

**THE METAPHORICAL IMPORT OF ADOPTION: A  
PLEA FOR REALISATION  
II: THE ADOPTION METAPHOR IN  
THEOLOGICAL USAGE**

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In this second article our attention is turned from the biblical to the theological use of the adoption metaphor.<sup>1</sup> When we set both usages in juxtaposition a threefold importance of the metaphor can be discerned. Having already shown from the Bible adoption's unique importance, we now proceed to show the intrinsic and primary import of the metaphor in its theological usage. In doing so we are conscious both of the complexities that have so often hidden the distinctiveness of adoption from view and also of the care needed in claiming recognition for the distinctive worth of the metaphor.

**I. The Intrinsic Importance of the Adoption Metaphor**

The mere fact that Paul thought it appropriate to write of God's love for sinners in terms of adoption is itself a pointer to the concept's intrinsic metaphorical importance. As we shall see, it communicates something significant to us. We are not, of course, saying that adoption is the only soteriological metaphor used in Scripture at large or by Paul in particular,<sup>2</sup> or even that it is used more than any other metaphor; but the fact that he used it at all is indicative of its essential significance as a way of conveying something of the import of the gospel itself. To unpack this thought we need to consider the very nature of metaphors in relation to their potential and actual employment. We are helped to this end by Eberhard Jüngel's insights

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<sup>1</sup> See 'The Metaphorical Import of Adoption: A Plea for Realisation I. The Adoption Metaphor in Biblical Usage', *SBET* 14 (1996), pp. 129-45.

<sup>2</sup> Gunton writes: 'All the main ways of spelling out the saving significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus contain a considerable metaphorical and imaginative content, drawing, as is often remarked, from a number of human institutions: notably the legal system, the altar of sacrifice, the battlefield and the slavemarket.' C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 17-18.

into Aristotle's reflections on metaphorical usage.<sup>3</sup> From these we derive a number of significant factors that inform our discussion.

### 1. The Metaphor's Power

First of all, a metaphor – originally defined by Aristotle as 'a short form of comparison'<sup>4</sup> – enables us to go 'beyond actuality without talking around it. Precisely in going beyond actuality, it gets to grips with it.'<sup>5</sup> The actuality is that we exist here on earth, and that God – presupposing he exists – is other than what we are. Therefore, to talk of God we have to go beyond actuality as it is now perceived, and by so doing we must begin to use the language of faith. 'Because the Christian faith has to talk about God if it wishes to speak the truth, it has to say more than the actuality of the world is able to say'; or, as George Chrysidis has put it: 'The theory that religious language is irreducibly metaphorical... does not entail that God is *unknowable*, but rather that his nature is *unstatable*, at least at a literal level.'<sup>6</sup> That said, it is important not to overstate the case, for metaphors do not enable us to say *everything* that can be said about God. Gunton writes: 'Metaphor claims only an indirect purchase on reality, bringing to expression some, but not all aspects and relationships...to which it is directed.'<sup>7</sup>

As much as any metaphor, adoption enabled Paul to write about God and his redemptive activity in a way which otherwise would have been impossible. In writing of adoption Paul moved beyond actuality,

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<sup>3</sup> See E. Jüngel, *Theological Essays* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 16f., and *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen, 1978), pp. 357-408. Aristotle remains of seminal importance for the discussion of metaphor. Of particular importance are his works *The Art of Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

<sup>4</sup> See Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 47. Gunton notes Dalferth's *Religiöse Rede von Gott* (Munich, 1981), which lists 125 definitions of metaphor (*The Actuality of the Atonement*, p. 27). As for Gunton he defines a metaphor as 'a term belonging somewhere else [which] is used in an unusual context' (*op. cit.*, p. 28). In spite of the numerous definitions of metaphor there exists a widely shared perception of what 'metaphor' is about; cf. J. McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture*, ed. Gary D. Badcock (Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), p. 270.

<sup>5</sup> Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> G. Chrysidis, 'Meaning, Metaphor and Meta Theology', *SJT* 38 (1985), p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*, p. 34.

which according to Jüngel 'represents being only in time', to describe God whose love is as that of a father, who in Christ has adopted and given us an elder brother, and through faith in whom we have a membership in the household of God (*cf.* Ephesians 2:19). Were such a picture not a metaphor, argues Jüngel, it would be a lie! God has not actually, in the literal sense of the term, adopted us. Rather, Paul has used what Aristotle described as 'the application of an alien name by transference'<sup>8</sup> in order to describe God's love in redemption.

