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## Editors' Note

The editors of *The Bible Translator* wish to acknowledge with gratitude the work of our long-serving Editorial Assistant, Rosario Yu, who concludes her contribution to the journal with this issue. Rose has worked on *Technical Papers* since 1995 and *Practical Papers* since 2002. Her meticulous attention to editorial detail and her cheerful service have contributed significantly to the quality of the journal and made successive editors' work much easier. Thank you, Rose!

Roger L. Omanson, Stephen W. Pattemore, Lénart J. de Regt

NORM MUNDHENK

## ADOPTION: Being Recognized as a Son

The author recently retired as a UBS translation consultant for the Asia-Pacific Area.

Beginning in Gal 3.19, Paul discusses the place of the Law in God's plan for humanity. In the earlier part of this chapter, Paul has been arguing that a person is put right with God not by following the Law, but by having faith in God. For people to have faith is the basic plan of God. God actually made this clear from the time of Abraham, hundreds of years before the giving of the Law. In fact, Scripture, knowing in advance that God would eventually put the Gentiles right with himself through faith, "foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, 'Through you shall all the nations be blessed' " (Gal 3.8; all quotations NAB unless otherwise indicated).

Paul's argument up to this point naturally raises the question, "Why, then, the law?" (Gal 3.19). Paul answers this question by saying that the Law was a temporary measure, necessary during the time of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. The Law functioned as a tutor or custodian, looking after people until the time of faith arrived. But now that the time of faith has come, "you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.26).

In the beginning of ch. 4, Paul then gives a comparison or metaphor, to make clear the point he has been trying to make. He says (4.1) that even though a person may be the heir to an estate, as long as that person is still underage, that person is no better off than a slave. "He is under the supervision of guardians and administrators until the date set by his father" (4.2). In vv. 3 to 5, Paul applies this metaphor to people who have become Christians. "We also, when we were not of age, were enslaved to the elemental powers of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son . . . to ransom those under the law, so that we might" be recognized as God's sons.

In v. 5 Paul uses the Greek word *huiiothesia*, a word that is often understood to mean "adoption." Apparently this word is used in the ancient Greek papyri in places where the English word "adoption" would seem to fit, and as a result the lexicons often say that the word means "adoption" (see the entry in BAGD). I am not in a position to study the papyri and other places where this word may appear outside of the New Testament, so I do not want to discuss the meaning of the word in those places. But in the New Testament itself, this word is used only by Paul, three times in Romans and once in Galatians. (It is also found in Eph 1.5, a passage which may not have been written by Paul.) Therefore, it seems reasonable to ask a very specific question: "When Paul used this word, what did he mean by it?"

In the passage that we have just looked at, from Gal 4, Paul is talking about people who are in fact heirs, but who have not yet reached the age when their rights as heirs take effect. They have to wait until "the date set by [their] father." When that time comes, Paul says, we receive *huiiothesia*. In the context of this passage, where Paul is talking about people who are already children of the father, "adoption" seems to be a very inappropriate English word to describe what Paul is thinking of. That is why, in my summary of the passage above, I translated "receive *huiiothesia*" as "be recognized as God's sons."

In this connection, some comments by Sandra Hack Polaski are relevant:

The metaphor of adoption has been one of particular interest to feminist interpreters, as they have grappled with Paul's designation of believers as "sons of God" (*huiioi theou*) (Rom 8:14; 9:26; Gal 3:26; author's translation). These interpreters have acknowledged that the decision of many modern translations to understand *huiioi* inclusively, as applying to all Christians, and thus to translate it "children," obscures the historical realities of adoption and inheritance. To be adopted as a son in Paul's day meant to be granted a share in the inheritance. Adoption as a daughter would not carry the same import. Indeed, the word Paul uses to describe this phenomenon is *huiiothesias* (Rom 8:15, 23; Rom 9:4; Gal 4:5; cf. Eph 1:5), built on the *huiios* root and perhaps

more accurately translated “sonship” than “adoption.” Again the structure of Paul’s world is clear. In that day, all believers, even the females, will receive the privilege of sonship. (88)

Polaski explains further that under Roman law a man might have sons by various women, but only if the child’s mother was officially the man’s wife would a son automatically be considered the man’s heir. What was important was first, whether there was any sort of estate to be inherited. If there was no estate, then it apparently didn’t matter whether or not anyone held the status of “son” and “heir.” If there was an estate, then it was important that the “heir” or “heirs” should be clearly identified. In a case like this, it would be possible for a father to officially declare as his heir someone who was in fact his son but who was not automatically his heir (that is, a son by a woman who was not the father’s legal wife).

