

Greek Word Studies:

Adoption as sons (5206) (huiiothesia from huios = son + titheimi = place) literally means "to place one as a son". Huiiothesia speaks of being placed in a position of a son or daughter who now possesses the same rights as the parent's natural children. It means to formally and legally declare that someone who is not one's own child is henceforth to be treated and cared for as one's own child, including complete rights of inheritance.

Barnhouse...

Let us take the Greek word apart. It is huiiothesia. The first half is huios, the common noun for an adult son. The latter half is thesia, a placement, an installation, a setting of a person or a thing in its place. So the whole word means not so much adoption as the placing of a son. (God's Heirs: Romans 8:1-39)

Huiiothesia - 5 times all by Paul -Ro 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5 (Not used in the Septuagint -)

Detzler writes that...

Throughout the Greek world the wealthy and influential practiced adoption. Sometimes just a simple declaration in the marketplace turned a slave into a son. It was an ancient remedy used when a marriage failed to produce a male heir. No change in name came, but the adopted son immediately became heir to the entire wealth and position of his adoptive family. Conversely the adopted son also assumed responsibility for the parents in their time of need. Adoption in the Greek and Roman world was a beautiful picture. His contemporary culture gave the Apostle Paul this word, but he gave the word a new, Holy Spirit-inspired meaning. (Only Paul uses this word to describe the relationship of believers to their Heavenly Father.) No concept is more meaningful to a believer. For adoption deposits every-thing that God owns to the accounts of His sons and daughters. Adoption is all about position and privilege... Walking down the dusty streets of Nazareth one summer afternoon I was almost run over by a racing boy. As he charged past me the little lad caught sight of his father. In a shrill, childish voice he screamed: "Abba, Abba." Then I began to understand the intimacy of relationship which God sustains to us. What wonderful, God-ordained words to use in prayer: "Abba, Father." (Detzler, Wayne E: New Testament Words in Today's Language. Victor. 1986) (Bolding added)

The concept of adoption as sons reaches back into the Old Testament, Paul writing in Romans that

For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren (the Jews), my kinsmen according to the flesh (specifically unbelieving Jews), who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons (huiiothesia) and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Ro 9:3, 4,5 -notes)

Comment: God had "adopted" Israel in the Old Testament, Jehovah declaring in Exodus 4:22 to Moses "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is My son, my first-born.'"

The nation of Israel was not chosen by God because they deserved His favor, but because of His unmerited grace and electing love (Deut 7:6ff). Israel was to have been "a holy (set apart from the profanity of the surrounding nations to be a) people to the LORD" Who had chosen them "for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Dt 14:2). Indeed, Jehovah protected, delivered, and chastened Israel, as a father would his own "adopted sons." In contrast to the other NT uses of huiiothesia, here the concept of adoption applied not to an individual, but to an entire nation to demonstrate the undeserved mercy of God. The were chosen by God because of His love (see Isa. 43:20-21).

Here in Ephesians 1:5 Paul reveals the "past tense" aspect of our adoption as sons, an event predetermined in the heart and mind of God before the foundation of the world.

In Romans Paul explains the present tense aspect of adoption as sons when we were born into God's family and God gave us His Spirit Who kindles the fire of assurance in our souls for...

all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery (as when we were bound to sin and our "father" Satan) leading to fear again, but you have received (right now in this life) a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! (Dearest Father)! Father (pater)!" (Ro 8:14, 15-notes)

Comment: Abba is the very name the Beloved Son used when speaking to His Father, Mark 14:36 recording "And He [Jesus] was saying "Abba! (Dearest Father)! Father (pater)! All things are possible for Thee. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt."

Again in Romans 8 Paul writes of the future tense aspect of our adoption as sons...

And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit (i.e., the first fruits is the Spirit, Whose presence in us guarantees the full completion of our salvation), even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons (we were adopted in the past when God predestined us, we are adopted now as believers --see Ro 8:15 above, Gal 4:5 below -- but there awaits the culmination of our privileges and position as adopted sons awaits our future resurrection and glorification - adopted as sons, past, present and future!), the redemption of our body (we have already been redeemed as believers but there is a future culminating redemption when this mortal body will put on immortality in glory). (Ro 8:23-note)

Comment: This future tense aspect of adoption as sons of God includes the ultimate privilege of being like him (1John 3:2-note) and being conformed to the glorious body of Christ [Php 3:21-note]

In a parallel passage in Galatians Paul describes the present aspect of adoption of sons of God writing that...

when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! (Dearest Father)! Father (pater)!" Therefore you are no longer a slave (to sin, Satan or the fear he orchestrates), but a son (we are adopted sons), and if a son then an heir through God." (Gal 4:4, 5, 6, 7)

Comment: The intimacy of our new relationship with God the Father - "Abba! Father!" - stands in striking contrast to our prior relationship of enslavement to Sin.)