## 2. The Metaphor's Faithfulness

Secondly the question arises to whether metaphors give a faithful picture of reality. The mere fact that Paul used adoption to convey God's saving activity (and in so doing went beyond actuality in order to get to grips with it) does not mean that the metaphorical usage of adoption necessarily presents a faithful picture of God's salvific accomplishment. To answer this query, Jüngel points the reader to the two characteristics given by Aristotle which identify a metaphor. In metaphorical usage two things are in common – the name (*to onoma*) and the conceptual nature of the comparison – the word of substance (*logos tes ousias*). Without these characteristics there ceases to be a metaphor.

The question we need to ask then is whether adoption as a metaphor displays these characteristics. Certainly it is possible to list three points of contact between the reality of God's redemptive activity and the metaphor of adoption: (i) in both cases the adopted receive a loving Father; (ii) in both instances the adopted receive the status of sonship or daughtership (*cf.* 2 Corinthians 6:17-18); (iii) in both cases, it is usual that the adopted are introduced into a family that includes brothers and sisters. As Marchel surmises: 'Cyprian's old saying: "He who is not able to have God for a Father, cannot have the church as mother", can in the language of the New Testament perhaps be better formulated: "He who is not able to have God for a Father, cannot have [his] neighbour as a brother".'<sup>9</sup>

Hence the situation arises in which a 'metaphor deviates from the truth by remaining within the bounds of truth'.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, it is clear that a paradox lies at the heart of metaphorical usage. By presenting salvation in metaphorical terms, *i.e.* other than the way it really is, Paul actually presents the reality of major aspects of salvation. Willi Twisselmann's view of New Testament sonship in

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Gunton, *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> W. Marchel, *Abba Vater! Die Vaterbotschaft des Neuen Testaments* (Düsseldorf, 1963), p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 25.

general is also true of adoption in particular: 'Sonship[*Gotteskindschaft*] is...a reality. It is not only a title which really is not correct, but a new existence. But it is not something physical...The nature of mankind remains. It is not deified.'<sup>11</sup> For Paul the reality of adoption lies not in a new existence but in a new filial liberty: 'it is the communicator', writes McIntyre, 'who has received the insight into reality in terms of the metaphor in the first place, or alternatively, to whom reality so revealed itself, and who then imparted it in these terms to the person listening or reading.'<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Metaphor's Acceptance

Thirdly, we need to consider the way in which a metaphor is chosen. What is the process in which a metaphor can be adapted and 'accepted by everyone in ordinary linguistic usage'? 'A metaphor', writes Jüngel, 'gets itself adopted, either by being accepted by its hearers or by being repeated in speech.'<sup>13</sup> We assume that the adoption metaphor underwent this process. No doubt Paul was prone to use it in his discussions of the gospel and also in his sermons. However, the process of acceptance was accelerated once Paul had incorporated the metaphor into several of his epistles. When we examine these epistles it is possible to trace something of this process of acceptance.

As far as can be told from his extant writings, Paul first used the term *huiiothesia* in Galatians. According to the 'South Galatian Theory' he wrote the Epistle probably as early as 49 A.D., but even if we assume the correctness of the 'North Galatian Theory', Paul's use of *huiiothesia* in Galatians is still earlier than that in Romans. This significance of adoption in Galatians apart, the Epistle is also important because it contains the *locus classicus* of the biblical doctrine of adoption (Galatians 4:5). Later, when he wrote to the church at Rome (probably around 57-59 A.D.) he was writing to a church he had not founded or even visited, and in all probability many there had not heard him preach. Yet, it is in this Epistle, generally regarded as his *magnum opus*, that he used the metaphor on three occasions (8:15, 23; 9:4). Two of them are in the climax of his unfolding of the gospel in chapter 8.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> W. Twisselmann, 'Die Gotteskindschaft der Christen nach dem Neuen Testament', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 41 (1939), p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm*, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> The coherence of Paul's argument in Romans is sometimes set against the contingency of his circumstances. We are working from the premise that whatever Paul's situation, it gave rise to

Thus in the years separating the writing of the two Epistles the metaphor became established in Paul's explanation and understanding of the gospel. 'The use of *Huiothesia* in Rom. 8:15, 23', writes Scott, 'clearly builds on that in Gal. 4:5, for once again those who receive adoption as the sons of God participate in the sonship of the messianic Son based on the 2 Sam. 7:14 tradition (cf. 2 Cor. 6:18). Yet Rom. 8 also emphasises a *future* aspect of *Huiothesia*, a point which, although adumbrated in Gal. 4: 1-7 by the equation *Huios Theou* = *kleronomos* = *kurios panton*, is more fully and explicitly developed in Romans.'<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, when we reflect on Ephesians we find the adoption metaphor further developed. As in Galatians there is just the single use of *huiothesia* (1:5), and yet we find the doctrine highly and widely developed in terms of its cognate themes – predestination (*proorisas hemas eis huiothesian*, 1:4-5), assurance (*esphragisthete to pneumatī tes epaggelias*, 1:13), inheritance (*arrabon tes kleronomias hemon*, 1:14,18), membership of the household (*oikeioi tou theou*, 2:19) and, indirectly, ultimate redemption (*en ho esphragisthete eis hemeran apolutroseos*, 4:30).

