Adoption in New Testament Times

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Abstract

The plight of abandoned children in ancient culture is a plight that reaches to the depths of practical Christian living. Adoptions in both Semitic and Greco-Roman were conducted in much different ways than we do now. The background and society in which these adoptions took place, particularly in New Testament times is very important to understanding first century families. Closely tied to the subject of adoption is the subject of orphans, since many of those adopted were orphans. In examining the varying approaches to adoption, it becomes apparent that the contrasts between the cultural and familial perspectives of the Semitic culture and the Greco-Roman are quite significant. These contrasts are seen rather bluntly in the area of adoption.
ADOPTION IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

The position of children, and orphans especially was precarious in first century times. The death of parents from famine, disease, age, and war, all contributed to the possibility that a child would suddenly be left parentless. The Bible predictably has a lot to say about the response God expects from His people toward this glaring need. Children are members of society entirely dependent on help and assistance to succeed in life. Any society or family modelled after principles of godliness and holiness cannot ignore this truth. Such was the case with Israel. As God moved to bring His chosen people out of Egypt, He established the Mosaic and Palestinian covenants with them, stipulating what they could expect from Him, and what He expected of them.

It is important to first develop a basic understanding of the typical first century family to give a background upon which to understand the situation a child would be in during this time to demand the crisis of adoption. The scenarios a child might face were varied and greatly influenced by the historical development of Jewish/Semitic and Greco-Roman attitudes and principles toward adoption. These are in stark contrast to one another as the worldviews represented often had radically different values. The world of the first century church was the scene of a direct collision between these worldviews. Adoption is portrayed in the New Testament in a Greco-Roman context by Paul, and represented from a more Semitic perspective in the Old Testament Covenant. These contrasts provided a challenge to both the church and Christian families concerning orphans and children in need of parents, and their role should be toward them.
The Role of Children in the Family

Israelite families from their beginnings were chiefly rural farmers or shepherds. When Jacob entered Egypt, the Israelites were mostly dependent on their shepherding capabilities. Having settled in Goshen, however, which was a very fertile area that could produce great amounts of crops, it is very likely that they learned farming. It may be for this reason that they complained in the wilderness about missing “The fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic.”

Based on this passage it seems very likely that the Israelites had already become a largely agrarian society. Once they arrived in the Promised Land and settled down the majority of them likely continued to be either farmers or herders of some kind. Both David and Saul are seen later in I Samuel as taking care of livestock. As they became more settled in the land, cities began to grow and many traders and businessmen began to spring up. While the exile disrupted all of this, it is likely that most families returned to Judah after the exile with similar trades and occupations as those they had when they left. Arriving in the New Testament there were many businessmen, craftsmen and traders as the gospels describe. The larger cities could support large numbers of merchants and small shops and businesses. A wide variety of trades existed in which whole families could participate, such as innkeeper, carpenter, baker, butcher and numerous others. However, it seems that most families continued to rely on some kind of agriculture as the chief means of supporting

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1 Numbers 11:5.
themselves. The farming family was very dependent on the labor of children to make their efforts a success. The first century family had a great deal of adversity to deal with to survive. Besides the ever-present taxes that they had to pay to both the Romans and the local authorities, there were also the challenges of providing enough food for the family, as well as the many items a family would need which could not be produced at home. As a result, it was a matter of daily survival for many first century families. The slightest drought or disease could wreak havoc on a family. Unfortunately, this was a far too frequent occurrence in Palestine in first century times. Rulers such as Herod the Great often lived such extravagant lives that they had no choice except to raise taxes even though they knew the effect this taxation was having on the general population. This daily need for basic survival was certainly one of the factors drawing Israelite families together in their need for one another. While children in our society today have little to no economic value, children in ancient times were an extremely valuable commodity. Instead of going to school all day, children put in significant hours toward the family business or occupation. Children, especially the eldest, were expected to learn and continue the family provision. The duties of women in the house were also far different from the modern western view. Men are traditionally viewed as the “breadwinners” in our culture, while the woman stays at home and takes care of the children. Semitic thought presents a clear contrast to this perspective. Solomon, for example, in Proverbs 31, touts the aspects of a Godly wife, making her business ventures and crafts a prominent point equal with her

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5 *New International Bible Dictionary* 273-278.