Adoption (see ISBE article on adoption) is a well known human institution but supernatural adoption of believers by God is far more than a name. A man adopts one to be his son and his heir that does not at all resemble him, but whosoever God adopts for His child is like Him (2Pe 1:4-note) he not only bears His heavenly Father's name, but His image.

Adoption, was a commonly known legal procedure in the Hellenistic world, the most famous example being Julius Caesar's adoption of his great-nephew Octavius, who later succeeded him as the emperor Caesar Augustus. Often a wealthy, childless man would adopt a young slave, who would trade his slavery for sonship, with all its concomitant privileges. This adoption meant at least three things all of which have spiritual parallels for believers who are now sons and daughters of God...

(1) It brought about a total break with the old family and a new family relation with all its rights, privileges and responsibilities. The adopted person lost all rights in his old family, and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate son in his new family. In the most literal sense, and in the most binding legal way, he got a new father!

(2) The adopted son became an heir to his new father's estate. No matter how many other sons there were at the time or how many were born thereafter, he was co-heir with them. This was not subject to change.

(3) The old life of the adoptee was completely erased. All debts and obligations were legally canceled. The adopted son was regarded by the law as a new person. William Barclay cites a case in Roman history that shows how completely this was true. The Roman emperor Claudius adopted Nero so that Nero could succeed him as emperor. Claudius had a daughter named Octavia. Nero wished to marry Octavia to seal the alliance. Although they were not blood relations, in the eyes of the law they were now brother and sister and could not marry. The Roman senate had to pass a special law in order for them to marry.

In like manner, believers, when they are adopted, are removed from under the authority of their previous father, Satan (see Jn 8:44) and are given a new Father. They are guaranteed an inheritance with all the children of God, and as Paul explains later (Ep 1:14-note) the Holy Spirit is the down payment and guarantee of their inheritance. The Spirit is also the witness that adoption has taken place (Ro 8:14, 15-notes). Finally, the adopted sons are new persons, in that all their sins are forgiven, and they have a clean slate before God. What a tremendous blessing to know that God has made us His own and that this was predetermined most likely before the foundation of the world "according to the kind intention of His will"!

Second, it is the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of adoption who is given to us as a permanent witness to our adoption. It is the Spirit who assures believers of their relationship with God and causes them to cry "Abba, Father" (Ro 8:15-note; Gal. 4:5). And not only this, but it is the Spirit who assures believers of their freedom from the bondage of the law (Gal. 4:5) and frees them from fear (Ro 8:15-note).

Finally, while adoption is a present possession for believers, it also has a future aspect. Although believers have received the "first-fruits of the Spirit," they are still waiting for the redemption of the body, which is considered to be part of "the adoption" (Ro 8:23-note). It will be complete only when Jesus returns and changes this vile body into a glorified one.

S Lewis Johnson writes that when Paul used adoption as sons he may have had in mind the idea of true adoption as practiced in the Roman Empire at that time in history. Johnson goes on to say that...

a true adoption, (is the process) by which an individual is taken out of one family and put in another family. In the Roman world, the family was based on what was called the patria potestas, that is "the father's power." The father had absolute power among the Romans. He not only had absolute power over his children so far as disciplining them is concerned, but he had power over them as long as he lived. He could actually put children to death in Roman Law. In fact, even when a son became a magistrate, he was still under his own father. So, for a child to be taken out of one Roman family, and placed in another family, was a very, very significant thing. In fact the ceremony is so interesting I'm going to read a little bit to you about it.