On the other hand, the denial of Pauline authorship of Ephesians makes no difference to our case. In fact it is strengthened in two ways. First, since on this reckoning Ephesians was written later, perhaps c. 100 A.D., it would mean that by the end of the first century the metaphor was well established in the early church as a means of understanding the gospel. It has to be remembered that, on this view of its authorship, the composition of Ephesians was dependant upon Colossians and other Pauline epistles but especially, and most significantly, Romans. Secondly, as is widely acknowledged, the Epistle was not written only to the Ephesians, but to the Christians in general in Asia Minor.

This then in all probability was how the adoption metaphor received acceptance in the early church. However, the question as to why this happened remains unanswered. To that end we return to Jüngel's understanding of Aristotle. He points out that the success of a metaphor relies upon 'the strangeness of a strange word, which is intrinsic to

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his coherent presentation of the gospel, and did not detract from it. See J. Christiaan Beker, *The Apostle Paul* (Edinburgh, 1980), particularly pp. 23-37; and N. T. Wright's reflection on Beker's case in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 259f.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Scott, *Adoption as the Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of Huiothesia in the Pauline Corpus* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2 Reihe; Tübingen, 1992), p. 221.

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metaphor'.<sup>16</sup> The strangeness normally lies not with the word itself but in its analogical application. It is argued that in the later rhetorical tradition metaphor was used solely for the purpose of transference of meaning. Hence, Jüngel provides us with a clue to the reason for the success of Paul's adoption metaphor. He picked up on a known custom and applied it to God's redemptive activity. The oft-debated question which custom Paul had in mind (Graeco-Roman or Semitic)<sup>17</sup> does not interest us here. Rather, the fact of Paul's application of the term used for an adoption custom to soteriology is our sole concern. Such an employment was lent weighty theological credence by Paul's apostolic status.

The intrinsic importance of the use of adoption as a soteriological metaphor lies in the fact that had Paul, or any other biblical author for that matter, not used metaphors, then his communication of the gospel would have been at worst impossible, or at best, impoverished by extraordinary dullness. In the event, Paul used the metaphor so as to be neither silent nor dull. This is confirmed by McIntyre's assessment of metaphorical usage: it 'creates the possibility of "epistemic access" to the outside world, the events that happen in it and the persons who live in it. These subjects are characterised in ways that would be impossible in flat, literal descriptions.'<sup>18</sup> Applying this principle of metaphorical usage to adoption we can begin to see the doctrine's intrinsic importance. It enabled Paul to embark on a powerful act of communication.

Having taken hold of a familiar Hellenistic term, Paul applied it in an unfamiliar theological context. He did so circumspectly, for on the one hand he needed to use the term sufficiently to ensure that the metaphor gained acceptance, but on the other hand, sparsely enough to

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<sup>16</sup> Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> For some sample opinions see A. Mawhinney, 'Huiiothesia in the Pauline Epistles: Its Background, Use and Implication' (Ph. D thesis, Baylor University, 1983); F. Lyall, 'Metaphors, Legal and Theological', *SBET* 10 (1992), pp. 94-112 (especially pp. 105-6) (Roman); J. M. Scott, *Adoption as the Sons of God* (OT/Jewish); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London, 1977), pp. 197-8 (OT); William H. Rossell, 'New Testament Adoption - Graeco-Roman or Semitic?' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952), p. 233 (Semitic); M. Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings* (*Analecta Biblica, Investigationes Scientificalae in Res Biblicas*, 72; Rome, 1977), pp. 69 (OT/Jewish), 71 (Roman).

<sup>18</sup> McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm*, p. 271.

preserve its potency. Therein lay Paul's success. He used *huiiothesia* on as many as five occasions to ensure the metaphor gained acceptance, but only on those occasions and no more in order to retain the metaphor's power by guarding it from over-exposure. Seen in this light the fact that *huiiothesia* is used on only five occasions becomes one of the most telling arguments in favour of the metaphor's significance.

#### 4. The Metaphor's Christocentricity

Fourthly, Jüngel says that 'Every theological metaphor must be compatible with the cross of Jesus Christ.'<sup>19</sup> The centrality of the cross is, of course, the great discovery of Christianity. The metaphors which in turn describe the cross are 'the articulation of discoveries'.<sup>20</sup> They always succeed the discoveries or, as Gunton more precisely puts it: 'It is not that metaphor *precedes* discovery, helping to make it possible, but rather that new language and discovery happen together, with metaphor serving as the *vehicle* of discovery.'<sup>21</sup> The central discovery unearthed by Christianity is the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is accompanied by huge implications for both the church and the worlds, and is expressed metaphorically.