activities for her family. Carol Meyers writing about the divisions of labor in Israelite families comments, “women probably performed more jobs requiring technological skills than did men.” She goes on to note that many key areas of technological knowledge probably survived through women. It is curious to see, however, that she also points out that women often performed up to 40% of the work in agrarian based families. Regardless of the role the wife and the children had in supporting the family, it is clear that the average family had to be a very closely-knit unit by necessity just to survive. Laziness and children who loafed simply were not options for first century families. Children were expected to work and to uphold the honour and respect the family had in the community. This agricultural mindset also made children a very valuable economic commodity. Even before Abraham, the Semitic culture placed heavy emphasis on bearing children, especially male children. These would be very helpful to the family in many ways. Besides being a valuable economic commodity, children were also considered to be a divine blessing from God. Psalm 127:3 reveals this attitude quite clearly when it says that, “children are an inheritance from the Lord.” This shows that the Jews considered it an example of divine favour to be blessed with large numbers of children. This importance was so valued that the Jews even went so far as to go beyond the Old Testament laws regarding divorce, making it possible to divorce a wife after a 10 year period if she had not borne any children. This was clearly an over-reaction, but it illustrates the importance of children in their

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culture especially considering that they had to amend the Mosaic laws regarding divorce to allow for this.\textsuperscript{11}

Greco-Roman families had many similarities to Semitic families. They faced all of the same economic and cultural pressures that having children (or not) placed on them. Numerous festivals related to the family show that they placed great emphasis on ideals such as marriage, childbearing and respect for ancestors.\textsuperscript{12} The fact that a child was born unfortunately, did not assure its survival. The Romans simply did not place as much value on life as the Jews did. This is reflected by their acceptance of exposing children shortly after birth if they did not want them. The most frequent reason for exposing a child was the simple challenge of providing for them. In some Roman families, education was an important part of a child’s life; however, due to economic concerns most children were required to begin working for the support of the family at an early age.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Semitic Attitudes toward Adoption}

From the time of the exodus down through New Testament times, the Jewish people had a very strong religious commitment to the poor, needy, widows and orphans. There are numerous Old Testament passages warning against taking advantage of the fatherless and widows.\textsuperscript{14} Besides these passages, there are also many ancient Mesopotamian laws and traditions regarding the treatment of widows and orphans. In Sumer for example, the treatment of widows and orphans is addressed in two law codes, “Urukagina of Lagash” and “Ur Nammu.” These codes reveal that the


\textsuperscript{14} Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 82:3, Jeremiah 22:3.
Semitic idea of caring for and protecting the helpless of society went back at least as far as the twenty-fifth century B.C. Later law codes including the well-known "Code of Hammurabi" incorporated these early principles and expanded upon them.\(^\text{15}\)

While Mesopotamian law was developing codes of conduct and law concerning the family and the needy, Egypt was also following suit by doing the same. In Egypt one of the most important signs of a kind and generous ruler was to be the protector of the widow and orphan. Richard Patterson notes that, "Merikare of the First Intermediate Period is instructed by his father, Khety III, that the good king does not oppress the widow or confiscate the property of the orphan." He then goes on to note that other kings including Ramses III, one of the greatest Egyptian rulers, gave as one of his boasts that he gave special attention to protecting widows and orphans.\(^\text{16}\) This likely is another manifestation of the Shepherd-King idea that pervaded Semitic culture.\(^\text{17}\) These Semitic kings considered themselves the owners and protectors of their "flock" that is, the people they ruled. It is not surprising, therefore, that these kings, looking to establish their credentials as generous benefactors, caretakers, and rulers would seek to solidify their place in history and in the minds of their people by showing kindness and mercy to the neediest members of society.

Syro-Palestine also contributed to this area, as there are at least two clear examples of kings in the city of Ugarit recognizing the importance of protecting the interests of the fatherless and widows before the judges.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{17}\) Class notes from New Testament Survey with Dr. Don Fowler (Spring 2003).

