
Exegesis 14: Adoptive - Sonship

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A consideration of the term 'huiiothesia' in Romans 8 verse 12-17 and the ethics of this end-time blessing.

Introduction

In the early verses of Rom 8 the apostle Paul sets out two very different kinds of life - that lived *kata sarka* which is death (v 6), hostile to God (v 7) and cannot please God (v 8) and the other *kata pneuma*, which is life and peace (v 6). The rest of the chapter (v 9-28) is dominated by the subject of life in the Spirit (*pneuma* occurs 21 times) which is in contrast to Rom 7:14-25 where Paul delineated the struggle with sin. What the apostle is saying in the two chapters is that the struggle in Rom 7 and the life in the Spirit in Rom 8 are both part of the **normal Christian life**. In Rom 8 Paul unfolds what it means to live in the Spirit and relates this to adopted sons of God.

Exegesis

Paul begins Rom 8 with a summary statement, 'Therefore, there is now (*nun*) no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'. Having been declared righteous in Christ there is for the believer no condemnation. The apostle had already sounded the same note in 3:21, 'But now (*nuni*) a righteousness from God apart from law has been revealed . . . through faith in Jesus Christ'. This righteousness from God has been unveiled in Christ, (ie the Christ-event) and is, 'the dawning-time of salvation'. In other words, the 'now' is not merely logical but eschatological in that the Christ has come. This state of 'no condemnation' (justification, a forensic term, here put in another way) anticipates the final judgment and hence an 'eschatological' state of affairs. Furthermore, all who are, 'in Christ' are also spoken of as 'in the Spirit - another eschatological condition, because the gift and outpouring of the Spirit is an end time event (cf Joel 2:28-32) and here regarded by the apostle as the 'first-fruits' and the 'guarantee' of the consummation of salvation. In these motifs we have the eschatological 'already' and the future 'not yet'. Hence, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the adoption motif itself is eschatological in character, since it is connected with the gift of the Spirit and obviously refers to those who are 'in Christ', and are justified. We shall look at this more closely in our exegesis which we will approach serially because of the apostle's close reasoning.

Having discussed the two different ways of living in v 1-8 Paul then addresses the Roman Christians, 'But **you**' in v 9 (*humeis*) because of your new standing are not under the control of the flesh but under the Spirit. The Spirit of God now lives in them (v 11) and for Paul living in the Spirit is evidence of adoptive sonship (v 12-17).

If we are dealing with eschatological language here as we have already postulated

then Paul in v 12-17 gives us **the ethics of the eschaton** - how to conduct oneself as an adopted son of God in the last days.

Verse 12: The word 'therefore' (*oun*) connects with what has gone before, ie in the light of this new standing before God and more specifically, 'now the Spirit of God lives in you' (v 9) Paul instead tells his readers there is an obligation upon them. He includes himself, 'We have an obligation not to the flesh' which would cause the reader to look for the qualifying phrase, 'but to the Spirit'. Instead Paul breaks off to insert a warning in v 13a. The obligation is not to live according to the flesh (*kata saka*). The word *sarx* is a complex Pauline word usually employed by him in a negative sense². To live according to the Spirit means obedience to God. Ziesler captures the contrast, 'The opposition is not between physical and non-physical, but between life centred in something other than God and life centred in God'³. Thus, *kata sarka*, means to live with one's horizons bounded by the requirements of this fleshly life and existence as if this life were all that really mattered. The Christian has an obligation not to live that way.

Verse 13: The last phrase of v 12 ('live according to the flesh') is repeated here and shows us that Paul has no mere hypothetical situation in mind but a real one. To live that way means death - the word *mellette* is a strong one and means 'must/will certainly'. Instead the responsibility of the believer is to actively put to death (*thanatoute* present continuous tense) the misdeeds of the body. Although the word *praxeis* does not have any inherent negative meaning the inclusion of the word *somatos*⁴ provides the negative tone. The 'deeds/misdeeds' in this case are as Dunn states, 'Actions which express undue dependence on satisfying merely human appetites'.⁵ Although the 'old man' has died because we are still in this human body, the flesh, and its downward pull is always a menace to the Christian. There is no doubting the apostle's words that we need to be ruthless with the flesh, killing it off continually. The responsibility is upon the believer and, writes Paul, he has the energy to do it - it is done, 'by the Spirit'. No slackness on the part of the Christian is to be entertained as J Murray warns, 'The believers once-for-all death to the law and to sin does not free him from the necessity of mortifying sin in his members; it makes it necessary and possible for him to do so'.⁶

