

Sunday, October 26, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 149  
Sonship Edification: Evaluating SE’s Definition of Biblical Adoption

### **Introduction/Review**

- In Lesson 148 we discussed the teaching of Sonship Edification (SE) regarding “Biblical Adoption.” The goal of that lesson was to ascertain SE’s teaching on the matter and to demonstrate that its definition of “Biblical Adoption” is central to its curriculum apparatus.
- This morning we want to begin evaluating SE’s teaching regarding “Biblical Adoption.” In order to accomplish this purpose we will consider the following four points:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman adoption
  - Adoption in Romans 8
  - Adoption in Romans 9
  - Adoption in Galatians 4
- In this lesson we will limit our comments to the first point listed above: 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman Adoption.

*Note: The reason we are covering this is because secular 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman adoption is appealed to by SE to support their definition of “Biblical Adoption” – that a father adopted his own natural born son or daughter for the purpose of instructing him or her personally in the family business.*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman Adoption**

- SE appeals to 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman adoption to sustain its view that “Biblical Adoption” is a father selecting from his natural born children the one whom he would educate personally in “his business.”
  - “A father adopted his son for the purpose of installing and instilling his wisdom into his son so that the son would labor with his father in all his business.” (McDaniel, Sonship Orientation, Lesson 5, Page 5)
  - See Appendix A on page 8 for more extensive quotations on SE’s definition of “Biblical Adoption.”
- First, in terms of scholarship it is important to note that not one reference to an extra-biblical source is offered to support this notion. Both Newbold and McDaniel appeal to a “Syrian-Roman Law Book” to sustain their notion of “Biblical Adoption,” however, neither of them provides anything by way of source citations that one could use to corroborate their claims.
  - See Appendix B on page 10 for more extensive quotations on SE’s appeal to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman adoption.

- Second, after hours of reading extra-biblical sources from both secular and Christian authors on the adoption practices of Greco-Roman culture, we cannot find even ONE source that could be used to substantiate SE's definition of "Biblical Adoption." At this point in our research it appears that SE's definition of "Biblical Adoption" has been completely manufactured and its appeal to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Roman Adoption to bolster their definition is an intellectual dead-end that serves to undermine their position.
- Third, given the fact that most of Paul's readers in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were slaves, it does not follow that EVERYONE understood adoption in the manner outlined by SE. In fact, it is highly probable that the majority of the Paul's readers DID NOT own family businesses and therefore had nothing to instruct their children in or anything to pass on to their progeny, according to SE's definition.
- Given the FACT that Paul does use the notion of Adoption (Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5) to illustrate a spiritual truth that pertains to the body of Christ, it follows that one must understand how adoption in the Roman world functioned in order to follow/understand Paul's teaching.

#### *Basis in Roman Law*

- "Adoption is the legal device found in many legal systems by which a person leaves his own family and enters the family of another." (Francis Lyall. "Roman Law in the Writings of Paul—Adoption.") "In the Roman law and culture of the first century A.D., an affluent but childless adult who wanted an heir would adopt a post-pubescent male, often a slave, to be his son. Though there were some instances of female adoptees, they were rare. Adoption was one of the few ways a slave could come into the *patria potestas*, the power of the father (R.W. Lee *The Elements of Roman Law*. Sweet & Maxwell, Limited: London, 1946, p. 60)." (Julien, *Coming Home: Adoption in Ephesians and Galatians*)
- "Roman adoption was a very serious matter because of the Roman *patria potestas* (the possession of the father.) The *patria potestas* was the father's power over his family; and this power was absolute; it was actually the power of absolute disposal and control, and in the early times of Rome it was actually the power of life and death. If a deformed child was born it was to be killed immediately. In the case of divorce, custody of the children would always defer to the father because of *patria potestas*. In relation to his father, a Roman son never came of age. No matter how old the son was, he was still under the *patria potestas*, in the absolute possession, and control of the father. Therefore, this made adoption into another family a very difficult and a very serious process." (Valnes, 1-2)

#### *Reasons Romans Would Adopt*

- "Lack of male descendants would be the main reason for Roman adoption. If, in a particular family, there were no one to pass the inheritance down to if there were only daughters, then

adoption of a male would likely take place. Property was generally not handed down to daughters since *patria potestas* was in effect. Females were rarely adopted, and would generally accompany a brother, for they would not be adopted by themselves... Many fathers would allow their sons to be adopted from their plebian (common) families in order to be eligible to run for the tribunal.