Let us look at one more passage from Polaski:

Being a “son” also meant that one would become, eventually, a legally responsible adult. The status of “daughter” did not have the same legal ramifications, since women were legally “minors”—under the legal control of another—all their lives. Moreover, the status of “son” would have mattered little legally without an estate to inherit. If, as has often been argued, the lower strata of society comprised the bulk of Paul’s congregations, then for males and females alike the promise of “adoption as sons” would sound as a word of hope, beyond the reality of their present physical circumstances. Freedom, responsibility, investment with an inheritance—all these can only be promised to believers through the gender-exclusive metaphor of sonship. (71)

We should note that Polaski is talking about Roman law. One might want to know whether or not this law was in effect in all parts of the Roman world or whether some areas had their own laws which might have differed from Roman law. More particularly, it would be good to know just how the word *huiiothesia* was used in the contexts where Paul might have encountered it. Nevertheless, the Roman perspective on this matter of declaring someone to be one’s heir was probably well understood throughout the Empire. The Emperor Augustus had declared various relatives (including stepsons, grandsons, and a nephew) to be his heir, only to have them die one after the other, forcing him to repeat the process several times. This series of events would surely have drawn people’s attention to the Roman point of view, even if their own local laws were different.

In Newman’s lexicon at the back of the UBS Greek New Testament we are offered a choice. The word *huiiothesia* can be translated either as “adoption” or as “sonship.” With the cultural background offered by Polaski and the exegetical background we have reviewed regarding the use of this word in Gal 4, it seems to me that the English word “adoption” does not fit the context, whereas “sonship” or something like it is precisely what Paul is talking about. The sons who have not yet come of age do not need to be “adopted.” But they do need to come into a situation in which they can exercise their full rights as sons before the fact that they are sons has any practical significance for them. Paul makes clear his main concerns in the following two verses: “As proof that you are sons, God sent the

spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out ‘Abba, Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then also an heir, through God.”

### Romans passages

Let us turn now to the places where *huiiothesia* is used in Romans. In Rom 8.1-13 Paul describes believers as those who “live not according to the flesh but according to the spirit,” emphasizing that “Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (8.9). Then, in vv. 14-17 we find a passage that makes all the same points as Paul made in Gal 4: “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of *huiiothesia*, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

In spite of the points made by Polaski about the importance of being a son in Roman law, and the unimportance of being a daughter, in this passage Paul himself changes from talking about “sons” (*huiioi*, v. 14) to talking about “children” (*tekna*, v. 16). The metaphor based on Roman law may be helpful in leading people to grasp the point. But in fact Paul is talking about all Christians, both men and women, as being “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” So in the last part of the passage he drops the reference to “sons” and speaks of Christians as “children of God.”

There is nothing that I can see in this particular passage of Romans that would help us to choose between the translation “adoption” and the translation “sonship.” That is, in this passage, unlike in the Galatians passage, Paul has not previously described the believers as “sons.” Therefore, one might argue that he is thinking of those who are not sons being legally made into sons, which is the meaning of “adoption” in English. However, the clear connection of the thinking here to the thinking in Gal 4 suggests that if a word like “sonship” was appropriate for conveying Paul’s meaning there, it would be equally appropriate here. Certainly the emphasis of the passage is on our status as God’s children and heirs. There is nothing whatever that would suggest that “adoption” is a more appropriate term than “sonship.” On the contrary, the choice of the word “adoption” might introduce components of meaning which are irrelevant or misleading.

Romans 8.17 ends with the words “so that we may also be glorified with him.” In the following verses Paul talks about the wonderful hope that we as believers have of receiving what God has in store for us. What God intends to do is described in various ways:

- v. 18 the glory to be revealed for us
- v. 19 the revelation of the sons of God
- v. 21 the glorious freedom of the children of God
- v. 23 we are waiting for “*huiiothesia*, the redemption of our bodies.”

Here we meet again the word *huiiothesia*. As we have seen, in the preceding verses Paul has made much of the fact that we are already children of God, appropriately addressing him as “Abba, Father!” Then, in this passage, where Paul turns to the wonderful things that are to come, we are described again as “sons of God” (v. 19) and “children of God” (v. 21). So what is this state of *huiiothesia* that we (and all creation) are waiting for with such high expectation? It clearly cannot refer to “adoption.” Even “sonship” does not seem fully appropriate here, since our status as “sons” has already been stressed so much.

