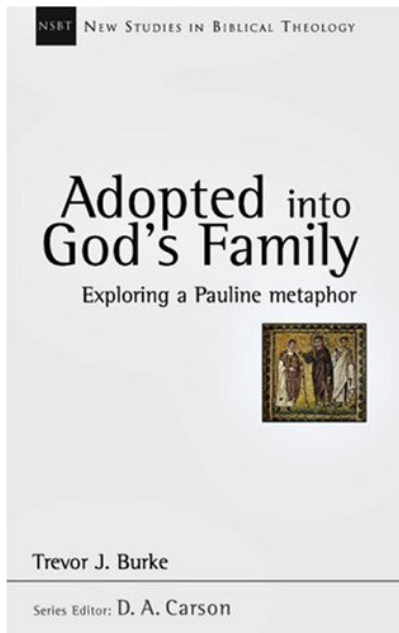


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Burke, Trevor J.

Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor

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Trevor Burke's study offers a particularly rich presentation of the metaphor of adoption followed by a careful exegesis of a number of key passages where this term is employed. Burke sets out to show the distinctive contribution of the metaphor of adoption within Paul's theological and soteriological scheme. While other metaphors such as justification, redemption, and propitiation are the most commonly discussed metaphors under the rubric of salvation, the adoption metaphor adds a particularly subjective or experiential insight that should not be overlooked. The metaphor provides a glimpse into the way the communities understood themselves. Burke proposes that the metaphor of adoption provides a framework for speaking of the significance of the Christ-event, the ethical response required of Christians, and the eschatological tension of the "now" and "not yet."

Burke situates the background for the metaphor within the Roman social system rather than the Old Testament. While Israel can be called "God's son," the term for adoption *huiiothesia* is not found in the LXX. Similarly, the Greek legal system does not offer such a radical transfer from one family into another that Paul envisages when he uses the language of *huiiothesia*. The Roman social practice of adoption provides the most likely

background. Within Roman society, the *familia* was the fundamental bedrock providing a sense of personal identity, “social, religious, political and economic security and fulfilment” (63). If the family appeared to be coming to an end either through the death of children or the father’s impotence, then adoption was the mechanism that allowed the family to continue. Burke provides a very clear summary of the two types of adoption practiced within Roman law: *adrogatio* and *adoptio*. *Adrogatio* was a process used when the adult male was not under the legal authority of his father. He could thus be a *paterfamilias* in his own right, and the process of *adrogatio* would bring the two families together in a way that the adopted son would lose his authority over his own children and his entire household would come under the authority of the adoptive father. This was a particularly serious process, for it meant the ending of one family even though it ensured the continuance of another. The more common process of adoption was the transfer of the adoptee from being under the authority of his own *paterfamilias* to being under the authority of his adoptive father. Within Roman law, the adopted son enjoyed all the rights and responsibilities of a natural son, while breaking ties with his natural family.

Having clarified the background for the metaphor, Burke then explores its theological implications over the next four chapters. The first three are organized to bring out the Trinitarian nature of the metaphor. God is the adoptive *Abba*, with Jesus as the intermediary in the processes. On this point there is no parallel in Roman law. The Spirit is considered as the eschatological gift marking the end of the old epoch of the law and the beginning of the new era. In what follows, I will highlight some of the insights Burke’s analysis offers.

Adoption rests solely upon God’s loving choice for Jew and Gentile to be drawn into the divine household; thus the metaphor provides the basis for an ecclesiology. The metaphor also provides a way of understanding the Pauline link between the redemption of a slave and adoption as a son. Part of the process of adoption was the natural father formally releasing his son from his authority by selling him as a slave. After doing this three times, the son was free of his natural father’s authority (*potestas*) and was therefore able to be adopted. After two sales the son, however, could be manumitted back to his natural father by an act of adoption reinstating him as son.

In looking at the role of Jesus, Burke begins with Rom 1:3–4, which he interprets as a passage describing two stages of the life on earth of God’s Son: his preresurrection state in weakness; and his postresurrection state in power. Here he disagrees with the work of James Scott (*Adoption as Sons of God*) and finds no suggestion that Paul considers Jesus as an adopted Son, since nowhere is the term *huiiothesia* applied to Jesus. It is used exclusively of Christians.

In turning to the role of the Spirit, Burke emphasizes the personal nature of the Spirit in the Pauline writings. “The Holy Spirit is not only God’s empowering presence ... but God’s *personal* (and inseparable member of the divine family) presence at work in and through his adopted offspring” (128). The gift of the Spirit is for Paul a sign that the old order of the written law has come to an end; the new covenant written by the Spirit on the heart has begun. Just as the Spirit was understood as an eschatological gift, so too was sonship; thus Burke argues that the two are essentially intertwined.

The next two chapters examine specific issues such as Christian ethics arising from the responsibility to live in a way that brings honor to the head of the household and the tension between living as members of God’s household now while awaiting the full manifestation and implications of that adoption.

Burke offers a clear, precise and coherent study of what emerges as a major Pauline metaphor that has long been overlooked. What I found particularly pleasing was that through the lens of this metaphor other Pauline images (i.e. redemption, slavery, household) became clearer and became part of a larger, overarching metaphorical framework. I had the sense in reading the text that each chapter could be the starting point for a major and more detailed study. One theme I thought could have received greater emphasis was the event of the resurrection. While this is discussed in passing, I think a study of the resurrection would ground this work in the historical experience of Paul and the early communities, thus strengthening Burke’s point that the adoption metaphor offers the subjective witness to God’s action in Jesus. I believe this to be a very valuable addition to Pauline studies, one that I recommend to students and scholars alike.