While theological metaphors are to stop short of Christomonism, they should promote Christocentricity. This should be as true of the adoption metaphor as of many others and it is. While one cannot understand adoption other than in a Trinitarian manner, nevertheless the doctrine is definitely Christocentric for it is only in Christ that adoption is effected. It is only through participation in Christ's Sonship that we come to a knowledge of God the Father, just as it is only in possession of the Spirit of Christ that we can call upon God as our Father (Galatians 3:26-8, 4:6).

This Christocentricity can first of all be seen in the context of the Fatherhood of God. Galatians 3:26-4:7 tells us that it is the Father who sends the Son, yet it is only in union with the Son that adoption is received. Only once adopted can we call upon God as 'Abba, Father!' (*Abba ho pater*).<sup>22</sup> What is fascinating in the prayer of the newly

<sup>19</sup> Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Die Bibel nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers* (Stuttgart, 1984) captures the emotion with which the redeemed cry *Abba ho pater* on each of the 3 NT occasions when the phrase is used: (i) Mark 14:36 - Abba, mein Vater...! (Abba, my Father...!); (ii) Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6 - Abba, Lieber Vater! (Abba, dear Father!).

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converted, is that being in possession of the Spirit of Christ they address the Father in exactly the same way as Christ did in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).<sup>23</sup> Again in Romans 8:15 we find that the adopted are freed from the 'spirit of bondage again to fear' (*pneuma douleias palin eis phobon*), and consequently, having the Spirit of adoption can cry (*krazomen*) *Abba ho pater!* Yet, the extent of the Christocentricity of this latter text may be queried, for Paul jumps from the spirit of bondage to the Spirit of adoption without even mentioning the work or person of Christ. However, Vellanickal points out that while the emphasis of Paul's terminology in Romans 8 differs from that in Galatians 3-4 the meaning is the same. Whereas in Galatians 3-4 the emphasis is more upon faith (3:23), through which the adopted are liberated from the law (3:26), the object of faith being Christ,<sup>24</sup> in Romans 8 the emphasis is upon the Spirit through whom we have become sons of God. Yet, as Galatians 4:4-6 makes clear, it is through the sending by the Father not only of the Son into the world but of the Spirit of his Son into our hearts that we are enabled to cry *Abba ho pater!* We must remember, therefore, that there is a correlation between the Pauline uses of *pistis* and *pneuma* as the means of adoption. When considered by means of the *analogia fidei* it is clear that Paul understood adoption Christocentrically, but always – whether explicitly or implicitly – in the context of the Trinity.

In Ephesians 1:5 the same pattern emerges. From verse 3 following the emphasis falls upon the phrase 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. He is the one who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. Yet all these blessings come to us 'in Christ'. Numbered among these blessings is that of adoption to which we have been predestined or pre-horizoned (*proorisas*), but only through Jesus Christ (v. 5).

This Christocentricity, however, manifests itself not only in the context of the Fatherhood of God but also in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit. As already alluded to, through the redemption that is in Christ we receive his Spirit which enables us to pray to the Father in the same way as Christ did (Galatians 4:4-6; cf. Mark 14:36). This is what Paul calls the Spirit of adoption (*pneuma huiiothesias*). It is the

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<sup>23</sup> Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings*, pp. 74f.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83. We are not ignoring the fact, as Vellanickal shows, that in Gal. 5:18 Paul also writes of the Spirit liberating us from the law. It is this very verse which provides the grounds upon which to argue that Paul perceived both *pistis* and *pneuma* as the means of adoption.



Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God (Romans 8:14-15).

It is, however, particularly in Ephesians 1 that adoption is dealt with in connection with the Spirit's work. Paul's doxology teaches that it is in Christ that we have redemption, that is, 'through his blood'. Consequently, those who have believed are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise who is the down payment of the inheritance (1:13-14). Or, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:23 the adopted already have in the present 'firstfruits of the Spirit' (*kai autoi ten aparchen tou pneumatos echontes*), but at the great consummation they shall receive the full harvest of the Holy Spirit's work, viz., the eschatological adoption, the redemption of the body.<sup>25</sup> While we confess that the Christology of Romans 8 is implicit rather than explicit (especially vv. 3 and 11), nevertheless we cannot understand the chapter's pneumatology without the Christological background.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, we may argue that Christocentricity is so central to an understanding of adoption that in Romans 8 Paul takes the liberty of presupposing it. Nevertheless, if we desire a more explicit treatment of adoption in relation to Christology a return has to be made to the earlier Galatian epistle.

