
Why Consider Adoption?

yelled, "and he takes care of his children! He knows I wasn't trying to hit you. He's going to take care of me, so you better be careful with me."

The surprised Perez felt his anger melt away. "I said, 'Stay with me, Birdie. I'll help you,'" he says.

"Eddie couldn't get off me fast enough," says Byrd. "It was like I was on fire."

Meals tossed Perez after the fight. Byrd stayed in the game and won it to run his record to 12–6, then insisted he is no headhunter. "It's not my intention to hit people," he said, "but the Lord blessed me with a short right arm and an 85 mile-an-hour fastball. I have to throw inside."

Perez laughed when he heard that. "Yeah," he said, "but not at my elbow."³

SALVATION CONSUMMATED

"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (Rom. 8:19). Thanks to the Son of God, we are center stage in God's plan. The creation takes a back seat to us. It longs for our final salvation, because in that day the creation too will get in on the blessings—our blessings. Our full identity will be made known only when Jesus returns. Then it will be revealed what beautiful sons and daughters of God he has made us. In the meantime, we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). This glorious expectation should inspire great hope within us. One day God will give us the final installment of our sonship. Every part of us will be completely redeemed, including our bodies. God will equip us to enter into our full inheritance on the new earth. Then he will conform us fully to the likeness

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of his Son (Rom. 8:29). Such thoughts are too wonderful for us; we can hardly take them in.

We marvel at the grace of God, who has planned, accomplished, and applied and will yet consummate our adoption. We can rejoice with Tami:

Until looking closely at adoption, I never really understood it. Adoption just seemed like a foreign concept to which I could not relate! Now, however, I understand that I truly am one of God's children. Even though both of my parents here are not believers, my Father in heaven is! It's okay now that my parents don't or can't understand me and the decisions I make when it comes to Christianity. God does. I have an eternal parent who will never leave me. And, whose love is not conditional. That's pretty cool!

Indeed, God's sonship is divine! The rest of this book will explore the joy of knowing God as our heavenly Father.

2

Is Adoption in the Old Testament?

*A*t first blush, the New Testament appears to send contradictory signals about adoption in the Old Testament. In Romans 9:4–5, Paul lists blessings that God bestowed upon the people of Israel:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

This is an imposing list, and its last item is plainly the greatest: Christ. But notice what Paul mentions first: adoption. By contrast, in Galatians 4:1–3, Paul seems to regard Old Testament adoption as a form of second-class spiritual citizenship: “When we were children”—Paul speaks of Jews under the old covenant—“we were in slavery.” Israel’s sonship was characterized by immaturity and even bondage. How, then, are we to regard adoption in the Old Testament? Is it a great blessing or a second-rate one?

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We can reconcile the apparent contradiction by viewing Old Testament Israel's sonship from two perspectives: looking around and looking back. First, as we look around from the vantage point of the ancient Near East, Israel's adoption by God was a great benefit. Adoption set Israel apart from the idolatry of its pagan neighbors. To belong to the only nation adopted by God was a great blessing. Second, we can consider Israel's sonship by looking back from the New Testament. From this vantage point, Israel's adoption was incomplete; the bestowal of the full status of adult sonship depended on the unique Son's coming to do his saving work. Adoption in its fullest sense, therefore, is a New Testament reality.

This chapter will consider:

God as father in the Old Testament
*"God's son" in the Old Testament*¹

God as Father in the Old Testament

If we examine the words with which the Old Testament speaks of the family of God, the first thing that strikes us is how infrequently the word *father* is applied to God. The Old Testament calls God "father" only fifteen times, a small number compared to the tally of 118 for the gospel of John alone. Why does the Old Testament hesitate to call God "father"? We can suggest an answer: because of the idolatry of Israel's neighbors. Many ancient peoples called God "father" in an impure sense. The Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed in a plurality of gods and arranged them by genealogy. Thus, to call a deity "father" meant that he was the source of the other gods. He was thought to have consorted with a female deity to produce divine offspring. In this way, the pantheon arose.

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Given this false idea of divine fatherhood, it is not surprising that ancient Near Eastern nations used the expression *son of god* in error, too. In Egypt, the pharaoh was regarded as the god Horus, the son of the gods Osiris and Isis. The pharaoh was thus thought to be a god begotten by a god. In Egypt, therefore, the sonship of the king was by begetting. In Mesopotamia, by contrast, the kings were not regarded as divine, but were thought to be great men chosen and installed by the gods as their representatives. There was a case of royal sonship by adoption.

