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## An Identity Received from God

### The Theological Configuration of Paul's Kinship Discourse

Im Gegensatz zu jüngeren Paulusdeutungen, die den Standpunkt vertreten, dass der Apostel die Ethnizität der „Heiden“ neu bestimme, zeigt eine Untersuchung zweier paulinischer Motive („Nachkommen Abrahams“ und „Annahme als Söhne“) die Vorstellung einer Identität, die von Gott geschaffen und in Israel paradigmatisch verwirklicht ist. In ihrer integrativen Differenziertheit ermöglicht diese Form der Identität die Beibehaltung ethnischer Partikularität innerhalb von Gemeinschaften, in denen sie zur gegenseitigen Aufwertung beiträgt.

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The recent surge of interest in the “ethnic” language of Paul is entwined with a number of ideological battles over the legacy of Paul and its contemporary meaning. That is neither a surprise nor regrettable, but it is as well to be conscious of what is here at stake. The study of “ethnic reasoning” in early Christianity by Denise Kimber Buell has an explicit ethical purpose.<sup>1</sup> In reaction to the modernist acclamation of Christianity as a “universal” religion which rises above “ethnic” particularities, Buell notes the way that, in the name of anti-racism, this configuration of Christianity has perpetrated an antipathy to Judaism, which is often negatively portrayed as a persisting “particularity.”<sup>2</sup> In a tradition that goes back at least to Ferdinand Christian Baur, “Jewish particularism” has been depicted as a past and now outdated stage, “a stepping-stone to the universalism of Christianity, in which all nations should be embraced.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a claim

1 D.K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York, 2005).

2 D.K. Buell, “Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition,” *HTR* 94 (2001), 449–476.

3 F.C. Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1 (trans. A. Menzies from 2nd ed.; London, 1876), 309. Worse, according to Baur, “it was necessary that the particularism of Judaism which opposed to the heathen world so repellent a demeanour and such offensive claims, should be uprooted, and that the baselessness of its prejudices and pretensions [be] fully exposed to the world’s eye. This was the service which the apostle

to transcend “ethnicity” has often masked the colonial imposition of European forms of Christianity, or fostered notions of religion as an abstract and disembodied phenomenon. In contrast, Buell aims to show how many early Christian texts use ideas about “peoplehood” in their strategies of persuasion, such that Christian “ethnicity,” in one form or another, is not denied but positively embraced.<sup>4</sup>

A similar critique of Christian “universalism” has been levelled against “the new perspective on Paul”: its negative judgments on Jewish “nationalism” and ethnic “narrowness” have taken the place of the older critique of Jewish “legalism” but from this perspective look equally problematic.<sup>5</sup> Joining forces with Buell, and developing the Gaston-Gager tradition of Pauline interpretation, Caroline Johnson Hodge has argued that, far from transcending or dismantling ethnicity, Paul’s theology is fundamentally concerned with the formation of ethnic identities, and especially with the affiliation of gentiles to Israel as the means to overcome their alienation from “the God of Israel.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing from recent discussions of ethnicity in anthropology and politics, Hodge understands the language of “ethnicity” as a “doubled discourse” that employs notions *both* of fixity *and* of fluidity: ethnic claims can be alternately, or even at the same time, about a “real,” primordial and immutable identity *and* about an identity that is manifestly situational, malleable and “fictive.” Rather than playing off one against the other, or placing them at opposite poles of a spectrum, Hodge stresses how in antiquity and today “ancestry” can be manufactured and lineages adapted, while ethnic identity is produced by social and ritual practice. At the same time such fictive claims gain force by

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[Paul] did to mankind by his magnificent dialectic” (*The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, vol. 1 [trans. A. Menzies from 3rd ed.; London, 1878], 57).