Consequent upon what we have said above, we may conclude that the adoption metaphor does point us to the cross but not at the expense of either the incarnation (Galatians 4:4-6) or a comprehensive Trinitarian understanding of the gospel. As the old Princetonian A. A. Hodge remarked: 'Adoption proceeds according to the eternal purpose of the Father, upon the merits of the Son, and by the efficient agency

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note Brendan Byrne's point that it is only in 8:22-23 that adoption is actually defined. He draws a comparison between 8:15 and 23: in the former text Paul writes of receiving not so much *huiiothesia* as the *spirit* of *huiiothesia*, in the latter of *huiiothesia simpliciter*, but only in 8:23 does *huiiothesia* actually receive definition. See B. Byrne, *Sons of God - Seed of Abraham: A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul Against the Jewish Background* (*Analecta Biblica, Investigationes Scientificalae in Res Biblicas*. 83; Rome, 1979), pp. 109-10.

<sup>26</sup> Byrne makes the important observation that Romans 8 does not spell out the "mechanics" of redemption *effected by Christ* (italics inserted), but rather emphasises the elimination of the key problem (sin in the flesh) and its positive results. Says Byrne, 'Only in the phrase... "in the likeness of sinful flesh", does Paul hint at what might be termed the inner workings of redemption' (p. 94).

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of the Holy Ghost.<sup>27</sup> In relation, then, to the intrinsic importance of the adoption metaphor it is sufficient now to recognise that adoption grants us a facility of enquiry into God's redemptive activity. The extent to which this is so can be illustrated from Calvin who, in addition to following the contours of Paul's thought in specific regard to adoption, also used adoption as an epithet descriptive of salvation in general. He went as far as to describe adoption as bestowing 'salvation entire'.<sup>28</sup> The fact that adoption has been put to use at all, let alone to two uses in Calvin's case, illustrates the worth of the adoption metaphor as a conveyor of significant elements of God's redemptive activity.

### II. The Primary Importance of the Adoption Metaphor

For all that we have said, the argument that adoption possesses intrinsic importance does not actually reveal much of its importance in comparison with other biblical and, more especially, soteriological metaphors. While they are all significant in the language of faith, they do not all grant the same power and enabling to speak of God. It ought not then to be unthinkingly assumed that all metaphors possess complete parity. That being so, it must be noted that adoption has, to use Max Black's terminology, been wrongly assumed to be a 'subordinate metaphor'.<sup>29</sup> One may be initially forgiven for numbering John McIntyre among those who play down the importance of the adoption metaphor by virtue of his silence in *The Shape of Soteriology*. There he lists thirteen models or metaphors which are descriptive of the death of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Given what we have already said of adoption's Christocentric credentials, for reasons that will be explained, we might have expected adoption to have at least merited a mention.

In spite of McIntyre's silence, with his personal help we are able to put forward a cogent argument in favour of adoption's primary importance. It is his opinion that adoption is not a subordinate metaphor, but a 'second-order' soteriological metaphor: 'I have not

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<sup>27</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London, 1886), p. 519. For similar examples of Christocentricity within a Trinitarian framework see T. A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (London, 1980), pp. 145-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Tracts and Treatises*, translated by Henry Beveridge. (ed. T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh, 1958), vol. III, p. 275, from Calvin's *True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church*.

<sup>29</sup> M. Black, *Models and Metaphors, Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY, 1962), pp. 42-3.

<sup>30</sup> J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 26-52.

used Black's term "secondary metaphors", preferring the "second order" description. In my view a second order metaphor is not necessarily of "secondary import" or "importance"...it is of primary importance in certain references.<sup>31</sup> Three factors determine the worth of a metaphor. First comes its place in Scripture and whether it has been accorded major consideration in the history of doctrine. As we are discovering with adoption, however, the scriptural status of a doctrine does not always lead to its recognition in subsequent theological discussion. The second is, whether it has been recognised in the church's credal formulae. Thirdly, and more relevant to the second-order metaphor, McIntyre applies the term 'to a concept which requires for its full implementation and understanding some other, some basic concept.'<sup>32</sup> Given the overlooked place of adoption in Scripture, its neglect in the history of doctrine, its scant treatment in a handful of creeds, and the way it completes redemption as a first-order metaphor we concede that adoption is best understood as a second-order metaphor, but only on condition that McIntyre's caveat is taken to heart: that to view adoption as a second-order metaphor 'is [not] an obstacle to the assertion of its primary importance.'<sup>33</sup> We would put it more constructively. There are positive grounds for arguing that adoption, although a second-order metaphor, is nevertheless of primary import.