Clearly, it was the boast of every king who wished to be remembered, that he had been a just and moral king who supported the rights of the weak. It is ironic in many ways that these kingships would view this in such a way. Hammurabi is the most obvious example of this scenario as his code of laws was both a compilation and building block of most Near Eastern ideas about law. That these dictatorships would view the people who could least support them as valuable and important to a functioning society demonstrates that they were far from completely morally bankrupt. Most importantly, it reflects the values of the Semitic culture which tended to be focused on the family and keeping traditions alive. A significant part of keeping the family and tradition alive involved the use of adoption of extended family that had lost their parents. It is very likely that this is what happened in the case of Abraham taking his brother’s son Lot with him on his travels. Encouraging this kind of adoption while also protecting the rights and inheritance of those being protected would have been a very important part of the shepherd-king “protector of the weak” mentality.

While there are few examples in Old Testament times of the laws concerning the fatherless and widows actually in practice, we do see in the story of Ruth that the law allowing for gleaning the fields after the harvesters had finished was still in practice at this time. It is very likely then that this practice required by the Law of Moses continued through the time of Jesus, especially considering the fanatical devotion of such sects as the Essenes and Pharisees to be precisely obedient to the Mosaic Law.

In the frequent absence, however, of just rulers and kings following the reign of Solomon, especially in the northern kingdom, it is very likely that most of the Mosaic

19 Genesis 12:4-5.
Laws regarding gleanings and leaving crops behind fell into disuse. This most basic sin and rebellion against the covenant God had established with Israel was one of the chief reasons for the judgment of God that fell upon Israel. The famous passage in Isaiah is an example of this point. Here Isaiah after calling on Israel to cease doing evil, asks them specifically to “relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.” He then continues in the next verse asking them to be reasonable, “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow;” 20 Clearly, the sin Isaiah (and God through Isaiah), is pointing out is that the needy in the land have been mistreated. The weakest members of their family and society have been left out in the cold. S. Bendor in commenting on the cause of the widow and orphan in ancient Israel notes that while the Pentateuch did indeed place a great deal of emphasis on the correct treatment of orphans and widows including a curse for failing to do so, the prophets of Israel in their writings show how often and widely these commands were disobeyed. 21

Examples of concern for the widow and orphan clearly predate Moses and the Pentateuch. Since Moses was educated as an Egyptian and grew up as an Egyptian prince, he must have been well aware of these traditions. To say that the emphasis in the Pentateuch and throughout the Old Testament on the plight of the widow and orphan is merely a reflection of their surrounding culture however would be entirely inaccurate. The Palestinian and Mosaic covenants between God and Israel in the Pentateuch clearly and authoritatively tied the relationship between with God and Israel with its treatment of the weakest members of society. 22 Adoption is the key

20 Isaiah 1:16-18.
element of this treatment as far as children are concerned. While not mentioned specifically in the Pentateuch, the Law of Moses did provide for the continuation of inheritances within families so that helpless children taken in with other families did not lose their family’s possessions.

Many commentators have observed that the Pentateuch and the Mosaic covenant with Israel appear to be molded after a traditional Middle Eastern suzerainty treaty between a king and his vassals. This follows the pattern of the Middle East very closely, in that God represented Himself as their king. The example of the Pentateuch however, certainly goes beyond being a moral king, or acting as such just to be remembered as a beneficent king. Clearly, God has more in mind than simply establishing himself as a good king by Middle Eastern standards. The laws God gave Moses at Sinai far exceed any of the requirements or ideas in previous ancient records. As Patterson notes in Biblioethica Sacra, “the God of redemption invokes the law of charity upon His people so that they might continuously remember the magnitude of His redemptive grace toward them.” God was establishing the moral code for His people to follow and one of the most essential parts of a society that recognizes God is that they treat those less fortunate than themselves with compassion. The range of those included in this covenant was wide and consisted of the poor, widows, the fatherless and foreigners. With this command came the threat that when those who were mistreated cried out for justice to God, their cry would not be ignored by Him.

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Later in Israelite history, God speaks through His prophets to condemn Israel severely for failing to have mercy for people in need. All of the Major Prophets mention the failure of Israel in its rejection of God and wickedness to give justice to the fatherless and widows. One of the most stinging rebukes is in Ezekiel 22 where God condemns the princes of Judah for oppressing the strangers in the land and “vexing” the fatherless and widows.26 This is clearly a very serious matter in the eyes of God, and it is mentioned right along with the princes’ bloodthirsty desire to commit murder, profanity and sexual immorality. David Pleins commenting on the state of Israelite leadership during this time says, “The system of law and legal transaction was reinforced with laws that served to benefit the more influential members of society. The rulers did not take up the cause of disenfranchised individuals…”27 The reason this was even a problem was that the people themselves did not take it upon themselves to aid those in need by adopting them and providing them with the protection and safety that they needed.