Verses 14 - 15: In the previous verse the emphasis was upon the responsibility of the believer (Those who by the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body will live) but here the role of Spirit is stressed (all who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God). The verb *agontai* is in the passive voice and means 'being led'. Allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit is a sign (or evidence) of sonship as Morris writes, 'We should understand the leading of the Spirit as a distinguishing sign of God's sons'.⁷ It may seem that this verse is at a variance with what Paul has to say elsewhere about sonship. Here it seems that the Spirit makes people sons whereas in Gal 4:6 we read, 'Because you are God's sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts...' The question then regarding sonship is this, Does the Spirit effect this new filial disposition of sonship (as it may seem in Rom 8:14) or merely express it? In other words, is the Spirit the agent of sonship? We need also to look

at v 15 in conjunction with v 14 because here Paul goes on to say, 'by him (ie the Spirit) we cry Abba, Father'. John Murray helpfully comments; 'It is the Father who by way of eminence, is the agent of Adoption. The evidence particularly in the Pauline epistles, indicates that it is to the Father believers sustain the relation of sons by adoption and it is therefore the Father who adopts...The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Adoption, not because he is the agent of adoption but because it is he who creates in the children of God the filial love and confidence by which they are able to cry, Abba, Father'.

All this must not allow us to lose sight of the full import of what the apostle has just written. Previously he has stated that a Christian is one in whom the Spirit dwells (cf 8:9) now we have another designation of what it means to be a believer - an adopted son of God! The greatest privilege and most solemn responsibility for the believer is to know and act as a son of God - this is Paul's focus in these verses. Paul unpacks the full significance of sonship¹⁰ in v 15 - no longer slaves, receivers of the Spirit of Adoption, and able to address God as Father.

There are problems with the word *pneuma*¹¹ but because of the prominence of this word in Rom 8 the apostle states two things - that the Spirit is not one who will lead back again (*palin*)¹² into slavery but more positively he is the Spirit of adoptive-sonship. Believers are (*eisin*) now sons of God (the eschatological 'already') because they have been justified and have the Spirit but they await the future consummation of adoption (the 'not yet' cf especially v 20). Adoption is a present reality but there is a cosmic dimension to it (cf v 18-22), 'as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (v 23).

The word for 'adoption' used here is peculiarly Pauline occurring 5 times in his writings (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15,23; 9:4; Eph 1:5) and although Israel is spoken of as a son (eg Hos 11:1) most commentators¹³ today see the *huiiothesia* term as being a Roman¹⁴ or possibly Greek concept. Adoption was not practised by the Jewish people¹⁴ and the term *huiiothesia* or an equivalent is lacking in the LXX. This is not to rule out any OT significance that Paul may have had in mind. Indeed, it may be possible that Paul with his peculiar mix of cultural backgrounds (a Jew, Phil 3:5; and a Roman citizen, Acts 22:27, who wrote fluently in Greek) used a term which would have meaning to all the above groups. The term is an appropriate word for it denotes that people are given the full rights and privileges of adoptive-sonship - a new status, name and inheritance. **Perhaps the greatest privilege is that they are able to call God 'Father'.**

The words, 'Abba, Father' have long been held by Jeremias to be an alien address by a Jew to God.¹⁵ The word, 'ABBA' is Aramaic not Hebrew and is the language of the home and everyday life. These words were used by Jesus himself (Mk 14:36; cf Gal 4:6) and may have even been used as an introit to the Lord's prayer. However, to translate the word, 'Abba' as 'Daddy' is now regarded as being oversentimental¹⁶ but this is not to rule out intimacy, reverence and obedience. The important point in this verse is that Jesus, as the unique Son of God, enables his disciples to communicate with God in the same way that he did. Jesus' use of this double form, 'Abba, Father' (Mk 14:36) in the context of his close band of disciples also implies that their sonship to God was **dependent** (Dunn's term) upon his. This is not to say that the believer's sonship is in every way the same as

that of Jesus. Paul has already stated at the beginning of Rom 8 that Jesus is God's 'own Son' (v 3). Jesus' sonship is different from the believers' in that he is the eternal son (scholars continue to debate whether Rom 8:3 teaches a pre-existent sonship); we are sons by grace of adoption.¹⁷ The verb *krazomen* has been taken by some¹⁸ to imply glossolalic utterances but the context here and later (cf v 26-28) imply the fervent language of prayer. The verb is used a number of times of crying out to God in prayer (Ps 3:4; 4:3).

Verse 16: Here we have the assurance of adoptive-sonship. The Spirit bears witness within - the question is whether he bears witness to or **with** our spirit. We cannot be dogmatic about this although the form of the verb *sunmarturei* would seem to favour the latter (cf Hendriksen). However, Cranfield states, 'What standing has our spirit in this matter? Of itself it surely has no right at all to testify to our being sons of God'. But we could ask, Does not the fact that believers are now sons of God and have the Spirit of adoption within not give them the privilege to witness with the Spirit of this new disposition, in Paul's view? Furthermore, the OT background recognises the importance of more than one witness (Deut 19:15) and the NT provides evidence that Paul was aware of the principle of multiple witness (cf 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19).