What is interesting to note is that the adoption of [infant] children appears to be a rarity at Rome. Much more common was “Adrogatio” – the adoption of a son who was of age, an adult.

How common was adoption in Roman culture? One number calculated was a rather larger figure of 8-9% of magistrates and decurions (members of the city senate) at Pompeii were identified as adoptees.

In adoption a person had to pass from one *patria potestas* to another. He had to pass out of the possession and control of one father into the equally absolute control and possession of another father.” (Valnes, 2-3; See also Hugh Lindsay’s *Adoption in the Roman World*. Pages 3, 5, and 217)

### *Adoption Process*

- “There were two steps to a Roman adoption. Both of these steps were done in the presence of seven witnesses:
  - The first step was known as *mancipatio*, and it was carried out by a symbolic sale, in which copper and scales were symbolically used. Three times the symbolism of sale was carried out. Twice the father symbolically sold his son, and twice he bought him back; and the third time he did not buy him back and thus the *patria potestas* was held to be broken.
  - After the sale there followed a ceremony called *vindicatio*. The adopting father went to the Praetor, one of the Roman magistrates, and presented a legal case for the transference of the person to be adopted into his *patria potestas*. When this process was completed the adoption was complete. Clearly this was a serious and impressive step.” (Valnes, 3)

### *Consequences of Adoption*

- “First, the adopted person lost all their rights in their old family. On the other hand they gained those exact same rights in their new family. They received a new name and a new family.

When we are adopted into the family of God at the time of our conversion we received a new family and technically a new name. We received the name “child (or son) of God” and the family we became a part of is made up of all those that have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. . .

God becomes our *patria potestas*. So often it is hard to grasp that picture of God as our Father. Naturally many of us have a tendency to compare or understand God as our Father in light of our

own relationship with our own earthly fathers. The understanding of God as our “*patria potesta*” can help us picture God as the father he wants us to see himself as.

It is through the spirit of adoption that we come into assured fellowship with God the Father and awareness of this new relationship.” (Valnes, 4)

- “The second significance to Roman adoption was that the adopted child became heir to the new father’s estate.

Even if there were children born naturally to the Father after, the adopted son’s rights of inheritance were not affected in any way. He was equally a joint heir with those later born siblings.

Verse Romans 8:16 states: The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

When we are adopted into God’s family, we became heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ. . .

(Quotes Romans 8:17)

Our inheritance makes us a beneficiary of goods in which we would otherwise be deprived. Through our faith in Christ we become joint heirs with Christ and, as a result, we will be glorified together with Christ.” (Valnes, 4-5)

- “The third significant part of Roman adoption was that the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out, they were regarded a new person entering a new life which the past had nothing to do with.

When Paul uses the imagery of adoption he is talking about how the Romans practiced it. In ancient Rome (just like worldwide today) the Roman family chose the child they wanted to adopt. As part of the adoption and, as we discussed previously, there was a special ceremony where the adopting father went to one of the Roman judges and presented a legal case to justify his right to adopt the child into his own household. Remember that this ceremony was called the “*vindicatio*”.

William Barclay says that when this ceremony was complete, in the eyes of the law the adoptee was a new person. So new... that even all debts and obligations connected with his previous family were abolished as if they had never existed.” (Barclay, 2002)

In other words, once a person went through this *vindicatio* ceremony - every debt he ever had was erased as if it never existed.