- 4 Buell’s broad definition of “ethnic reasoning” enables her to place in one category very different types of “ethnic” representation of the Christian movement, as (1) a “third” or “new” ethnic entity, distinct from “Greeks” and “Jews”; (2) an all-embracing people, as universal as the human race; (3) a people whose roots lie in the Hebrew nation, now augmented (or superseded) by gentiles; and (4) the offspring or people of God. I shall argue below that this last is a quite different form of identity.
- 5 The echoes in the “new perspective” of F.C. Baur’s configuration of universalism and (Jewish) particularism were noted and developed by D. Boyarin, who took this reading of Paul as correct (Paul’s spiritualizing universalism being a product of his Hellenization), but then reacted against it in the name of postmodern Jewish particularity: see his *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, 1994). For analysis, see J.M.G. Barclay, “Neither Jew nor Greek: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M.G. Brett; Leiden, 2002), 197–214.
- 6 D.K. Buell and C.J. Hodge, “The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul,” *JBL* 123 (2004), 235–251; C.J. Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford, 2007).

being essentialized, as if they were biological or fixed, their “reality” being, in effect, just how persuasive they can be. On this view, Paul’s claims that his converts are “seed of Abraham” and “children of God” should not be dismissed as “mere metaphor”: they represent serious rhetorical work however “non-biological” they may seem. The whole point of Pauline theology, for Hodge, is not to erase or deny ethnicity, but to reformulate gentile ethnicity in Christ as a form of aggregation or affiliation to Israel, and at the same time to affirm the superiority of Jewish ethnicity, which remains unaffected by the gentile-focused work of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Others have discussed to what extent ethnicity is central in Paul’s theological discourse,<sup>8</sup> but my focus here will be different. I wish to examine two significant and intertwined clusters of kinship discourse in Paul – offspring of Abraham and adopted sons – first as they appear in Galatians, and then (briefly) as they reappear in Romans. “Ethnicity” is a slippery term in this context, not only because of the radical instability just noted but also because its modern definitions contain a varying list of factors, and it is uncertain whether it should be taken to be a monothetic category (where “ancestry,” real or fictive, is a *sine qua non*) or polythetic (where no one criterion, even ancestry, is necessarily present).<sup>9</sup> Thus Jewish “ethnicity” can be taken to be primarily about descent, or primarily about social customs and characteristics (which could be shared by those with no Jewish ancestry), or a combination of the two. I will focus here on Pauline discourse which is unambiguously about kinship, and my aim is to show that in Paul’s configuration of this language his stress lies on a form of identity that is radically contingent on the creative action of God, and thus a *type of identity* which cannot be mapped onto the ethnic identities claimed or ascribed by human beings. An identity received from God neither enhances ethnic identities nor excludes them; in its non-exclusive difference it frames ethnicities (along with other forms of human identity), without replacing them or forming a new ethnicity of its own. The special attention given by Paul to Israelite identity is not an exception to this rule, but its manifestation, because for Paul Israel’s identity, uniquely,

<sup>7</sup> See further, C.J. Hodge, “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles – but also Not – in Pauline Communities,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (ed. M.D. Nanos and M. Zetterholm; Minneapolis, 2015), 153–173.

<sup>8</sup> S. Buttica, “Vers une anthropologie universelle? La crise galate: fragile gestion de l’ethnicité juive,” *NTS* 61 (2015), 505–524.

<sup>9</sup> For a well-known recent discussion of ethnicity, with six core factors, see J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith, *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996). On the distinction between monothetic and polythetic categories, see J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), 1–18.

is not human-made but received from God. Israel is thus the pioneer and exemplar of what all humanity, Jews and gentiles, are given to be in Christ.

## 1 Offspring of Abraham: Receiving an Identity Created by God

Both in Galatians and in Romans Paul draws a close connection between Abraham and both Jewish and non-Jewish believers-in-Christ, and each time he uses kinship language to express this link. In Galatians “those from trust” (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως) are “sons of Abraham” (υἱοὶ Ἀβραάμ, Gal 3:7), since Abraham “trusted in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (3:6) and since the Scripture foresaw and pre-preached the good news that “all the nations will be blessed in you” (3:8).<sup>10</sup> That blessing is presented as a promise (3:14) which was made to Abraham and “to his seed” (τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ, 3:16), a figure identified as Christ (3:16). With the coming of that seed or promise (3:19), and thus the coming of “trust” (3:23–25), the gentile Galatians who are baptized into Christ and belong to Christ are said to be “seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). There are two kinds of connection to Abraham here: the gentiles are sons of Abraham via “trust” (3:7) and seed of Abraham via Christ (3:29). What gentiles share with Abraham is a trust-relation to a promise, which was pre-preached to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ.