Verse 17: Now Paul relates other privileges together with that of sonship. 'If children (*tekna*)... then heirs of God... joint-heirs with Christ'. The Christian's inheritance¹⁹ depends on first being a son. In the OT inheritance was associated with the land (Gen 12:2; 18:8; 22:16f) but here it is not so much ownership as **relationship** which the apostle has in view. He speaks of heirs of God and co-heirs **with Christ**.²⁰ Also note that the apostle links together sonship and suffering (no health-wealth gospel here!). Kasemann writes, 'In all Paul's theology participation in coming glory does not mean the cross can be dodged' (p 229). If our sonship depends upon Christ's then this also means treading that same path of suffering that he trod - a **privilege** of an adopted-son?

References

- 1 H Ridderbos PAUL; AN OUTLINE OF HIS THEOLOGY, Eerdmans, 1975, p 162
- 2 At times *sarx* is used to refer to the physical/material body (1 Cor 15:39) or human descent (Rom 1:3).
- 3 J Ziesler PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS, SCM/TP1, 1988, p 61
- 4 F F Bruce: 'Body' for Paul is an altogether nobler word than 'flesh'. The flesh, in the Pauline sense is doomed to die; the body is destined for immortality. PAUL; APOSTLE OF THE FREE SPIRIT, Paternoster, 1977, p 206
- 5 J D G Dunn ROMANS 1-8, Word Books, 1988, p 449
- 6 J Murray THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Eerdmans, 1960, p 294
- 7 Käsemann, wrongly in our opinion, understands *agontai* as, 'driven by the Spirit' and regards it, 'as taken from the language of the enthusiasts'. EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Eerdmans, 1980, p 26. Dunn likewise agrees but not exclusively so. (p 450, ROMANS)

- 8 L Morris THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, Eerdmans, 1988, p 313
- 9 op cit, p 296
- 10 J Murray REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED AND APPLIED, Banner of Truth, 'Sonship is the apex of redemptive grace and privilege'. p 134
- 11 There are 3 main ways of interpreting this phrase:- (a) contrast between 2 human dispositions (spirit of slavery and spirit of sons) (b) contrast between a human disposition and the Holy Spirit (spirit of slavery and spirit of sonship) (c) Cranfield states, 'the sentence does not imply the actual existence of a *pneuma douleias*, but means only that the Holy Spirit whom they have received is not a spirit of bondage but the Spirit of adoption'. ICC Vol 1, 1975, p 396
- 12 In the other adoption passage in Galatians 4:9 it is interesting if not significant that Paul also uses this word in connection with bondage to the law.
- 13 eg A Mawhinney 'Huiiothesia in the pauline Epistles: Its Background, Use and Implications' Baylor Univ. PhD. 1982; F Lyall 'Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles,' Zondervan, 1984. (contra Roman background, B Byrne 'Sons of God-Seed of Abraham', Rome, 1979), cf also J I Packer's stimulating chapter on 'Sons of God' in KNOWING GOD, Hodder, 1973 and S B Ferguson's CHILDREN OF THE LIVING GOD, BoT, 1989
- 14 Other devices were built into Jewish culture and society (such as polygamy and levirate marriage) to alleviate need for legal adoption.
- 15 J Jeremias, NT THEOL (Vol 1 SCM, 1971), 'It can certainly be said that there is no instance of Abba as an address to God in all the extensive prayer literature of Judaism, whether in liturgical or in private prayers p 65. (Dunn while holding essentially to Jeremias' basic findings believes he has overstated his case here (cf CHRISTOLOGY IN THE MAKING, SCM, 1989, p 27)
- 16 C F D Moule in THE HOLY SPIRIT, Mowbrays, 1978, 'Addressing his heavenly Father with exceptional intimacy does not . . . take advantage of familiarity. He uses the Abba address to offer to God his complete obedience. The intimate word conveys not a casual sort of familiarity but the deepest most trustful reverence'. p 29
- 17 cf I H Marshall's excellent article, 'The Divine Sonship of Jesus,' INTERPRETATION, p 21, 1967, p 87-103 where he upholds Jesus' own self-consciousness as the unique Son of God in the Gospels.
- 18 Käseman, op cit p 228 (contra E A Obeng 'Abba, Father: The Prayer of the Sons of God' EXP TIMES, 99,12, 1988 p 363-66)
- 19 THEOL DICT OF NT ed G Kittel (transl by G Bromiley) Vol III, *kleronomos* (another eschatological condition) by W Foerster, p 767-785
- 20 The *huiiothesia* term is not only eschatological in character but also relationally Christological, ie in each of the texts (cf especially Gal 3:26; 4:4; Rom 8:1,15,23; and Eph 1:3-5) mentioned there is a strong christological note sounded. In other words, Christians do not receive their adoption as sons **apart from Christ**.