The two dominant ancient Near Eastern cultures contemporary with Israel's, the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian, then, understood divine fatherhood and human sonship within a framework of polytheism. In light of this background, we can readily understand the reticence of God to call himself "father" in the Old Testament. Too many false connotations attached themselves to that term. In light of the idolatrous background, the best name for God in the Old Testament was not Father, nor the Trinity, but One, the living and true God in distinction from the false gods of the nations. Sadly, however, Israel, who imitated her neighbors' sins, called idols "father" in a sinful sense, too. God chastens the rebellious nation in Jeremiah 2:27–28:

They say to wood, "You are my father," and to stone, "You gave me birth." They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, "Come and save us!" Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah.

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When God does call himself "father" in the Old Testament, the term almost always refers to him as Savior rather than Creator. A good example occurs in Isaiah 63:16, where the prophet declares, "But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." Again, the reason why God is called "Father, our Redeemer," and not "Father, our Creator," is to avoid confusion with contemporary errors. The Old Testament, from its first chapter onward, asserts clearly and frequently that God is the Creator, but it reserves the word *father* to speak of God as he delivers his people from Egypt.

The past century has witnessed an error related to the ancient ones that Israel's prophets opposed in God's name. The old liberalism proudly proclaimed the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. That is, God is everyone's Father, and all human beings are brothers and sisters. This was one way that liberalism distorted the gospel. If God is already our Father, then we don't need to be redeemed, we don't need an atonement, and we don't need to trust Christ as our substitute.

In fact, according to Scripture, God *is* everyone's Father by creation; this is a minor chord in the New Testament symphony (Acts 17:28; James 1:17). But it is wrong to say simply that God is everyone's Father and just leave it at that. Chiefly, he is Father by virtue of redemption, and in this regard all are not his children. Rather, many are children of their father, the devil. They need to be redeemed and become children of God by faith in the unique Son of God (1 John 3:10; Gal. 4:4, 7).

The Bible is God's instrument to counter errors, both ancient and modern. This truth is as important today as at any

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time in church history. Our culture is poisoned by false teaching from many sources, including the New Age movement, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other cults. What is the divine antidote to this poison? If our church, our families, and our children are to stand fast against the attacks of the Evil One, we must take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

How are we to learn the Word of God? I will mention two ways. First, by supporting Sunday school. Make sure your children are there—and go yourself. If you have the gift of teaching, then take your turn to teach. You and your students will benefit. Second, fathers, spend time around the dinner table reading the Bible to your family. The spiritual nurture of your children is not primarily the responsibility of the church, the Christian school, or the youth pastor—it is the responsibility of you and your wife. I give God the glory that our sons have learned to think in a Christian manner in our family times of Bible reading and discussion following our evening meal. Single mothers, do not be discouraged. God will be Father and husband to you. Trust him for strength and wisdom and lead your children in devotions at the dinner table or at bedtime. Your heavenly Father will work through you to bless them.

"God's Son" in the Old Testament

Who is God's son in the Old Testament? The answer to this question will help us to understand the New Testament idea of adoption. The Old Testament gives three answers:

The nation of Israel

The king of Israel

Individual Israelites

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THE NATION OF ISRAEL

Most frequently, God's son is the nation of Israel. A good example is found in Deuteronomy 32:6: "Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" Here God is Israel's father, and Israel is God's son. But doesn't this text refer to God as Creator, rather than Redeemer? Yes, the verse does use the language of creation, but it employs this language in reference to God's redemption of the nation from Egypt, as the following verses indicate. God brought Israel into being—he created her, so to speak—by loving, protecting, and leading her.

For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance. In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him. (Deut. 32:9–12)

Verse 15 reinforces the conclusion that Moses uses the language of creation to tell of Israel's redemption: "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior."