How is this Abrahamic kinship to be understood? Since Paul uses the phrase σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ elsewhere (2 Cor 11:22), in association with other words that could be taken to depict “ancestral” identity (“Hebrews” and “Israelites”), one might conclude that what is in mind here is simply genetic descent: “in Abraham” (Gal 3:8), that is “in his loins,” as the descendants of the seed already contained in his body, the Galatian gentiles can identify themselves as his physical but non-Israelite offspring. Paul knows Abraham, indeed, as the “father of many nations” (Rom 4:17–18, citing Gen 17:5), but hardly in this sense. The Galatian believers are Abraham’s sons not by birth but in relation to the correspondence between his and their trust (Gal 3:6–7), and it is only as they belong to Christ that they can be labelled his offspring (3:29). As a variant on the genealogical understanding of the matter, Matthew Thiessen has recently argued that Paul interpreted the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be

<sup>10</sup> For “trust” as a translation of πίστις, see T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, 2015).

like the stars (Gen 15:5) to mean that they would be the pneumatic stuff of which the stars were composed, and that this is now true of gentile believers: they have received the promised πνεῦμα (Gal 3:14) by incorporation into the “seed” of Abraham (Christ, 3:16) and thus qualify as the promised genealogical descendants of Abraham (3:29).<sup>11</sup> This is a bold hypothesis, but it contains a number of gaps. There is no evidence that Paul took Gen 15:5 in the sense suggested here, or that he understood the πνεῦμα received by believers to be the stuff of the stars. More particularly, the connection that Paul draws between believers and Abraham is emphatically on the basis of their common πίστις (Gal 3:7; cf. Rom 4:23–24). This points away from a physical/genealogical connection between believers and Abraham, however much they are certainly connected to *Christ* through the indwelling Spirit (Gal 4:4–6). They have the πνεῦμα of Christ, but Paul makes no connection between the πνεῦμα and the status of “seed of Abraham.”

Noticing the significance of πίστις, Hodge has suggested that Abrahamic lineage could be interpreted in moral terms.<sup>12</sup> Because ethnicity and social traditions were (and are) mutually reinforcing, it was possible for people to acquire the ethnicity of others by sharing their ancestral traditions even if their ancestry was utterly unrelated. If the Greeks manifested their ethnicity by the way they spoke, behaved and sacrificed, others could become Greek by speaking, behaving and sacrificing in the Greek style. In similar vein, Philo could speak of proselytes acquiring “noble birth” (εὐγένεια) by adopting the Jews’ religious and ethical modes of life.<sup>13</sup> Hodge reads πίστις in Gal 3 as “faithful characteristics and actions,” showed first by Abraham and then by his descendants, as secured by the faithfulness of Christ: “Abraham’s trustworthy response to God constitutes the human action which generates this lineage.”<sup>14</sup> By adopting the

11 M. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford, 2016), 105–160. “Paul makes it clear that it is not faith as such that makes one a son of Abraham; rather faith brings the *pneuma*. Since those who are out of faith receive the *pneuma* of Abraham’s seed, Christ, they too become Abraham’s seed. The reception of the *pneuma* thus provides Gentiles with a new genealogy so that they become truly descended from Abraham, not through the flesh but through the *pneuma*. Paul does not reject genealogical descent; instead he envisages a newly possible pneumatic form of such descent” (105–106).

12 Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* (see n. 6), 79–91, taking the preposition ἐκ in οἱ ἐκ πίστεως (Gal 3:7) as a marker of ethnic descent. She also, however, finds a more physical link in the notion that the gentiles were present in Abraham’s body from the beginning (“in you”); see *ibid.*, 93–107.

13 Philo, *Virt.* 211–227. Abraham is the standard of εὐγένεια for proselytes who have abandoned idolatry and “come to settle in a better land” (219).

14 Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* (see n. 6), 80, 87.

character and behavior of πίστις, the Galatian gentiles have acquired an Abrahamic lineage, becoming like him in the pattern of their lives.