The greatest reason God wanted the Israelites to treat the weakest links in their families and society with kindness and compassion is because it reflects His own nature. If a people called after His own name cannot shepherd and protect their weak and most needy, what kind of example would this be to the nations surrounding them? Obviously, it would not be an example that they would seek to model their families and society after.

Israelite families were both close and tight knit, and the family unit was the most essential part of any Semitic culture. Thus, it was extremely important for the Israelites to realize that those outside family warmth were clearly the neediest and the

most grateful. It is not without coincidence that throughout the gospels, Jesus ministered very frequently to these kinds of people.\textsuperscript{28}

When we arrive in the New Testament period and James speaks about the fact that “faith without works is dead,”\textsuperscript{29} it is no accident that even before he gets to this he points out that, “pure and undefiled religion before God is this, to keep oneself unspotted from the world and to visit widows and orphans in their distress.”\textsuperscript{30} In saying this, James is driving home how important the point is to God. This may also be another example of how the early Christians viewed themselves as the “New Israel.” While old Israel had clearly failed in this area many times, James is reminding the believers that since they are the New Israel, they are responsible to care for and adopt members of their surrounding society who needed their help, just as in Old Testament times. This responsibility was at the very core of the message he taught, and that Christ taught, to love one another.

\textit{Roman Attitudes toward Adoption}

While Greek and Roman culture placed less importance or value on young human life, condoning and allowing such things as abortion and infanticide,\textsuperscript{31} Jewish law and tradition sternly prohibited these actions. Chapman, writing on second temple Judaism notes that Jewish culture valued children so highly that abortion or infanticide would have been considered acts equivalent to murder.\textsuperscript{32} In spite of this radical difference in view of children, Roman culture was more open to the idea of adoption. The Roman views about adoption were radically different from Semitic

\textsuperscript{28} Luke 19:1-10.
\textsuperscript{29} James 2:20.
\textsuperscript{30} James 1:27.
\textsuperscript{31} Beryl Rawson, \textit{The Family in Ancient Rome} (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 172.
views however. The main reason behind Roman adoptions was neither as a solution to the large number of orphaned and abandoned children or as a common response to infertility.\textsuperscript{33} The Roman idea of adoption was most frequently as a means of securing political succession. Most of the records available for Roman adoption concern primarily the legal and political aspects of succession and inheritance. These political adoptions were often used by wily men looking to trump the traditional blood relationships that determined power and inheritance. While modern adoption and Semitic adoptions most often involved children, Roman legal adoptions were almost exclusively adoptions of adults.\textsuperscript{34} This is a rather different perspective on adoption that may be explained by the Roman view of children. Since abortion and infanticide were both practiced among the Romans, it is not surprising that the Romans would fail to see the importance of adopting needy children. In many cases, these children were probably reduced to slavery instead. It is likely that adoptions for infertility and of orphans, although not recorded, were more common among the lower classes. In a society where plagues and death could easily decimate entire families and where women frequently died in childbirth, this often left families without any male heir.\textsuperscript{35} For some Romans, the solution to this problem was to adopt a male heir. While this kind of adoption most often involved influential members of society seeking an heir to their wealth, it is probable that many families in the lower class also adopted, although for entirely different reasons. Because of this tendency, many of these adoptions were simply legal arrangements by which either another family member or


\textsuperscript{35} \textit{New International Bible Dictionary} (1987), 273-278.
another adult was adopted and given the rights of a natural born son. In later Roman times even women were allowed to be adopted by other families.\textsuperscript{36}

While this was certainly a more welcome approach to adoption on the surface than that of Jewish culture, there is very little evidence of adoptions taking place for any reason except for material, inheritance and political purposes. It seems possible that most Roman adoptions were not the legal inheritance type allowed by Roman law but involved simply taking children into a household without conferring any of the legal rights of a natural born child. Roman attitudes overall were much more at ease with the idea of legal adoption, but much less so to the concept of adopting to provide a home for abandoned or orphaned children.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{The Israelite Approach to Adoption}