This is where we get the English word “vindicate” from and our English dictionaries define vindicate as “to clear of accusation... to absolve... to justify.”

Who I was before I came into my new family had no effect on my new identity. I inherited a history of grandparents and great grandparents and a family history in God's family.

When we are adopted into God's family through the saving work of Christ on the cross, our sins and past are forgotten. We are a new person entering into a family with a clean slate. Our past is erased and we are a new person with a new name in a new family.

Another quote from William Barclay puts it this way: "It was Paul's picture that when a man became a Christian he entered into the very family of God. He did nothing to deserve it; God the great Father in his amazing love and mercy, has taken the lost, helpless, poverty-stricken, debt-laden sinner and adopted him into his own family, so that the debts are cancelled and the glory inherited." (Valnes, 4-5; See also William Barclay *The Letter to the Romans*)

- "The final significant part of Roman adoption was, in the eyes of the law, the adopted child was seen as an absolute child of the new father.

Roman history provides an excellent case of how literally this was held to be true. The Emperor Claudius adopted Nero, so that Nero would succeed him on the throne. They were not in any sense blood relatives. Claudius already had a child, his daughter, Octavia. To solidify the alliance Nero desired to marry Octavia. Now, Nero and Octavia were in no way true blood relatives; yet, in the eyes of the law, they were brother and sister; and before they could marry, the Roman Senate had to pass special legislation to enable Nero to marry a girl who was legally his own sister." (Valnes, 6)

### *Theological Implications*

- First, Romans 8:14 states: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God", that is, we are in God's *Patria postestas*. We are the property of God, owned and possessed.
- Second, Romans 8:15 states "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" – this is an expression of an assured awareness of son-ship!
- Third, Romans 8:16 states, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" – here is the Eternal Holy Spirit that is a witness to our adoption as sons. We do not need seven witnesses when we have a witness that is eternal and is God.
- Fourth, Romans 8:17 states, "and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" – we are joint heirs with Christ, equal in inheritance, and verse 29 also tells us that Christ is the firstborn among MANY brothers!

### Concluding Thoughts

- The “Syrian-Roman Law Book” which is used to support SE’s definition of Biblical Adoption is, as of this date and to the best of our knowledge, not even available in English. This fifth century book is cited in William M. Ramsay’s 1965 publication *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*. The Law Book is first mentioned on page 338 along with the following footnote:
  - “[Mitteis, Reichsrecht und Volksrecht](#), p. 339 ff. The Law Book is published in Syriac and German by Bruns and Sachau *ein rOmischsyrisches Rechtsbuch des fünften Jahrhunderts.*” (Ramsay, 338)
- The Law Book does not prove SE’s definition of Biblical Adoption that a father would adopt his natural born child to be instructed in and run his business. The portion of the Law Book referenced by Newbold and McDaniel merely proves that an adopted son possessed a stronger legal position than a natural born son on account of the adoption process outlined above. In no way does the following passage prove/support the SE definition of Biblical Adoption.
  - “The Roman-Syrian Law-Book—which we have already quoted as an authority for the kind of legal ideas and customs that were obtained in an Eastern Province, where a formerly prevalent Greek law had persisted under the Roman Empire—well illustrates this passage of the Epistle. It actually lays down the principle that a man can never put away an adopted son, and that he cannot put away a real son without good ground. It is remarkable that the adopted son should have a stronger position than the son by birth; yet it was so. Mitteis illustrates this by a passage of Lucian where a son, who had been put away by his father, then restored to favour, and then put away a second time, complains that this second rejection is illegal, inasmuch as his restoration to favour put him on a level with an adopted son, who cannot be turned away in that fashion.” (Ramsay, 352-353)
- In fact, it is our contention that Ramsay’s *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* does more to undermine SE’s position on adoption than it does to support it.
  - “Among the Jews, adoption had no importance, and hardly any existence. The perpetuity of the family, when a man died childless, was secured in another way, viz., the levii’ate. Only sons by blood were esteemed in the Hebrew view: only such sons could carry on the true succession, and be in a true sense heirs. From every point of view the thought in III 7 (Gal. 3:7) is abhorrent to Hebrew feeling. It is one of the passages which show how far removed Paul was from the mere Jewish way of thinking; he differed in the theory of life, and not merely in the religious view. Quite apart from the fact that the Jews naturally abhorred the idea that the Gentiles could become sons of Abraham, the very thought that the possessing of a man’s property implied sonship was unnatural to them. Paul had grown up amid the surroundings and law of Greco-Roman society; otherwise the expression of III 7 (Gal. 3:7) could not come so lightly and easily from him.