The commentaries on this passage remind us of the frequent tension in the New Testament between “the already” and “the not-yet.” Perhaps Paul’s metaphor in Gal 4.1-2 can help us here. We are sons of God; we have received the Spirit; we can even be described as heirs. But we have not yet received the inheritance. We are still waiting for “the time appointed by the Father.” That is precisely what Paul is talking about in this passage, the glorious inheritance that we, God’s children, are waiting for. At the time when we finally receive our inheritance we are finally revealed as what we are, the sons of God (8.19). In this passage “adoption” is a strikingly inappropriate word to show what Paul is thinking of. If “adoption” is ever appropriate to describe some stage of a Christian’s relationship to God, by the time we get to this passage it is a stage that has long been passed. What Paul has in mind when he uses the term *huiiothesia* here might be better described as “our full sonship” or “our reception of all that belongs to us as God’s sons.”

*Huiiothesia* occurs once more in Romans, in 9.4. Although it is only a few verses beyond the passages we have been discussing, Paul has now moved on to a new topic, namely, his concern for his own people, his fellow Israelites. In vv. 4 and 5 Paul lists all of the special benefits that God has conferred upon them: “They are Israelites; theirs the *huiiothesia*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.”

In this passage, *huiiothesia* clearly focuses on Israel’s special status as “sons of God.” As in the other examples of this word that we have looked at, there is no reason that the sense of “adoption” should be selected here. Even if one wanted to argue that for Paul the word can sometimes mean “adoption,” in this passage it is the status as sons, the result of the adoption, which is in focus. But in view of Paul’s other uses of this term, which we have already looked at, it is very unlikely that Paul thinks of this word as meaning “adoption” at all. It is better to assume that here too he has a meaning more like “sonship” in mind.

### **Ephesians 1.5**

The final NT use of *huiiothesia* is in Eph 1.5. Here, at the beginning of the epistle, the author is joyfully expressing his thanks to God for all that God has done for his people in Christ, blessing us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. He predestined us to *huiiothesia* to himself, through

Jesus Christ, in accordance with his own pleasure and will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he bestowed on us in the beloved.

As with the passage in Rom 9.4, even if the word is thought to mean “adoption,” the meaning here surely focuses not on the event of adoption but on the state of relationship with God that results from it, that is, on “sonship.” If Paul is the writer of Ephesians, one can argue on the basis of other passages that the word does not mean “adoption” at all, but “sonship.” If Paul is not the author, then that particular argument is not so strong. Nevertheless, the sense of “sonship” would seem to be more appropriate in the context than the sense “adoption.” As Polaski pointed out in her comments on Roman culture, the emphasis in any case is on the status and rights of the son and heir. In general “sonship” would seem to be a more relevant translation than “adoption.”

### **Humanity as children of God**

One question that might be asked in relation to all of this is, “What is the Bible’s view of people in general as children of God? Are people thought of as children of God all along, or do they become God’s children only when they have received the Spirit of God, as is suggested by the Gal 4 and Rom 8 passages that we have looked at?”

As we have seen in Rom 9.4, the status of the people of Israel as “sons of God” was one of their well-recognized benefits and blessings. Yet immediately after listing these blessings as though they are definite facts, Paul goes on to undermine this very question of the people’s status as sons of God. In vv. 6 and 7, Paul says “not all who are of Israel are Israel, nor are they all children of Abraham because they are his descendants.” In v. 8, he explains that this means that “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.” He points out (vv. 10-13) that in the case of Rebecca’s twins, only one (Israel himself, in fact) was accepted as able to carry on Abraham’s line.

The thought here seems to be similar to the passages (Matt 3.9 and Luke 3.8) where John the Baptist says that God can make children of Abraham out of the very stones on the ground. Even in the case of the people of Israel, their status as sons of God should not be seen as something automatic. As individuals, it depends to some extent on their own relationship to God. And God can extend the same relationship and status to anyone else that he pleases. In any case, the status of the people of Israel is considered to be a special case. Israel has this status as a result of a special choice made by God and as a special gift of God. If anything, it suggests that people from other groups who are not part of the people of Israel should not be thought of as children of God. The clear impression of all of these passages is that the Bible does not think of everyone as automatically children of God.