But πίστις in Gal 3 is hardly the character trait of “trustworthiness” or “faithfulness” as envisaged by Hodge.<sup>15</sup> What is shared here between Abraham and gentile believers is not something that can be imitated or inherited, but an orientation to a divine reality which is not within the determining power of the persons concerned. Since all the references to πίστις (and the one use of πιστός) in Gal 3:6–26 follow from the lead verb, πιστεύειν, of Gal 3:6 (derived from Gen 15:6), they are better taken in the sense of “trust,” rather than the ethical sense of “faithfulness.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the context of Gen 15:6, cited in Gal 3:6 – a context that, as we can see from Rom 4, Paul knows very well – concerns not Abraham’s faithfulness to God’s instructions but his trust in God’s promise, and it is no accident that the language of “promise” dominates the second half of Gal 3. What Abraham and the gentile believers have in common is not something that they are or have, but something that they expect or are given (3:18, 22). Their identity is determined by what is beyond themselves: if they live ἐκ πίστεως, they live by trust in a divine promise which is expected (Abraham) or fulfilled (for Christ-believers) in the form of “the seed,” Christ. In other words, Abraham and believers are related to each other by their common relation to a divine reality on which they in parallel ways depend. Nothing is here “passed on” from father to children (by genealogical descent or by moral association) since what they share is not a human capacity or commodity, but a divine gift that calls or “reckons” them into existence.

That this is Paul’s peculiar construal of Abrahamic identity is clear in the allegory of Gal 4:21–5:1, a passage replete with the kinship language of mothers, births, sons/children, and inheritance. Viewing Abrahamic identity through the double prism of the Sarah-Hagar stories and the oracles of Isaiah, Paul traces in fact two forms of Abrahamic kinship, one (through Hagar) κατὰ σάρκα (4:23, 29) and the other (through Sarah) δι’ ἐπαγγελίας (4:23) or κατὰ πνεῦμα (4:29). The latter label has encouraged a notion of Abrahamic identity which is “spiritual” in the sense of non-material, a matter of the spirit or mind that is universal precisely because it is not confined by the physicality of body and birth.<sup>17</sup> But that is not what

<sup>15</sup> To be sure, it is also not “an abstract, private disposition of the mind” – the alternative she poses as a foil.

<sup>16</sup> The verb πιστεύειν does not mean and cannot mean “to be faithful” in the sense of “to be trustworthy.”

<sup>17</sup> See Boyarin, *A Radical Jew* (see n. 5), for a classic version of this reading.

the text implies. Both Ishmael and Isaac are real physical people, as are the people who correspond to them in Paul's present day, the persecutors and the physically persecuted (4:29; cf. 6:17: "I bear in my body the marks of Christ"). Rather, what impresses Paul about the birth of Isaac is that he is the product of a promise, a miracle-child born from the barren womb of Sarah. Hence the connection to Isa 54:1 (cited in Gal 4:27), where births are celebrated that are unexpected, counter-intuitive, and beyond the ordinary patterns of human possibility.<sup>18</sup> The Abrahamic children of this line are "children of the promise" (4:28), a form of kinship that is manifestly dependent on a divine creative *fiat*.<sup>19</sup> Their mother is the "Jerusalem above," since they are suspended from a reality that cannot be determined in human terms.<sup>20</sup> The contrast between children born κατὰ σάρκα and children of the promise (or children born κατὰ πνεῦμα) is thus the contrast between those whose existence is not derived from divine intervention and those whose lives are radically contingent, not self-constituted or human-made but constituted by God. And this, says Paul, is the form of kinship operative in Christ (5:1).

Such divine generation stands in a non-exclusive relation to human forms of ethnicity. It does not operate on the same level as human ethnic identities; it is not an ethnicity of the same kind which must therefore exclude, embrace, or expand other ethnicities. Being of a different order it *frames* all ethnic identities and thus variously profiles, critiques or relativizes their characteristics according to its own terms of reference. To be a "child of the promise" does not mean that one ceases to be a Jew or a gentile, any more than one ceases to be male or female (Gal 3:28). To the extent that those differences are part of the valued variety within the body of Christ, they are a mutually enriching element of a necessary inner diversity (1 Cor 12:12–28, where diversity in the one body includes the ethnic diversity of "Jews" and "Greeks," 12:13). But what those persisting

<sup>18</sup> For the fit here, see M. de Boer, "Paul's Quotation of Isaiah 54.1 in Gal 4.27," *NTS* 50 (2005), 370–389.

<sup>19</sup> The theme is brought out differently, but equally clearly, in Rom 4, where God's promise of the miraculous birth of Isaac, an event wholly dependent on the power of God to bring life out of death, is the focal point of Abraham's trust, and closely parallel to the trust of all believers (Rom 4:17–25).