Hosea also speaks of Israel as God's son:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they

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did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them. (Hos. 11:1, 3–4)

This passage helps us understand sonship in a number of ways. First, note that adoption is based on redemption: "Out of Egypt I called my son." Second, notice the combination of love and sonship: "When Israel was a child, I loved him." We will hear echoes of these principles in the New Testament. Third, the New Testament itself quotes Hosea 11:1. In Matthew 2:15, we learn that when Joseph took the baby Jesus to Egypt, out of harm's way in Judea, his action "fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" Here Matthew applies to Christ an Old Testament statement of Israel's sonship. So who is the "son" referred to in Hosea 11:1—Israel or Christ? Clearly, in its original context, Hosea 11:1 speaks of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, redeemed from Egyptian bondage, as his son. But, just as clearly, Matthew says that the Hosea text was "fulfilled" when Joseph took Jesus and Mary to Egypt for a time. How are we to put these facts together?

Here is the likely solution. Christ came as the Promised One, an individual Israelite who accomplished on behalf of the nation what it could not do for itself. "Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1), embodied Israel in himself. In place of the twelve tribes, he chose twelve disciples. As Israel was brought out of Egypt, so was he (Matt. 2:14–15). As the nation was tempted in the wilderness, so was he (Matt. 4:1–11). As God gave the nation the Ten Commandments, so he gave the people a new law (the

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Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5–7). Most importantly, as Israel was delivered by the Exodus, so he accomplished *the* great redemptive deed in his death and resurrection. In Luke's version of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on the mount, and they speak "about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). The Greek word translated "departure" is *exodos*. The Son of God would fulfill his "exodus" by going to the cross. The typology is unmistakable. The deliverance from Egypt was a type of Jesus' crucifixion. The Old Testament nation, God's son, therefore, is concentrated in one Israelite, Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God *par excellence*.

Our study of God's son in the Old Testament highlights the grace of God for us today. It is wonderful to contemplate that, from the beginning, God chose one nation from all the rest, Israel, and planned to bring one Israelite from that nation. This individual would accomplish what the nation could never do for itself. He would redeem Israel—and more! He would rescue not only believing Jews, but also Gentiles who would put their trust in him. This means that God planned our salvation from of old. Whenever we read of Israel in the Old Testament, therefore, we are reminded of God's grace, because all along he had in mind to bring our Savior from Israel. From God's son Israel, God brought God's Son Jesus Christ, so that we would become God's sons and daughters through faith in him. Surely our Father in heaven loves us and made great provision to include us in his family.

THE KING OF ISRAEL

God's son in the Old Testament is sometimes the king of Israel. In 2 Samuel 7, God denies David's request to build a

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house (a temple) for him, and informs him that his son will build that house instead. Through Nathan the prophet, God promises to establish a "house" (a dynasty) for King David:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. . . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:11–14, 16)

When God pledges to bring a royal dynasty from David's loins, he uses family language. Concerning Solomon and his descendants, God promises, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." Here, God's "son" is not the nation as a whole, but the king who will carry on David's line.

The New Testament applies 2 Samuel 7:14 to Christ. Hebrews 1 contrasts the Son of God with the angels: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?" (Heb. 1:5). Here the writer to the Hebrews applies to Christ the words of Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. Our concern is with the latter. The paternal relationship between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is expressed in the words of that passage, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." This is fitting in Hebrews 1,

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for this chapter sets forth Christ in his threefold office as prophet (v. 2), priest (v. 3), and, chiefly, king. As a king, he has a "throne," a "scepter," and a "kingdom" (v. 8). As the crucified and risen one, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (v. 3). From here, the supreme location of honor and authority, the unique Son rules with his Father. So, in the end, the king who will reign forever on David's throne is not Solomon, nor any other of David's merely human descendants, but the incomparable descendant of David, the divine Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Here is a source of great comfort for the people of God. Our Savior Jesus Christ sits at the Father's right hand. He rules over all. Although there is terrible wickedness on the earth, nothing is beyond his control. King Jesus watches over us, armed with "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). John Calvin trumpeted the corporate and individual benefits of Jesus' royal office:

Therefore, whenever we hear of Christ as armed with eternal power, let us remember that the perpetuity of the church is secure in this protection. . . . Hence it follows that the devil, with all the resources of the world, can never destroy the church, founded as it is on the eternal throne of Christ.

. . . In like manner, Christ enriches his people with all things necessary for the eternal salvation of souls and fortifies them with courage to stand unconquerable against all the assaults of spiritual enemies. . . .

. . . Our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph.²