Deon Cassius tells us that the Roman Law was that the Law of the Romans gave a father absolute authority over his son, and that for the son's whole life. It gives him authority, if he so chooses, to imprison him, to scourge him, to make him work on his estate as a slave in fetters, even to kill him. The right still continues to exist even if the son is old enough to play an active part in political affairs, even if he's been judged worthy to occupy the magistrate's office, and even if he is held in honor by all men. It is quite true that when a father was judging his son, he was supposed to call the adult male members of the family into consultation, but it was not necessary that he should do so. There are actual instances of cases in which a father did condemn his son unto death. Silast, in the Catiline Conspiracy, tells how a son called Allus Fulvius joined the rebel Cataline. He was arrested on the journey and brought back. And his father ordered that he should be put to death. The father did this on his own private authority. The father gave as his reason, "He had begotten him not for Cataline against his country, but for his country against Cataline."

Under Roman Law a child could not possess anything, and any inheritance willed to him or a gift given to him became the property of the father. So it was a serious step to take a child out of one family and put him another. The ritual of adoption must have been very impressive. It was carried out by a symbolic sale in which copper and scales were used. Twice, the real father "sold" his son, and twice he bought him back. Finally, he sold him a third time and at the third sale, he did not buy him back. After this, the adopting father had to go the praetor, one of the principal Roman magistrates, and plead the case for the adoption. And only after all this had been gone through was the adoption complete. But when the adoption was complete, it was complete indeed. The person who had been adopted had all the rights of a legitimate son in his new family and completely lost all rights in his old family, and furthermore all his old debts were considered to be paid "he was a new person. (Ephesians 1:1-4 The Work of the Father - Audio)

Puritan Thomas Gataker writing on adoption into God's family noted that...

"The least degree of sincere sanctification is a certain sign of adoption, a sure argument to [the Christian] that he has it, that he is the adopted child of God."

Gerald Cowen has some thoughts on huiothesia...

Huiothesia (adoption) is formed by combining huios (son) and thesis (a placing) and literally means "the placing as a son" or "adoption." Vine says that huiothesia "signifies the place and condition of a son given to one to whom it does not naturally belong."

In the Greek world the word is found only as early as the second century B.C.; however, the concept of adoption (place a son) is much earlier. In Crete (fifth century B.C.) adoption had "to take place on the market-square before the assembled citizens and from the speaker's tribunal.

The rules allowed adoption even when there were already male descendants . . . The adopted son is introduced

.. . and inscribed in the koina grammateia. "4 This process was usually connected with the making of a will. Moulton and Milligan cite an example from the Greek papyruses:

We agree, Heracles and his wife Isarion on the one part, that we have given away to you, Horion, for adoption our son Paternmouthis, aged about two years, and I Horion on the other part, that I have him as my own son so that the rights proceeding from succession to my inheritance shall be maintained for him.

In the Jewish world official adoption was not practiced. The word is not used at all in the Old Testament. It is referred to by Jews living outside Israel, such as Philo. However, he used it in a figurative sense to refer to the relation of the wise person to God.

In Roman society the father had absolute power over his family; in the early days, at least, he had power of life and death over them. Barclay adds, "In regard to his father a Roman son never came of age. No matter how old he was, he was still under the patria potestas."⁵ Therefore, for a son to be adopted, he had to be transferred from under the authority of his father to another's, which was equally absolute.

There were two steps. The first step was called MANCIPATIO. It consisted of a mock sale in which the father twice symbolically sold his son, and twice bought him back. The third time he did not buy him back.

The second step was a ceremony called VINDICATIO. The new father went to a Roman magistrate and presented the proposed adoption before him. When this was finished, the adoption was complete. This ceremony was carried out in the presence of seven witnesses. This was in case some dispute arose after the death of the adopting father, so that the inheritance of the adopted person was guaranteed.

In the New Testament "adoption" is used only by Paul. On one occasion he referred to Israel's adoption by God as His chosen people (Rom. 9:4). The other four references speak of the believer's relationship with God. Romans 8:15 says, "For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." In the same chapter (Ro 8:23), adoption is spoken of as future (at least partially): "But ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." Galatians 4:5 gives further explanation of this concept of adoption. Jesus came to redeem those under the law "that we might receive the adoption of sons." Then Paul spoke of adoption as already complete: "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts" (author's italics). Ephesians 1:5 explains that adoption was part of God's will from ages past: "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of His will."