### 1. A Worthwhile Claim

Our first line of argument is that there exists a deficiency in the very definition of a soteriological metaphor. As a result of this we are sceptical of the current assumption that adoption is of secondary import. To put the matter differently, to assume that adoption is not a primary metaphor does not mean that the assumption is true!

Adoption is not alone in having suffered great theological neglect. The whole field of soteriology has, in general, suffered likewise. McIntyre helpfully highlights this. He notes but three eras of church history in which theological consideration of soteriology has been to the fore: the Anselmic, the Reformation and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Compare the protracted Trinitarian and Christological debates! While acrimonious to the extreme they still

<sup>31</sup> J. McIntyre, personal correspondence dated 2 February 1995.

<sup>32</sup> The first two factors are derived from what McIntyre says of the concept of revelation in *The Shape of Soteriology*, pp. 49-50. The third is provided by McIntyre in the correspondence mentioned above. Of this last factor he says it is 'the most important of the three'.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

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produced some much needed fine-tuning of the doctrines in question. In regard to soteriology, however, McIntyre has said that 'the church has not sought to canonise any specific *theory* of the death of Christ'.<sup>34</sup> We are therefore justified in asking whether, given a fully matured definition of soteriology, adoption would rank as a second-order metaphor, let alone a second-order metaphor deemed also to be of secondary importance.

### 2. A Feasible Argument

Secondly, the feasibility of and justification for assuming the primary import of the adoption metaphor are supported by its close relationship with redemption, a first-order metaphor.<sup>35</sup> McIntyre conveys the importance of redemption when he writes that the model 'has become almost the universally accepted interpreter of what was effected by the death of Christ'.<sup>36</sup> The fact that adoption is so closely connected with redemption is therefore most important. The nature of this connection is most clearly seen in Galatians 4:5:

but when the fullness of time was come, God sent his son, made of a woman, made under the law, in order that he may redeem the ones under the law, that [*hina*] we may receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts crying, 'Abba, Father'.

The nexus between redemption and adoption takes on real significance when we bear in mind that McIntyre describes redemption as an 'incomplete symbol'.<sup>37</sup> It cannot, he says, answer the question as to what was given and what was received in return at Calvary. If the cross is perceived solely in terms of redemption the question arises

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<sup>34</sup> McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, p. 1. For all that we must not forget Brevard Childs' comment: 'The importance of soteriology for the intellectual and spiritual life of the church is too obvious to belabour. Unfortunately, in the history of the Church some of the most bitter controversies have erupted within this area.' B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London, 1992), p. 523.

<sup>35</sup> While McIntyre prefers to call them models, nevertheless redemption is the second of the 13 models of the atonement that he lists. *The Shape of Soteriology*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

what status was secured for those looking to it for redemption.<sup>38</sup> While the Bible as a whole provides a multi-perspectival answer, Paul's main response was to present adoption as that gained by Christ's redemptive death. In Galatians 4:4-6 he writes that God sent his Son that we might be redeemed from under the law. That is the negative aspect, but there was also a positive or prospective end in view – 'in order that we might receive the adoption (*hina ten huiiothesian apolabomen*)'! This *hina* clause is all-important. Scott is right to say in relation to Galatians 4:5 that 'redemption is not an end in itself; the goal is rather redemption to a relationship with the Father established by "adoption"'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Paul draws an arrow linking Christ's redemptive work on the cross with the adoption of the sons and daughters of God. Although adoption is primarily attributed to God the Father he did not act alone. As we have seen already, the adoption of his sons and daughters was dependant on the redemption that is in and through Christ.

It is important to notice from the passage in Galatians 3-4, and 4:1-7 in particular, that adoption is dependent upon union with Christ.<sup>40</sup> It is especially in this passage (as also in Romans 9:4) that Paul sets *huiiothesia* – a Hellenistic term – against an Old Testament /Jewish background. Says Scott, 'the Hellenistic *meaning* of the term must be

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<sup>38</sup> It is important here to bear in mind Scott's comment that *exagorazein* occurs in the *Corpus Paulinum* only in Gal. 3:13 and 4:5 (*Adoption as Sons of God*, p. 172). He says that the consensus viewpoint is that the use of *exagorazein* in Gal. 4:5 is better understood as 'to redeem' rather than the usual and simple infinitive 'to buy'. Whatever the meaning, the incompleteness of the redemption symbol remains. If *exagorazein* at root means 'to buy', we have to ask what was purchased. On the other hand, if *exagorazein* means 'to redeem', we have to ask what we were redeemed from.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174 (italics inserted). See also John Murray's comment that 'Redemption contemplates and secures adoption as the apex of privilege', *The Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1977), p. 228. The closeness of the connection between redemption and adoption is also seen in Ephesians 1:6-7.