On the other hand, there are passages in which humans are described as children of God. The genealogy of Jesus in Luke, for example, ends with “Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3.38). If the first ancestor was a son of God, then presumably all of Adam’s descendants could be called sons of God.

Paul, when preaching in Athens (in Acts), reminds his hearers that some of their own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” He then goes on to accept this statement and say, “Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone” (Acts 17.28-29).

Such thoughts can be found in the Bible, and there is no doubt a sense in which God can be said to be the father of all humanity, since he is the one who created them and who sustains them. However, the “sonship” passages which we have been looking at do not belong with that line of thought. Even though I have argued that “adoption” is not the appropriate way of translating *huiiothesia* in English, the concept described by *huiiothesia* is like adoption in one important way. That is, the “sonship” which it describes is not something that people have automatically just because they have been created by God. It is not true of everyone, and for those to whom it applies, it refers to something that takes place in their lives. These people who were in a sense not yet God’s children have now become God’s children, and this is connected with the fact that they have received God’s Spirit. The idea is similar to the one expressed in the verses in John (1.11-12) which say, “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name.”

In this paper we are looking at the meaning of the word *huiiothesia*, not trying to examine Paul’s thinking or NT theology as a whole. However, some people might ask whether the idea of “adoption” is still present in Paul’s theology, even if it is not expressed by the word *huiiothesia*. If it is true that only Jesus Christ is always the Son of God, and others can only become God’s children, does that not imply some sort of adoption?

Although Paul himself does not talk about being “born again” as John does (John 3.3, 7), it seems to be the case that Paul’s thinking is quite similar to John’s. Paul does say, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5.17, NRSV). What makes people God’s children is not something like “adoption,” which is a kind of legal change of status. People become God’s children by receiving God’s Spirit, and in that way becoming new people, a part of a new creation. “Adoption” is hardly an appropriate word to describe this experience.

### **The translation of *huiiothesia***

The English word “adoption” refers to a legal process by which someone who is not one’s child by birth can be officially declared to be one’s child, and therefore to have the same status as any other children one may have. There are several ways in which this term is not the right word in English to convey Paul’s meaning in the passages where he uses *huiiothesia*.

First, “adoption” in English means that the person or persons who are adopted were not one’s children before the adoption took place. As we have seen, this meaning conflicts with the way Paul uses *huiiothesia* in Gal 4.5 and Rom 8.23, at least.

Second, “adoption” in English refers primarily to the legal action which makes a person one’s child, whereas the focus in Paul’s use of *huiiothesia* is on the resulting state.

Third, there is a serious psychological problem with using the English word “adoption.” It is a common experience for children who are adopted in English-speaking countries to be troubled about the fact that they are adopted. They may be very happy that their new parents wanted them and were happy to adopt them. But they often wonder, who were my birth parents? Why did they not want to keep me? In some cases these kinds of thoughts can lead children to suspect that there must have been something wrong with them which led their birth parents to want to give them up. It should be obvious that any thoughts of this kind are completely out of place in the contexts where *huiiothesia* is used. In the situation Paul is referring to there are no other parents who have given up the children first so that God can adopt them.

As Paul uses the term *huiiothesia*, the meaning refers to the status of being a son, and in particular to two facts which result from that status. First, there is the fact that one recognizes oneself to be God’s child, and therefore one feels that it is right to address God as “Father.” This fact is strongly connected in Paul’s thought with the receiving of the Spirit of God (Rom 8.15-16; Gal 4.6; Eph 1.13). Second, there is the fact that all of the promises that God has made to his people are made especially to us. As God’s children, we can expect to receive everything that God has promised to his people. Paul refers to this concept by the metaphor that we are God’s “heirs” (Rom 8.17-25; Gal 4.7; Eph 1.3-14).

Let us look at the passages where *huiiothesia* is used and see how the term might be translated.

**Galatians 4.4-5.** These verses say that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to free people who were basically slaves under the Law so that those people could be God’s sons. Two English versions are good models here:

NIV: that we might receive the full rights of sons

REB: in order that we might attain the status of sons

CEV and GNT here have, “so that we might *become God’s children.*” But this wording has the same problem that the word “adoption” has. In the context of this verse we are already God’s children. We do not “become” God’s children, but we reach the stage where we have the full rights of God’s children.