Such passages as this have led some very learned Jewish scholars of my acquaintance, whose names I may not quote, to declare in conversation their conviction that the letters attributed to Paul were all forgeries, because no Jew of that age could write like that, whether he were Christian or no. So far as I may judge, they undervalue the cosmopolitan effect produced on the Jewish-Roman and Greek citizens living for generations in Greek and Roman cities, just as much as many distinguished European scholars do, when they fancy that Paul is a pure Jew, unaffected, except in the most superficial way, by Greek education.” (Ramsay, 341-342)

- SE has invented a definition of Biblical Adoption that cannot be substantiated by an extra-biblical understanding of 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman adoption, as they have attempted to do. Consequently, Paul’s use of the metaphor of “adoption” in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians cannot be understood in a manner that is contrary to how his readers would have understood the concept. Furthermore, since the Jews had no concept of this Greco-Roman type adoption, SE is guilty of the worst type of scriptural exegesis by seeking to impose their private definition upon the Old Testament Wisdom Literature and thereby establish a curriculum for Israel’s Sonship Education.
- In the next lesson, we will look at more at Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5 in an attempt to establish a sound definition of Biblical Adoption.

#### *Suggested Further Reading*

Barclay, William. [\*The Letter to the Romans\*](#).

Dauids, P.H. “Adoption” entry in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology Second Edition*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001.

Lee, R.W. *The Elements of Roman Law*.

Lindsay, Hugh. [\*Adoption in the Roman World\*](#).

Lyall, Francis. *Roman Law in the Writings of Paul*.

Ramsay, William. [\*A Historical Commentary of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians\*](#). 1900.

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Ramsay, William. *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*.  
<https://archive.org/details/historicalcommen00rams>.

Valnes, John. *Adoption/Sonship in Ancient Rome*. Western Seminary: December 15, 2011.  
[http://www.academia.edu/4241401/Adoption\\_Sonship\\_in\\_Ancient\\_Rome](http://www.academia.edu/4241401/Adoption_Sonship_in_Ancient_Rome)