A great Old Testament example of the kind of adoptions that generally took place in Jewish culture comes from the book of Esther. From Esther 2:7 it is clear that her parents had died and that she had then been taken in by her uncle Mordecai who was raising her as one of his own children. James Walters commenting on Jewish adoption practices notes this adoption and comments that Jewish adoptions were not “adoptions” in the legal sense familiar to the Greco-Roman world, and it would have been unusual for an orphaned child to be legally adopted and made an heir. Rather it was common practice simply for the closest relatives of the orphan to take them in and raise them in their own house as Mordecai did for Esther.\textsuperscript{38} He goes on to say that there are no examples in any Jewish literature prior to or contemporary with Paul in which children are adopted and then given the same filial rights as natural born


\textsuperscript{38} James Walters, \textit{Paul in the Greco-Roman World} (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International 2003), 42.
children. In any case, it is clear from this passage that this type of adoption did occur and was probably a common occurrence especially considering that the living conditions of those times made the possibility of losing one or both parents a very real possibility for many children.

Of course, in a time when natural events played a much greater role in the life of the average person, it would not have been uncommon for entire families to have died from certain plagues. There are numerous plagues that struck Israel during and after their time in the wilderness. Some were punishments of God and some were simply the natural course of events. 39 Other events that could easily have deprived one of father and mother were battles, wars, and the execution of criminals. In New Testament times, bands of bandits such as the robbers described by Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan, 40 who beat, robbed, and killed travellers were very common. Deaths at sea and other natural causes would also have been possible causes of death. Leprosy by Jesus’ time was a common disease as is evidenced by the numerous miracles recorded in the gospels in which He healed lepers. All of these events could leave one alone to protect the family property and rights. It seems possible based on the book of Ruth, that female orphans may have had things slightly easier in a few cases. While Ruth was not an orphan, many of the Jewish laws that applied to her would also have applied to an orphan. Women who inherited property, such as Ruth, would have been valuable to near relatives who wished to increase their land holdings while also continuing the family line of the deceased. Male orphans would have been in a much more precarious situation with having to manage their inheritance (if any) and protect themselves from those who would take advantage of them. Obviously, at a young age it was very difficult to protect personal and property interests regardless of

39 II Samuel 24:15.
sex, especially when facing unjust rulers. The fictional story of Ben-Hur is an
example of the kind of events that could have easily befallen those who had lost both
father and mother in New Testament times. Without protectors, these children were at
the mercy of creditors their parents owed and anyone else in power. To have been
made a slave in these times was a common event. The question of how many of these
orphans were adopted is difficult to answer. Meir Malul commenting on adoptions in
JSOT notes that throughout the Middle East there were clear laws on how adoptions
were to take place.41

It is unlikely that “charity” adoptions outside the extended family were very
common in either Jewish history or in New Testament times, as traditional families
were very tightly woven and usually kept outsiders out of the family. What is likely is
that many of these orphans went to live with a close relative who cared for them until
they came of age and were able to establish themselves. It is also possible that many
of these orphans worked as slaves and servants for the more wealthy Jews who could
afford to hire or buy them. Closely related to this was the answer given by Howard
Jacobson where he notes that it was not unknown for a child to be educated and
trained in a certain craft or trade and then be adopted as a son when he had learned the
trade competently.42 While it is certainly questionable how many orphans were
adopted in this way, it certainly would have been possible for many Jewish families
without male heirs to provide for that deficiency by adopting an orphan. Documents
from other civilizations surrounding Israel show that adopting a son to provide a
means of inheritance did occur. While very early (1500-1400 B.C.), and mostly

41 Meir Malul, “Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents” Journal for
the Study of the Old Testament no. 46 (Fall 1990), 105. Unfortunately Malul deals in much greater
detail with abandoned children who still had parents rather than detailing the laws concerning
orphans whose parents had already died.