<sup>20</sup> The precise reference here is disputed: some find echoes of Jerusalem as the mountain of the Lord "above" (Isa 2:1–4), others of an eschatological Zion (e.g., 4 Ezra 10:25–54). For the latter, see A. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Cambridge, 1981). The important point is that the origin of believers cannot be plotted by the normal co-ordinates of space and time.

identities mean, what value they are given, and how such particularities are continued and negotiated will depend on how they relate to a kinship which is not higher on the same scale but of a different order. “Children of God’s promise” are certainly born through the normal human processes, and will certainly inhabit, and continue to inhabit, an ethnically particular location in society. But God’s creative election cannot be reduced to such phenomena. Paul had a well-rooted location in the Jewish tradition (Gal 1:14–15) and continues to identify himself as a Jew (2:15), but his position in Christ is not reducible to such ethnic facts since it is the product of a divine decision and a calling-in-grace before he was born (1:15–16).<sup>21</sup> The Galatian gentiles have experienced the same calling-in-grace (1:6), and it is important to Paul that they remain gentiles (and are not “Judaized,” 2:14), even if their calling by God requires that they abandon their ancestral traditions of “idolatry.” The remaining ethnic differences between Paul and his gentile converts are framed by a commonality which is not another human ethnicity but a new creation (6:15), an identity received from no human source (whether humanly ascribed or humanly achieved) but from God.

Returning to these same patriarchal stories in Rom 9, Paul makes a bold claim that Israel is constituted from the beginning as the bearer and paradigm of this “God-created identity,” and in this sense is *not* one ethnic group among others, but a people specially constituted and generated by the will and the mercy of God. “Not all descended from Israel are Israel” (9:6), because Israel is not an identity that can be appropriated by human beings, nor is it inherent in the normal systems of generation and descent.<sup>22</sup> Israel-identity is thus neither “primordial” nor humanly constructed. “It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise will be reckoned as the seed” (9:8). As in Galatians, the emphasis is on *God’s* promise, God’s creative intervention (“I will come,” 9:9), and a “calling” (9:7) that is less a “naming” and more a

21 I thus disagree with Love Sechrest’s depiction of Paul as “a former Jew,” while agreeing with her thesis that Paul’s identity in Christ is by no means reducible to his ethnic identity, nor even always expressed through it. See her *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race* (London, 2009).

22 I read οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραήλ (Rom 9:6) as “those descended from Israel,” in view of the immediate context, which concerns patriarchal descent. Even if ἐξ is read in a partitive sense (as Michael Wolter argues in his forthcoming commentary), Paul’s concern is not to identify an “inner” Israel within Israel (still less a “true” Israel within a larger “ethnic” Israel), but to indicate that Israel is not constituted simply by natural descent; see my analysis in *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2015), 526–536.



“calling-into-being” (9:12, 25).<sup>23</sup> Step by step through Rom 9 Paul shows how God’s people are a radically dependent phenomenon, generated by nothing other than God’s elective calling and will (9:11). They are the product of his mercy (9:16), subject to God’s selection, judgment, and reduction, as also to supplementation by gentiles when God reconstitutes those who are “not my people” as “my people” (9:24–26). This chapter makes as clear as possible that Israel is not self-constituted, self-authorized, or self-defined. If we wish to speak of “ethnicity” here, we have to reckon with a form of identity which follows neither a fixed line of descent nor a malleable human construction, but is founded on divine agency and divine intervention, and is thus theological to the core without being in the least abstracted from the flesh-and-blood lives of ordinary and particular people.<sup>24</sup>

## 2 Adopted by God: How Gentiles and Jews Become Children of God

One way to acquire a new familial identity in Paul’s world was by the mechanism of adoption.<sup>25</sup> This legal procedure (in more than one form) is reasonably well known through Roman law, and was apparently practiced especially by elite Roman families.<sup>26</sup> Those who had much to lose if their property and familial “name” was not passed on to the future, but who lacked a male heir of their own, could adopt the sons of relatives or friends. As James Scott notes, by this procedure “a person who was not by birth part of the family was made son of an adoptive father, in order that he might carry on the nomen, the pecunia, and the sacrum of a family which might have otherwise died out.”<sup>27</sup> The procedure was famously utilized by Julius Caesar (who adopted Octavius) and by Octavius/Augustus and his

23 See B. Gaventa, “On the Calling-into-Being of Israel: Romans 9:6–29,” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (ed. F. Wilk and J.R. Wagner; Tübingen, 2010), 255–269.

