ADOPTED AS SONS (ὙΙ ΘΕΣΙ ᾿Α ΤΗΛ ΜΙΣΙΝΓ ΠΙΕ ΧΕ ΠΑΛΙΝΕ ΣΟΤΕΡΙΟΛΟΓΙΑ)

Trevor J. Burke

Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, Illinois, USA

1. Introduction

What did Paul think God in Jesus Christ was doing and how is this manifested in the letters he wrote to his churches? Responses to these questions are usually couched in terms of soteriology, a point clearly demonstrated in a recent collection of essays entitled *Salvation in the New Testament*. In this collection, many metaphors in the New Testament are delineated, but three Pauline images are treated separately and extensively—justification, redemption and reconciliation. Indeed, these three images more than any others are the most commonly discussed under the rubric of salvation. To be sure, Paul’s understanding of soteriology is rich and many-sided but in addition to the above metaphors is another one which is only briefly mentioned in the above collection of essays and which is unique to the *corpus Paulinum*—the expression θεός ἄνθρωπος, “adopted as son(s)” (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Eph 1:5). Rarely, if at all, is adoption considered important and given the in-depth treatment it merits as another metaphor for the apostle’s understanding of salvation. In this essay, I will begin by showing how a proper view of Paul’s adoption metaphor provides a unique contribution to the apostle’s understanding of soteriology. This will be followed by a consideration of adoption as a salvific work of the divine Family—Father, Son and

---


2 I am using these terms in a generic sense and whilst the above three essays are wider in scope they do treat the verbs δικαίωμα, ἀγοράζω, and καταλλάσσω.

Holy Spirit. I will conclude by looking at how Paul not only uses his adoption metaphor to describe salvation for the individual but also employs this metaphor in more novel and innovative ways to describe how God’s adopted offspring are the conduit for the deliverance and transformation of the whole cosmos (Rom 8:18–25).

2. Mapping Paul’s Soteriological Metaphors

As already noted, the term “salvation” is a comprehensive one for the apostle Paul and more often than not the terms justification, redemption and reconciliation are employed in elucidating his views. What is significant about most of these discussions—in both the past and the present—is how often Paul’s adoption metaphor is treated within the orbit of these other metaphors. Historically, for example, adoption has been sometimes subsumed under justification, as evidenced by Francis Turretin, the seventeenth-century Genevan scholar, who posed the question “What is the adoption which is given us in justification?” to which he responded “Adoption is included in justification as a part.”

On other occasions, adoption has been mistakenly viewed as a synonym for justification, as the following remark by Robert L. Dabney in the nineteenth century amply demonstrates: “Adoption cannot be said to be a different act of grace for justification... [Adoption] performs the same act for us...which justification does.” Today, such misunderstandings persist so that whenever adoption is discussed it is generally treated under these others soteriological expressions, as the following comment by A. Hoekema demonstrates:

---


6 A. Hoekema, Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 185 (emphasis added). See also the most recent article by Gordon D. Fee, “Paul and the Metaphors for Salvation,” in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (eds.), The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54, 66. Fee subsumes his discussion of adoption under general treatments of “Redemption” and “Justification.” This is surprising because earlier in his magnum opus, God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 855, Fee considers adoption as a soteriological category in its own right under the rubric of what he calls “The Pauline Soteriological Metaphors.”