42 Howard Jacobson, “Adoptive Parents in Rabbinic Exegesis of the Bible” Vetus Testamentum 49
no. 2 (April 1999), 261.
irrelevant to this thesis, records from Nuzi show that formal adoption, while probably not very common, did occur.\textsuperscript{43}

Another way that many Israelites could have become de facto orphans was if their parents died young and they were not the eldest male in the family. Since it was traditional for the eldest to inherit the family property, it is possible many younger siblings in poor families could have become orphans in every practical meaning of the word, because they were not the inheritors of the family property. This would have been more common in very poor families where the family property was all that could be inherited. However, it is likely that in most cases these “orphans” were adopted to the families of other close relatives because of their economic value for work.

Another compelling reason to adopt an orphaned child derives from what Janet Melnyk calls “an overwhelming desire to have children.”\textsuperscript{44} This desire stemmed directly from the importance of continuing the family heritage and possessions. Examples of this abound in the Old Testament. In Psalm 127 for instance, David proclaims the blessedness of the man whose “quiver is full.” For a family without children, adopting an orphan was certainly a logical solution.

\textit{The Roman Approach to Adoption}

The Roman approach to adoption throughout the New Testament period was brutally uncaring toward children. Not only were orphans completely ignored by the Roman government,\textsuperscript{45} but also with no hope of any aid, the Roman law actually discouraged adoption of young children. Even androgation, which was the adoption of a child who was born illegitimately to the parents wishing to adopt, or public

\textsuperscript{44} Janet Melnyk, “When Israel was a Child: Ancient Near-Eastern Adoption Formulas and the relationship between God and Israel” \textit{History and Interpretation}, SS 173 (1993), 246.
adoption, was forbidden by Roman law. It was not until Antonius Pius, who became emperor in A.D. 138 that Romans were even allowed to adopt a minor through androgation. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know how common adoptions may have been among the lower classes simply because the few cases that are recorded are almost exclusively found among the elite classes of society. Whether the lower classes even practiced legal adoptions is a question that cannot be assertively answered. The nature of the adoptions recorded among the elites reveal that in most cases the motives were primarily politically related. Adoption outside of the family was often used simply as a means of giving a favourite the inheritance rights rather than a son who was disliked. It was common even inside the family unit to see this kind of legal maneuvering. There are even cases in which a grandfather would adopt a grandson as a son and then proceed to emancipate his other son.

Obviously, the point of this is to provide the family of one son with a much greater share of the inheritance. One of the reasons Roman law was unfriendly to the adoption of orphans may have been the desire to keep family possessions in the family bloodline. This attention to family bloodlines created a society in which it was very difficult to reach out to those in need. (In addition, their futile desire to keep everything in the family often resulted in a large number of families, especially among the more wealthy Romans without direct heirs). Richard Saller notes that there was a very high rate of turnover in the ranks of Roman senators between

generations.\textsuperscript{50} This would probably have been much lower had the culture been more accepting of adoptions. While it was allowable for Romans to adopt adults as heirs, it is still strange and heartless that they practically went out of their way to ignore the plight of orphaned children. While this was the case in most situations, it is interesting to note that the adoption of a minor was much more accepted under Roman laws if the person to be adopted was a near relative. There was no minimum age limit for adoption, although the adopter was required to be a legal adult.\textsuperscript{51} Although Roman law placed no age limitation on adoptions, it seems that the Romans simply did not adopt out of compassion for children, especially orphans. Gardner in her exhaustive examination of Roman adoptions does not report any cases of adoption for this purpose.\textsuperscript{52} Overall, the culture of the Romans had little compassion for the needs of children, and their laws reflected this attitude. This uncompassionate view toward children was born out in the grim truth that babies were often aborted or exposed in first century times by Greco-Roman families. This happened especially when families were unable to support more children. These children usually ended up either dying or being taken to be raised as slaves in other households. After Christian influence began to seep into public law and life infanticide was made illegal, but throughout first century times, it was both an accepted and common practice.\textsuperscript{53} The very fact that it was practiced at all demonstrates the gaping hole in the Greco-Roman family and culture concerning its view of adoption. Rather than give their child to be raised by another family, they would be aborted or exposed to die.

\textsuperscript{50} Richard P. Saller, \textit{Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 162.