Polaski has pointed out that in the context of the cultural background of the time, only sons could be heirs. This may well be the reason that Paul uses the term “sons of God” and a word like *huiiothesia*, which is based on the root “son.” However, we have also seen that Paul himself feels free to change the metaphor to “children” (Rom 8.16). Therefore, if there are languages where for some reason it is much better to use the word “children” rather than the word “sons,” this is probably not a problem, and translators should feel free to make that change.

**Romans 8.15.** There are some disagreements among commentators about the meaning of “spirit” in this verse, but let us discuss the verse in terms of one



common understanding. Let us assume that Paul is referring here to the gift of the Holy Spirit. He then says that the Holy Spirit does not lead the person to a state of slavery and fear. Instead, it is through the Holy Spirit that people recognize that they are God's children. NIV says "you received the Spirit of sonship." The English phrase "Spirit of sonship" is somewhat unusual and it may not be a good model for translators, but "sonship" itself is the right translation here.

GNT here has "the Spirit makes you God's children," but this wording seems to be based too strongly on certain components of the word "adoption." It is not a good model to follow. Paul is not saying that the Spirit makes us God's children, but rather that because we have the Spirit we know that we are God's children and we naturally relate to God as our Father (see v. 16). In some languages it might be possible to say "the Spirit which causes us to know that we are God's sons (or God's children)."

**Romans 8.23.** In this verse Paul says that we are waiting for the great moment when we finally receive all that God has promised us, including especially the new bodies that will be free from all of the troubles and limitations of the bodies we now have. As we have seen, this is one context where it is very clear that we are already children of God and "adoption" is definitely not an appropriate translation, even though many English translations use it. A more accurate translation here would be something like "we will receive everything that God has promised to his children." NLT is fairly good here (although we might wonder whether "rights" is the right word): "we wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children."

**Romans 9.4.** In this verse, *huiiothesia* is listed as one of the special benefits that God gave the people of Israel. Various English translations offer possible models:

REB: chosen to be God's sons

NLT: chosen to be God's special children

CEV here simply has "God's chosen people." This translation loses the metaphor of being sons, but it is otherwise very close to the right meaning, and for some English speakers it is probably more meaningful, at least for those who are familiar with the concept of the people of Israel being God's chosen people.

**Ephesians 1.5.** Verse 3 of this chapter mentions that God blessed us in Christ with every kind of spiritual blessing. Some of these blessings are then listed in vv. 4 and 5, and one of the blessings is that he "predestined us for *huiiothesia*." *Huiiothesia* here presumably refers to our status as God's sons (or God's children). GNT has "God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children," which focuses on the process rather than the status, but other English versions tend to use the word "adoption" in this verse, so they are not good models either. A better model for translation would be, "God had already decided that we would be recognized as God's sons (or children)."

We have already noted that Newman's dictionary gives two alternatives as possible English meanings of the Greek term *huiiothesia*. Of these terms, "sonship" should definitely be preferred to "adoption," even though "sonship" may not be the best English translation. In other languages it will often be correct to translate as "to be recognized as the sons of God." But each of the contexts where the word is used is sufficiently different that somewhat different translations may be needed in each place.

We have also seen that the concept of being sons of God is closely connected with the metaphor that we are God's heirs. In some cases it might even be possible to translate *huiiothesia* by using the idea of "being heirs of God." However, translators should be aware of the fact that there are many languages where the idea of being God's heirs causes serious problems. This is because in most situations being an heir means that one only receives the benefits at the time that the previous owner dies. We must avoid any translation which might suggest that God has to die first before we can enjoy what he has promised us. The underlying meaning of the metaphor of being "heirs" is simply that the time will come when we will receive the things that God has promised us.

A "Note" on adoption was published a number of years ago in *The Bible Translator* (Ellington). That note surveyed various translations and discovered that not all of them used the word "adoption" to translate *huiiothesia*. GNT in particular was criticized for translating the concept in other ways, rather than using the term "adoption."

The problem with that note was that it was based on the assumption that the word *huiiothesia* clearly means "adoption." If that assumption were correct, then the obvious question would be, "Why is the word 'adoption' not used in some translations?" However, this present article has challenged the assumption which that earlier note was based on. Even if it may be true that "adoption" is an appropriate translation for *huiiothesia* in contexts outside of the New Testament (and one cannot help wondering whether that is always true), as the word is used in the New Testament we have seen that "adoption" is not a good translation. In some contexts, "adoption" is clearly the wrong word. Even in other passages, the focus of attention is not on the event of "becoming a son," but rather on the result, the state of being a son.

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