## Appendix A

### *Newbold and McDaniel on Biblical Adoption*

<b>Newbold</b>	<b>McDaniel</b>
<p>“And perhaps the most astounding or shocking aspect of ancient adoption is the fact that adoption didn’t just pertain to sons that were outside the family and brought in from some other family—no—ancient adoption included the family’s own genetic sons by blood!</p> <p>. . . The father would want a very strong son—and most of all, he would want a son that would possess the wisdom and the thinking of his father.</p> <p>And the father would also want a son who would be able to take his business and carry on that business, not just any old way—but to carry it on exactly as the father, himself would!</p> <p>And so the father would look over his sons, and if he found one that was willing and able to be educated as his son, in his father’s business—then the father would adopt that son and begin personally teaching all about his business, along with the way he (the father) thought, and pass on all his wisdom and experience to his son—so that his son would take on his father’s thinking, and living, and then <b>as</b> he labored in his father’s business, all of his dealings were as if it were the father, himself who was engaged in the business.</p> <p>It would really be, “Like father, like son!”</p> <p>But sometimes the father would look over his own, natural born sons, and still not be able to find one with the will, the drive, and the ability to be educated properly as his son—and in that case the father could look <b>outside</b> the family and find a child that would fit the bill (so to speak), and he would then adopt that unnatural born son as his adopted son, and then educate him to enter into laboring with the father in all the father’s business.</p> <p>And this was done so that the integrity and the success and the character of the father and the father’s business could be successfully passed on from generation to generation—and it was a way to not only keep the integrity of the father’s name and</p>	<p>“Biblically, adoption was for the natural-born children of a family. That is, a Father would adopt His natural son or daughter. And this was not unusual, but rather, it was the rule. The primary motivation for adoption was not pit or some strong emotion of rescue, but it had in mind the welfare of the family’s name and the family’s business. It is true that on occasion, a man might adopt a son or daughter outside of his own natural children. It may be that he had no children of his own. There is another circumstance that may arise that would have a man adopting someone other than his natural children, but we will discuss that a little later. . .</p> <p>In adoption, the father would be looking for some specific traits in the son or daughter he would adopt. The father did not just want a son that would be able to carry on the family business, but one that would carry on that business with the same commitment and dedication that he had. The father would want a son that possessed his wisdom and way of thinking. In other words, the father wanted a son who would carry on the business exactly as the father himself would. To accomplish this adoption, the father would look over his sons, and if he found one that was willing and able to be educated in his father’s business, then the father would adopt that son and begin personally teaching all about his business. He would teach the son the way he (the father) thought, and pass on all his wisdom and experience to his son. This was so that his son would take on his father’s thinking, and living, and then as he labored in his father’s business, all of his dealings were as if it were the father, himself who was engaged in the business. It would really be, “Like father, like son!”</p> <p>But sometimes the father would look over his own, natural born sons, and still not be able to find one with the desire, the drive, and the ability to be educated properly as his son. In that case, the father could look outside the family and find a child that would fit the bill (so to speak), and he would then adopt a child that was not natural born. The father</p>



<p>the father's business strong, but to insure that it would continue getting even stronger and more powerful as time went on—in other words it was a way to insure the father's business against corruption and weakness and attack and ultimately, failure!" (Newbold, Romans 8 (101-200), Pages 171-173)</p>	<p>would take that son (or daughter) and begin to educate them so they could enter into laboring with father in all his business.</p> <p>This was done so that the integrity and the success and the character of the father and the father's business could be successfully passed on from generation to generation. It was a way to not only keep the integrity of the father's name and the father's business strong, but to insure that it would continue getting even stronger and more powerful as time went on. In other words, it is was a way to ensure the father's business against corruption, weakness, attack and ultimately, failure!" (McDaniel, Sonship Orientation: Lessons 1-2, 5-6)</p>
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## Appendix B

