicates that people become adopted as heirs of God through faith (by virtue of the mediation of the Son and the Spirit), and are thus able to call God “Father” in an intimate way (“Abba” being an affectionate term Jewish children would use for addressing their fathers). The image draws meaning from the realities of belonging, connectedness, relationship, and inheritance implied by literal adoption.

As background for this metaphor, Paul may be drawing on:

- adopted relationships among humans found in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 15:1–3; Exod. 2:10; Esther 2:7, 15)
- God’s election of Israel (e.g., Hosea 11:1; Exod. 4:22)
- Greco-Roman customs regarding the manumission and subsequent adoption of slaves.

There has been some discussion concerning how literally we should take Paul’s reference to people being adopted as sons (a phrase that is consistently translated “as children” in the NRSV).

Specifically, many critics (especially feminists) have challenged the NRSV translations of these phrases:

- “so that we might receive adoption as children” (Gal. 4:5)

- “we are children of God, and if children, then heirs” (Rom. 8:16–17)

A better translation, these critics hold, would be:

- “so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:5)
- “we are sons of God, and if sons, then heirs” (Rom. 8:16–17)

Obviously, the NRSV translators were trying to be inclusive, emphasizing that God’s salvation is for women and men alike but, some critics say, the well-intentioned translations missed the point.

Paul insists that those who are adopted by God become “heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). Paul assumes a cultural situation in which inheritance laws were different for men than for women: sons typically receive a better inheritance than daughters.

What Paul wants to emphasize is that, through Jesus Christ, all people may be adopted by God not merely as children but as sons, favored to receive the best possible inheritance. Jews and gentiles are adopted as sons; slaves and free persons are adopted as sons; and, indeed, men and women are both adopted as sons (and receive the same favored inheritance).