The adoptions that did take place in Roman society were regulated by many laws. One of the strengths of Roman adoption was its complete acceptance of the adoptee. Once a child had been adopted, everything from their past was erased. While they still had a blood connection with their former parents, the legal and familial ties to them were entirely severed. An adoptee in Roman society was endowed with all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of his new family just as though he was a natural born son. The adoptee was expected to respect and honor his new parents just as though they were his real parents. There were certain drawbacks to adoption in Roman society. The greatest drawback was the fact that at any time the adoptee could be emancipated by his adopted father. Emancipation revoked all the rights that one possessed by having been a part of the family. All property and inheritance rights were completely lost.

The actual procedure of adoption required that the subjects involved submit to an investigation by a college of pontiffs. Questions about a variety of subjects were typically asked during these inquiries. Questions about health, age and motive were to be expected. Once this had been done and the necessary approval had been granted for the adoption to continue, it was then subjected to the approval of a curate assembly. If approval was granted then the adoption was the considered as legally binding and all the rights adoption then took effect.

Figurative Biblical Adoption Language

In the Old Testament there is a great adoption story concerning the Israelites.

Janet Melnyk reveals this very interesting picture of Israelite adoption, in that God adopted the nation of Israel as His own.⁵⁸

This is certainly the Old Testament parallel to Paul’s picture of adoption in the New Testament. Numerous passages illustrate how God provided for Israel and saw them as His children. One of the most obvious is found in Jeremiah 31:9, which says, “...I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born.” Melnyk identifies Hosea 11 as the keynote passage in which, “God is represented as the perfect parent, adopting and rearing Israel, teaching and providing for him.” Melnyk then cites Jeremiah 3:19 as representative of three critical aspects of legal adoption in ancient times.⁵⁹ These three aspects consist of, legal appointment as a son by declaration, the promise of an inheritance, and a condition against rebellion. This parallel with Paul’s adoption language in his epistles, is quite striking, and reveals the way God feels toward us, as we are orphaned from Him. The parallel also helps place the importance of adoption and caring for those in the most desperate need in proper perspective. It was extremely important to God and written into the very depths of their understanding of His covenant with them.

Paul’s spiritual analogy of adoption into the family of Christ figures very strongly into his theology in several books, particularly in the book of Romans. Romans chapter 8 is Paul’s exposé on our new life and relationship with Christ and the changes that this brings. It is not surprising then that to illustrate his point he would call up an image that would be very familiar to the Hellenized world to which he was writing. Thus, it would seem very likely that for Paul to have used the human example of adoption as a type of model for spiritual adoption and sonship that he


approved of the general idea of adopting into one's family those who were lacking such a relationship.

Greek and Roman adoption practices, not surprisingly, were quite different from Jewish practice. While the chief object of Jewish adoption was to provide for the fatherless and to gain another helping hand for the family business, the chief object of Greco-Roman adoptions was usually to provide a male heir for a family that lacked one. In fact, Greek Athenian law did not even permit formal adoptions to take place unless the man or family lacked a male heir. While Roman law was somewhat more permissive about adoptions, the goal of adoption was mostly that of providing an heir. Because of this businesslike and familial succession type of view, it seems unlikely that many orphans were adopted and raised as heirs. Paul in Romans 8 is using the Greco-Roman idea of adoption with which to illustrate his point. In verses 16 and 17, he teaches that we are first children of God and then as a logical next step, heirs with Him.

In commenting on Paul's adoption language in Romans, Kostenberger notes that rather than draw from all of the secular Roman sources around him he goes back to 2 Samuel 7:14 which says "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me." Kostenberger takes this to mean that Paul is taking the example of Israel as an orphan or a castaway that is rescued by God, redeemed and brought into a new familial relationship. It is most likely that Paul is drawing from both areas to frame the point he wants to make in the minds of his readers. His readers were both Jews and Gentiles, and from his extensive use of the Old Testament in his epistles, it is not surprising that he went back to the Old Testament to find a way in which to make his

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point. At the same time, his audience also lived in a very Hellenized culture in which the Greek and Roman laws and ideas concerning adoption would have been much more well known than the relatively few Jewish traditions in the area of adoption.

Paul in Galatians speaks clearly about the analogy of our spiritual adoption into the family of God. This is a beautiful metaphor because it describes the true state of orphans in that culture. Just as humanity, living in sin, and without God is hopelessly lost and without hope of ever coming into anything good, so the orphan in the first century world had little to look forward to beyond slavery. When Paul used this as an example of how great the grace of God is to us as believers it must have sent chills down the spines of his readers because the contrast was so great.