### *Newbold and McDaniel on 1<sup>st</sup> Century Greco-Romans Adoption*

Newbold	McDaniel
<p>“In the Greco-Roman world an unadopted child differed very little, oftentimes, from a slave.</p> <p>But when <i>adoption</i> took place, the change was dramatic!</p> <p>The adoption procedure was usually a pretty formal affair with a lot of symbolic tradition contained in it.</p> <p>It usually involved the child exchanging his clothing—the toga of his youth was taken off and he had put on him the toga virilis—the toga of his adulthood.</p> <p>The adopted son would receive his father’s ring—which gave him the same authority over his father’s business and holdings and money—and it gave him the same powerful stature as his father in the eyes of his country. (Remember this had to be done, even with a natural born son!)</p> <p>And the result of all this ceremony of <i>adoption</i> was that the son would now enjoy all the rights and honor and privileges and liberty as that of the father.</p> <p>But perhaps one of the most striking aspect of being an adopted son in the ancient world had to do with the position that the son had only through being adopted—that is, (and this is critical), an adopted son <b>had a far stronger position</b> than a natural-born child—he had a permanently fixed, powerfully strong legal standing that was greater than any naturally-born son or heir that hadn’t been adopted!</p> <p>And that was a huge deal in connection with estates and wills and contracts and all the legal issues surrounding the father’s holdings and the father’s estate!</p> <p>In fact, an ancient Roman-Syrian Law Book lays down the principle that a father can never put away an adopted son, and he cannot put away a real (natural-born) son without good legal grounds.</p>	<p>“When I talk about “Bible-style” adoption, I am referring to adoption as it was understood and practiced by the Greeks and the Hebrew people. Adoption itself was different, the basis behind adoption was different and the “who” involved in adoption could be very different. . . The Adoption that Paul refers to is different. It usually does not involve a child from another family and it is not because a child has lost his parents and although there may be some “emotions” involved, that is far from the primary thought and feeling involved in the process.</p> <p>Biblically, adoption was for the natural-born children of a family. That is, a Father would adopt His natural son or daughter. And this was not unusual, but rather, it was the rule. . . In the Greco-Roman world, an unadopted child differed very little, oftentimes, from a slave. But when adoption took place, the change was dramatic! The adoption procedure was usually a pretty formal affair with a lot of symbolic tradition contained in it. It usually involved the child exchanging his clothing; the toga of his youth was taken off and he had put on him the toga virilis (the toga of his adulthood.)</p> <p>The adopted son would receive his father’s ring, which gave him the same authority over his father’s business, holdings and money and it gave him the same powerful stature as his father in the eyes of his country. (Remember this had to be done, even with a natural-born son!)</p> <p>The result of all this ceremony of adoption was that the son would now enjoy all the rights, the honor, the privileges and liberty as the father. But perhaps one of the most striking aspect of being an adopted son in the ancient world had to do with the position that the son had only through being adopted; that is, (and this is critical), an adopted son had a far stronger position than a natural-born child.</p> <p>He had a permanently fixed, powerfully strong legal standing that was greater than any naturally born son or heir that hadn’t been adopted! That was very important when it came to dealing with</p>

And the remarkable fact is that the adopted son held a stronger position than the son by birth!

In fact, this Roman-Syrian Law Book actually gives an account of a natural-born son who had been put away by his father, and then restored to favor with his father—but then he did something to get himself put away a second time!

And in this account the natural-born son complains that this second rejection by his father is illegal—inasmuch as his restoration to favor put him on a level with an *adopted son* who cannot be turned away in that fashion!

And these are just some of the issues concerning the particular frame of mind behind the concept of *adoption* as it was used in the ancient world—and as it is being used by Paul in Romans 8.

But perhaps the most critical thing of all to keep in mind in dealing with being an adopted son of your Heavenly Father is that when a child gets adopted as a son—he's considered by the Father to be an **ADULT SON!** And therefore he now has greater privilege and greater advantages, and most of all he now has the **freedom** and **liberty** that goes along with being an adult son!

And that means that the Father is going to treat his adopted son **DIFFERENT** than He would treat his unadopted child!

And when we're talking about this Biblically, that difference has to do with how the child (during childhood) was being raised—and that was under the system of tutors and governors—and all that was how a child was raised under the law!" (Newbold, Romans 8 (101-200), Pages 173-174)

estates, wills, contracts and all the legal issues surrounding the father's holdings and the father's estate.

In fact, an ancient Roman-Syrian Law Book lays down the principle that a father can never put away an adopted son and he cannot put away a real (natural-born) son without good legal grounds. But the remarkable fact is that the adopted son held a stronger position by his adoption than a natural son had by birth. In fact, this Roman-Syrian Law Book actually gives an account of a natural-born son who had been put away by his father, and then restored to favor with his father, but then he did something to get himself put away a second time. In this account the natural-born son complains that this second rejection by his father is illegal inasmuch as his restoration to favor put him on a level with an adopted son who cannot be turned away in that fashion. It is interesting that the position he is turning to is the adopted position, not the natural-son position.

These are just some of the issues concerning the particular frame of mind behind the concept of adoption as it was used in the ancient world and this is exactly how it is being used by Paul in Romans 8." (McDaniel, Sonship Orientation: Lessons 1-2, 6-7)