24 For a theological reading of the identity of Israel, and of Rom 9–11, parallel to mine, see T. Givens, *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* (Minneapolis, 2014).

25 Whether adoption, or something equivalent, was practiced among Jews is uncertain. For an argument to this effect, see J.M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus* (Tübingen, 1992), 61–117, with particular reference to 2 Sam 7:14. It was certainly familiar to Jewish authors such as Josephus and Philo.

26 For Roman law, see J. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford, 1998), 114–208.

27 Scott, *Adoption as Sons* (see n. 25), 9.

successors, in order to secure the imperial succession.<sup>28</sup> In Roman law, the adopted son acquired a new status and was subject to a new *paterfamilias*, with all the rights and duties of an heir destined to inherit the property of his new father. There was nothing “fictive” about adoption: the legal procedure *created* a new person in the sense that from henceforth the adopted son was in every respect the son and heir of the father. He acquired thereby a new ancestry and a new set of kinship relations which redefined who he was, both objectively and in subjective truth.<sup>29</sup>

Paul uses the language of adoption in three places: at Rom 9:4 as the first of the listed characteristics of Israelites; in Rom 8 in a discussion of what it means to be “led by the Spirit of God” and therefore sons of God (8:15, 23); and in Gal 4:5 where the sending of Christ, the Son, has as its purpose “that we may receive adoption as sons” (ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν). In the latter two cases it is clear, and in the first at least implicit, that the agent who does the adoption and therefore creates new sons is God (through the agency of the Son and the Spirit of the Son). This is not about adoption into a superior, wealthier or more prestigious human family. There is no human father who makes this decision and enacts this change: when those who are adopted cry “Abba, Father,” they do not address “Father Abraham” or “Father Paul,” but God (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15).<sup>30</sup> Here again the new kinship created is not comparable with, and therefore not in competition with, a human form of kinship. Those who are adopted as sons of God do not thereby *lose* their human familial or ethnic identities. But they are given a new identity, wholly dependent on and determined by the agency of God. As “sons of God” they do not cease to be human (embodied, living, humanly particular beings), but their identity is no longer reducible to human terms. Their humanity is framed by a God-given and God-sustained identity.

The adoption text in Gal 4 is particularly interesting as it is part of a narrative (4:1–7) which at first sight appears puzzling. These verses follow the depiction of a period when “we” were “under the law,” as under a παιδαγωγός, a time-limited period “until Christ” or “until the trust which was due to be revealed” (3:23–25). With the arrival of Christ, “you are sons

<sup>28</sup> See, most recently, R.B. Lewis, *Paul’s “Spirit of Adoption” in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London, 2016). *Pace* Lewis, I find no evidence that the *imperial* usage of adoption was particularly important to Paul, even when he wrote Romans.

<sup>29</sup> The masculine language is inherent in this discourse, since the adoption of daughters (who could not inherit) was very rarely practiced in antiquity.

<sup>30</sup> Of course, Paul can figure himself as a father of his converts (1 Cor 4:15; Phlm 10), and as their mother (Gal 4:19).

of God, through trust, in Jesus Christ” (3:26), a change of status enacted and displayed in baptism, when believers participate in Christ: “for as many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ” (3:27). That narrative, and especially the metaphor of the *παιδαγωγός* (the slave tasked with supervising children until they become adults), might suggest a transition from immaturity to maturity, a coming-of-age when the children finally acquire adult freedom. On this reading, baptism might even be construed as a coming-of-age ritual, a transition to adulthood for those who were already heirs *de iure*, and were simply waiting for the years to elapse.

In Gal 4:1–7 Paul re-runs this narrative, again as a transition from the condition of being “under” to the condition of being sons. It is made clearer now how the coming (or sending) of Christ, as Son, is connected to the son-status of those in Christ, but otherwise the narrative line appears the same and it finishes on the same theme of being an heir (4:7; cf. 3:29). But in this second version of the narrative there is a crucial twist that seems to undercut the logic of the narrative itself. In the description of the condition “under” in Gal 4:1–2, the child (*νήπιος*) is described not just as governed or disciplined, but as “no different from a slave, although he is master of all” (*οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου κύριος πάντων ὄν*, 4:1). That he is under overseers and stewards until the time set by “the father” might suggest that he is already a son, simply a son in his childhood. But to describe his status as “no different from a slave” adds a jarring note. However similar sons in their minority and slaves might seem in their everyday treatment (subject to physical punishment and to the *auctoritas* of their superiors), they are categorically different in legal status, rights and expectations (e. g., a slave cannot inherit and therefore cannot be an heir). But this description, “no different from a slave,” it turns out, is not just hyperbole, but is crucial to the theological sense of the narrative that Paul is telling. Outside of the analogy it corresponds to the *real* condition of the “we” who are described in Gal 4:3: “so also we, when we were children, were enslaved under the elements of the cosmos.”