<sup>40</sup> For the exegesis that follows we are indebted primarily to Scott, with whom we concur. See Scott, *Adoption as the Sons of God*, particularly chapters 3 and 4, most notably pp. 145f. Space allows us to give only a summary of his summary of the exegesis.

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distinguished from a Hellenistic *background* of the term'.<sup>41</sup> The use of *huiothesia* in a redemptive-historical perspective of the Old Testament is the key to a clear understanding of the connection between redemption and adoption as displayed in both the first and the second exodus.

Israel, argues Scott, is described by Paul in Galatians 4:1-2 as *nepios* during their sojourn in Egypt. As *nepios* Israel was a slave under Egyptian officials (4:1b, 2a) which is probably an allusion to the taskmasters. As such, Israel was little more than a minor whose experience under the oppression of the Egyptian officials, in spite of all their potential, differed little from that of a slave. Israel's potential was based upon the nation's covenantal status. As Yahweh's son, Israel was the collective heir to the Abrahamic promise (cf. Romans 4:13; the promise to Abraham and his seed stated that he would be heir of the world, *to kleronomon... kosmou*).<sup>42</sup> The state of bondage for the children of Israel lasted for 430 years (Galatians 3:17; Exodus 12:40; the problem of dating does not concern us here), until the time of Israel's redemption (v.2b; cf. Exodus 2:23-4). The redemption was activated by God's calling Israel out of Egypt and into a relationship of sonship (cf. Hosea 11:1). This then was the first exodus and included the two significant theological elements: redemption *from* bondage and adoption *to* sonship (Romans 9:4).

However, when we come to Galatians 4:3-7 Paul begins to write of the second exodus as the antitype of the first. This comparison between the type (vv.1-2) and the antitype (vv.3-7) can be seen at several points. First, in v.3 he compares Israel's historic period of bondage in Egypt with the former spiritual bondage of both the Jewish and the Gentile Christians of Galatia. Whereas Israel had been under the taskmasters of Egypt, contemporary Jewish and Gentile Christians were under *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*. Scott says that *ta stoicheia* meant for Jewish Christians the Torah (*hupo ta stoicheia tou kosmou* parallel to *hupo nomon*, v.5),<sup>43</sup> while the Gentile Christians would have understood by *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* the non-Christian deities (v.8). Whereas the Jewish Christians had recently come out from under the Torah as taskmaster, the Gentile Christians had recently come out of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267. Scott here argues against the *opinio communis* that 4:1-2 refers to a hypothetical illustration drawn from Hellenistic or Roman law of testamentary guardianship.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 248f.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158. To be under the elements or the material system of the world was, then, to be under the Mosaic covenant; cf. H. K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978), p. 238.

bondage to polytheism. God had intervened through the ministry of his Son and redeemed his believing Jewish and Gentile people from their respective forms of slavery. He was sent in the fullness of the time, being made of a woman (*genomenon ek gunaikos*), having been born under the law (*genomenon hupo nomon*) with the express purpose of redeeming both Jews and Gentiles from their bondage.

It is in the manner of God's intervention that we find the second parallel between the first and the second exodus. Just as the first came at 'the time before appointed of the Father' (*tes prothesmias tou patros*, v.2), so the second came in 'the fullness of time' (*to pleroma tou chronou*, v.4). Whereas prior to the first exodus God had promised beforehand to Abraham that Israel would be redeemed from bondage in Egypt, in the second exodus God sent none other than his Son in the fullness of time to effect the eschatological redemption. Thus Scott writes that 'both the redemption of Israel and the redemption of believers proceeded according to God's own timetable and promise'.<sup>44</sup>

Thirdly, there is the parallel between Moses, the leader of the first exodus, and Christ (*ho huios theou*, Gal. 4:4b), the leader of the second. Scott points to the Jewish tradition originating with Deuteronomy 18:15,18, the Fragment-Targum reference to Exodus 12:42 and the cross reference in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 as supporting the expectation of a second Moses. This last reference is of particular importance for the prominence of the Moses/Christ parallel. Just as Moses led the exodus through the Red Sea – signified as their baptism (*eis ton Mousen ebaptisthesan*, 1 Cor. 10:2) – so Christ led the second exodus, in which the participators are 'baptized into Christ' (*eis Christon ebaptisthete*, 3:27). Thus it is no surprise that the verb used of the sending of Christ (*exapesteilen*, 4:4b) is also used most frequently in the LXX together with *apesteilen* for the sending forth of a prophet, most notably Moses.