The use of huiiothesia in the New Testament can be summarized as follows. First, it speaks of the special relationship believers have with God. It speaks of "sonship," but one distinct from that assured by natural descent. In this respect the believers are contrasted with Jesus. Believers are put into the relationship of sons by adoption; Jesus is the unoriginated, unique Son who always was the Son and therefore did not need to be adopted. Second, it is the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of adoption who is given to us as a permanent witness to our adoption. It is the Spirit who assures believers of their relationship with God and causes them to cry "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5). And not only this, but it is the Spirit who assures believers of their freedom from the bondage of the law (Gal. 4:5) and frees them from fear (Rom. 8:15). Finally, while adoption is a present possession for believers, it also has a future aspect. Although believers have received the "first-fruits of the Spirit," they are still waiting for the redemption of the body, which is considered to be part of "the adoption" (Rom. 8:23). It will be complete only when Jesus returns and changes this vile body into a glorified one.

Adoption, as it was practiced in the Roman world of Paul's day, meant three things. Barclay points out, "The adopted person lost all rights in his old family, and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate son in his new family. In the most literal sense, and in the most binding legal way, he got a new father."⁶

Next, he became an heir to his new father's estate. No matter how many other sons there were at the time or how many were born thereafter, he was co-heir with them. This was not subject to change.

Finally, the old life of the adoptee was completely erased. All debts were legally canceled. He was regarded by the law as a new person. Barclay cites a case in Roman history that shows how completely this was true. The Roman emperor Claudius adopted Nero so that Nero could succeed him as emperor. Claudius had a daughter named Octavia. Nero wished to marry Octavia to seal the alliance. Although they were not blood relations, in the eyes of the law they were now brother and sister and could not marry. The Roman senate had to pass a special law in order for them to marry.

In like manner, believers, when they are adopted, are removed from under the authority of Satan and given a new Lord, who is now also their Father. They are guaranteed an inheritance with all the children of God, of which the Holy Spirit is the down payment and guarantee. The Spirit is also the witness that adoption has taken place. Finally, they are new persons, all their sins are forgiven, and they have a clean slate before God. What a tremendous blessing to know that God has made us His own. (Salvation- Word Studies from the Greek New Testament- Gerald Cowen)

Through (1223) (dia) is a preposition of intermediate agency. Christ is the intermediate agent of the Father to bring to fruition His purpose of placing believers as adult sons through His finished work on the Cross, satisfying the just requirements of God's law that we broke.

To Himself (846) (auto) refers to the Father Who had previously marked us out with a view to adopting us as sons for Himself for His own satisfaction that He might lavish His love on us.

God has preordained that we would share His very nature...like Father, like son! Am I living up to my potential in Christ? Peter phrases the same idea this way calling us partakers of His divine nature...

For by these (His own glory and excellence) He has granted (perfect tense = an abiding gift, speaks of permanence of the grant, He won't renege on His word to His beloved!) to us His precious (costly, valuable, same word used of the blood of Jesus in 1Pe 1:19 [note]) and magnificent (very great, exceeding great, preeminent, in a sense beyond adequate description) promises (assurances), in order that by them (by what? His promises -- which means we need to saturate our mind with His word of Truth that the Spirit would renew our thinking) you might become partakers (those who commune, have fellowship with, partner with, are companions with - Do you really believe this? Does your everyday life demonstrate to the lost world you believe this radical truth?) of the divine nature (no, we are not "little gods", but His life is now our life Col 3:4 - notes, His Spirit now our enablement, Ep 5:18- notes), having escaped (note past tense! The verb is unique and means we have escaped completely! Sure we are in the world, but we are no longer of this decaying world which is passing away) the corruption (state of ruin, decay, deterioration) that is in the world by lust (epithumia). (2Pe 1:4-note)

ACCORDING TO THE KIND INTENTION OF HIS WILL: kata ten eudokian tou thelematos autou: (Ep 1:9-note; Ep 1:11-note) (Daniel 4:35; Matthew 1:25; 11:26; Luke 10:21; 11:32; Romans 9:11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16; 1Corinthians 1:1,21; Philippians 2:13; 2Thessalonians 1:11)

According to (2596) (kata) does not mean out of but in proportion to. Let's illustrate. If I am a billionaire and I give you ten dollars, I have given you out of my riches; but if I give you a million dollars, I have given to you according to my riches. The first is a portion while the second is a proportion." In this case the phrase introduces God's sovereign motivation for predestining believers to adoption as sons.