We will return to the identity of this “we” below, but for now our focus is on the shape of this narrative. The initial status of those who will be, by the end of this story, sons is now no longer that of legitimate or natural born sons who are simply in their minority, but that of slaves who require not maturation but emancipation. Indeed, if they are *slaves*, but are going to end up at the end of this story as sons, they require far more than the passage of time, a period of growing up and some coming-of-age ceremony, because a child slave who grows up is simply an adult slave, and not

a son. What is required for a slave to become a son is a combination of manumission and adoption, first being changed in status from slave to freedman, and then being made, by adoption, the father's heir.<sup>31</sup> And this is precisely what is spelled out in the double purpose clause of Gal 4:5, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ, ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν. Slaves are here both bought out of slavery and granted adoption as sons.

The apparent mismatch between the analogy of the minor awaiting the time set by his father (4:1–2) and the narrative of *emancipation* and *adoption* (4:3–7) has baffled readers. It is clear on linguistic grounds that the term υἰοθεσία cannot be taken to mean “sonship,” as if all the minors needed was a confirmation or display of their inherent and continuing status as sons.<sup>32</sup> Lexical usage is unambiguous, and the term can mean only “adoption,” the making of sons out of those who were not sons before.<sup>33</sup> Many therefore regard Paul's analogy in Gal 4:1–2 as unsuccessful, an extended metaphor that “limps”; some consider the passage so self-contradictory that it must be the product of more than one hand.<sup>34</sup> The text would indeed look wholly incoherent had Paul not inserted into the analogy the statement about being “no different from a slave” (4:1). One may ask how in reality a minor, however dominated by his overseers, could lose his son-status and become, in fact, a slave, but it seems that for Paul the tension between the analogy (4:1–2) and the application (4:3–7) expresses something fundamental about the Christ-event: what happens here is not the reform or development of an existing human condition, nor the realization of a latent human potential, but a radical alteration of status made possible only through the agency of God.<sup>35</sup>

31 Examples of this double move are extremely rare; see Scott, *Adoption as Sons* (see n. 25), 85–87.

32 B. Byrne's otherwise valuable thesis errs, I think, on this point: “*Sons of God*” – “*Seed of Abraham*”: *A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul against the Jewish Background* (Rome, 1979); among other reasons for his judgment, he notes the incongruity between Gal 4:1–2 and 4:3–7 if the term is translated “adoption” (183 n. 174).

33 For examination of this term and its semantic field, see Scott, *Adoption as Sons* (see n. 25), 3–117.

34 For the former opinion, see, e. g., M. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky., 2011), 258–261; for the latter, see J.C. O'Neill, *The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (London, 1972), 56.

35 I am not convinced by Scott's reading of Gal 4:1–2 as referring to the Exodus narrative (the heir as Israel, under Egyptian overseers and enslaved, despite being the son of God and due to inherit the world), which stands in typological correspondence to the new Exodus in Christ, described in Gal 4:3–7: see Scott, *Adoption as Sons* (see n. 25), 149–185. For critique, see, e. g., J.K. Goodrich, “Guardians, not Taskmasters: The Cultural