The Role of the Early Church in Providing Homes for Adoption

Peter Lampe, writing about this topic notes that in New Testament times the Roman government had no interest whatever in either orphans or adoptions. Nursing homes and orphanages were most likely nonexistent. A rather disturbing practice noted by both Malul and Lampe was the practice of exposing unwanted children. This practice was unfortunately common in Greco-Roman culture. For a few children this may have turned out well. If a child were born to a family which could not support them then it is clearly better that they be taken care of by a more capable family. Unfortunately, almost all of these abandoned children died. The Roman law and culture regarding children and financial difficulties is directly to blame for this terrible result.

65 Meir Malul, “Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament no. 46 (Fall 1990), 100.
The early church was not institutionalized as it is today, and as a result did not have the social programs and orphanages, etc. that Christian groups run today. The Roman government failed to show any interest in the welfare of its weak and helpless citizens, especially infants and those either without family or not freeborn. Thus, the orphan in these times had nowhere to look for help unless their extended family offered to help or another family offered to take them in. It is not surprising then that James felt the need to call on the church to do its part to support those in society who were being left behind. Lampe notes that it was likely not until the third century that the first actual church buildings began to be built, although part of the reason for this may be a simple lack of records. This kind of Christianity is hard to understand in our culture today, but the fact was that individuals and families had a much more important role in the early church. Rather than building buildings, they put their resources at the disposal of the church. This would have included both monetary and social aspects. For a family capable of receiving an abandoned child to refuse to do so would have been not merely a refusal by the family, but a failure of the church. This individual level of understanding the church’s role in society was what the ancient world desperately needed in the absence of a government-sponsored answer to the plight of orphans. Oseik and Balch writing about the New Testament family observe that the practice of the Lord’s Supper was often used by the early Christians as an opportunity to minister to the needs of those who were less fortunate in their ranks by providing food for them, particularly widows. The Church could then directly minister to the needs of those who were less fortunate than they were in this way. In

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view of James’ command in James 1:27 to care for both widows and orphans, it is most likely that orphans would also have been recipients of such charity. The role of the church and families in caring for orphans and widows also has a practical application, in that it seems many in the church today seem to think social tasks are the responsibility of the government rather than the church. This is clearly not what James taught or what Old Testament traditions and laws demanded of the covenant community. Just as the church then, even though it was composed of individual families and had little governmental force or organization, was responsible for the care of the weak and needy in its ranks, so the church today bears the same responsibility.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is clear from the Pentateuch to the New Testament that the family is probably the most important and valuable social framework God ever created, and it was certainly the first. Adoption is a way of providing this basic human need for those who need it the most.

At Mt. Sinai, the Israelites were commanded by God to uphold the rights of orphans and widows and to give them justice. The prophets throughout the Old Testament gave warnings and exhortations to the Israelites to cease taking advantage of the weak and helpless members of society. This history was clearly reflected in the way the Israelites dealt with the needs of orphans, and the value they placed on children and childhood. Adoption to them was like a second nature. They knew it was something that they had to do out of love and obedience to God.

The Romans never had this background upon which to base their views of adoption. While they developed elaborate laws about the process, and integrated it into their culture legally far more than the Israelites ever did, they never took
advantage the opportunities it provided to help others. Rather adoption to the Romans was a selfish means to personal ends. The Romans certainly had a more sophisticated system of adoption but it completely lacked the heart and purpose that it needed. The laws in this area were merely a reflection of how the Romans lived and thought. The Romans were not concerned with the hardships facing orphaned children and did little to alleviate their suffering.

The first century church faced a great challenge as the Roman and Semitic worldviews collided head on as the gospel spread throughout the Roman world. For the most part the Semitic view succeeded in this area. The church took on the heart and compassion toward children that the Roman culture was lacking. The church reached out often to the needy, and James clearly commands that the church reach out to orphans and widows.

Just as the church then realized its responsibilities, so the church today must not fail in its responsibilities. Yet it so often does. Rather than ministering to the needs of the most desperate members of society, the church often stands to the side and watches while the government to make its own feeble efforts. It is time for the church as a whole, and each family and person to recognize the heart of God toward orphans and adoption, and give it the same heart that God gave to us when He adopted us as His children.
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