In the fourth parallel, we draw nearer our main point when we remind ourselves that 'the Father who redeemed Israel as his son in the first exodus at the appointed time is the Father who redeemed mankind as his son in the second Exodus at the fullness of time'.<sup>45</sup> This was accomplished by the Father in one single determinative act: he sent his Son into the world as a curse for us (*huper hemon*, Gal. 3:13). In obedience to the Father's will Christ died a substitutionary death thereby accomplishing both redemption and adoption for the Father's sons. If the atonement then is to be regarded as finished work it can only be so when both aspects of Christ's accomplishment are kept in view: a 'redemption from' or an 'adoption to'. The completion and

<sup>44</sup> J. M. Scott, *Adoption as the Sons of God*, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

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perfection of Christ's work exhibits the unbreakable connection between redemption and adoption.

Fifthly, there is a climactic parallel between vv.1-2 and v.5. The latter verse is introduced by a *hina* clause – '*that we might receive the adoption as sons*'. This, as we have stated, is the antitype of the earlier type. However, in both cases redemption is not an end in itself, but finds its completion in a relationship with the Father.

### 3. A Logical Deduction

Thus it is clearly both possible and plausible to argue for adoption's primary importance, given both the close and indissoluble connection in Paul's mind between redemption and adoption and, in any case, the incompleteness of redemption, a first-order metaphor, when considered without adoption. We can deduce then that adoption ought to be considered as a primary metaphor as much as redemption, especially given that adoption, in completing redemption, serves as its climax or apex. While adoption always presupposes redemption, we cannot fully understand Paul's view of redemption without bringing in adoption as its climactic element. As John McIntyre puts it: 'the adoption presupposes the redemption, and it would not have meaning without it.'<sup>46</sup> We have no qualms in asserting then that the direct link between the two concepts has too often been severed. This has frequently left the doctrines of redemption and adoption unhealthily separated. They should rather consolidate each another as Gunton's description of atonement shows, albeit in more general relational terms:

The central focus of the proclamation after Easter was that the events of Jesus' history and particularly of the Easter period, had changed the status of believers, indeed of the whole world. The metaphors of atonement are ways of expressing *the significance of what had happened and was happening. They therefore enable the Christian community to speak of God as he is found in concrete personal relationships with human beings and their world.* Language that is customarily used of religious, legal and commercial and military relationships is used to identify a divine action towards the world in which God is actively present remaking broken *relationships*.<sup>47</sup>

For all the exaggerated estimates of the theological stature of John McLeod Campbell, it is in this context that his work is of greatest

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<sup>46</sup> Private correspondence.

<sup>47</sup> *The Actuality of the Atonement*, p. 46 (italics inserted).



significance.<sup>48</sup> While he owned that the atonement possessed a retrospective aspect (that is, what we are saved *from*) he stressed that it also had a prospective element (what the Christian is saved *to*).<sup>49</sup> Although the importance of redemption can never be overstated, the attention the doctrine has received appears inordinate when compared to the neglect of adoption. The solution is not to place less emphasis on redemption, but urgently to heighten the profile of adoption in order to complement the church's understanding of redemption, thereby encouraging a more balanced perception of salvation.

### III. Conclusion

In this and the preceding article we have sought to persuade the reader of the importance of adoption. Our argument has been but a partial one. We have proffered only a brief survey and then only of the metaphorical arguments. We hope at some point in the future to supplement these with what we may call the connectional reasons. We would propose to show the significance of adoption as seen from the doctrine's connection with (i) biblical theology (particularly its redemptive-historical model), (ii) its contextual usage (related to protology, covenant theology, soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology), and (iii) Christology. There is far more to say of the significance of adoption than we have said in the course of these two articles.

These two articles are submitted in the hope that we may begin to appreciate, whether as theologians or preachers, more of what adoption is and to explain more fully to the church what it means to be in possession of the Spirit of adoption. The time has arrived for our theology of adoption to catch up our experience of it. It is our belief that a more comprehensive theology of adoption cannot but have a positive effect on the deepening of our filial experience of salvation. After all, the very purpose for which Paul wrote of adoption was for the comfort of the early Christians.<sup>50</sup> Has the church managed so well without a fully developed doctrine of adoption so as to make its belated recovery superfluous? Are our circumstances, as those living

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<sup>48</sup> For a critique of McLeod Campbell in this regard see my forthcoming dissertation 'The Good News of Adoption: A Comparative Study of Calvin and Nineteenth-Century Scottish and American Calvinism', ch.6: 'Fighting for Fatherhood'.

<sup>49</sup> J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, new edit. (Grand Rapids, MI, and Edinburgh, 1996), particularly chapters 1 and 7.

<sup>50</sup> A. T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 83, 88.

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on the brink of the third millennium, so different as to make such a spiritual comfort surplus to our requirements? A thoroughgoing theology of adoption is long overdue. In spite of all the moves toward a relational understanding of the gospel that have taken place since the early nineteenth century, a consideration of adoption has been largely left out, and to this day the doctrine remains out in the cold. Only time will tell for how much longer.