Who are the “we” in this narrative, and to whom does it apply? The emphatic καὶ ἡμεῖς in Gal 4:3 brings this question to the fore, but the shifts in Gal 4:5–7 from first person plural to second person plural subjects (“because you are sons”), to first person plural pronoun (“our hearts”), to second person singular subject (“so you are no longer a slave, but a son”) have caused considerable debate. The discussion of this matter (and of related variations in subjects and pronouns in Gal 3:13–14, 23–29) goes back at least as far as Augustine, and in current debate the reading of “we” as referring specifically to Jews or Jewish believers (an interpretation many centuries old) has gained renewed currency.<sup>36</sup> This would echo the “we Jews” of Gal 2:15 as part of a wider network of hints in this letter, clarified in Rom 9–11, that Paul regards Jews (as the “Israel of God”) as enjoying a special relationship to God, different from that of other peoples.<sup>37</sup> This would be confirmed by the notice that Christ was himself “under the law” (Gal 4:4) and came to buy out of slavery “those under the law” (4:5), both phrases appearing to describe Jews who lived under the authority of the Torah (cf. 1 Cor 9:20). The biggest obstacle to the reading “we = we Jews” (apart from the fact that in Gal 4:6 the “our” appears inclusive of all believers) is the statement that “we were under the elements of the cosmos” (4:3) – a condition that in Gal 4:8–9 is associated with gentiles who worshipped “no-Gods” and were governed by the physical constitution of the world in their adherence to the rhythms of the calendar.<sup>38</sup> In fact, there is no insuperable difficulty in Paul characterizing life under the Torah as another form of slavery to the “elements of the cosmos,” since in Gal 4:9 he accuses the Galatian converts, who want to come “under the law” (4:21) of wanting to go *back* (in this new form) under these same elements. On this reading, the narrative of Gal 4:1–7 starts out as a narrative of Israel’s “slavery” (despite its relationship to the Father) which needed to be overcome not by a period of maturation but by *liberation* and *adoption* as sons of God. By the end of the paragraph, the same transition from slave to son is said to be true also of gentiles (4:6–7).

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Resonances of Paul’s Metaphor in Galatians 4.1–2,” *JSNT* 32 (2010), 251–284. Among other things, the present tense in Gal 4:1–2 renders Scott’s reading implausible.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., T.L. Donaldson, “The ‘Curse of the Law’ and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3.13–14,” *NTS* 32 (1986), 94–112. For further details, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (see n. 22), 419, n. 70–71.

<sup>37</sup> Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (see n. 22), 418–421.

<sup>38</sup> On the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, see M. de Boer, “The Meaning of the Phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Galatians,” *NTS* 53 (2007), 204–224.

An alternative reading takes the “we” throughout to apply to both Jews and gentiles, who are similarly taken as included in earlier statements about the curse, the παιδαγωγός, and life “under the law.”<sup>39</sup> Given the universality of Paul’s statements about the human plight in Gal 1:4; 2:15–16 and 3:22, this is certainly possible. What seems impossible is to take this paragraph as referring *only* to gentiles, on the grounds that Paul is speaking throughout this letter to gentile converts and uses “we” only as a form of rhetorical identification with them.<sup>40</sup> Paul may be writing *to* gentiles, but that does not mean that he is writing *only about* them: he makes explicit, for instance, that what is said of justification and of baptism is true of both Jews and non-Jews (2:15–16; 3:26–28). It seems clear enough that the status of “adopted son” applies to all believers and applies to them in Christ. If adoption is enacted or expressed in baptism, both Jews and gentiles experience it there, as all there “put on Christ” and receive the Spirit (3:27–28; cf. 1 Cor 12:13). For our purposes, what is important is that in that adoption they do not develop a natural or inherent sonship status but receive it through a divine initiative that is beyond their control and outside their choice. They become sons only through the sending of the Son, participating in a son-status that is not theirs by origin or right, but first and foremost his. And that new adopted status is expressed by the cry of “Abba, Father,” which is first and foremost not their cry but the cry of the Spirit of the Son (τὸ πνεῦμα [...] κρᾶζον, Gal 4:6; cf. Rom 8:15–16 where “our” cry constitutes the witness of the Spirit to our spirit). In other words, this adoption is not aggregation into a human genealogy but participation in the sonship of the Son (cf. Rom 8:29), and it is brought about not by human agency but by a divine act of sending, liberating, and calling. To be a child of God is to be suspended from a divine decision, with an identity borrowed from the Son and generated by the Spirit. This is a form of identity neither (putatively) “fixed” by birth nor “fluid” by social construction, nor generated by a combination of the two. It is not a given but a gift, an identity received “from above,” derived not from human say-

<sup>39</sup> For this reading, see, e.g., H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (KEK 7; Göttingen, 1971), 193; J.L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, 1997), 334–336; de Boer, *Galatians*, (see n. 34), 258–268. Many take the “we” as applying primarily, or in the first instance, to Jews, but also, secondarily, to gentiles: see, e.g., J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Gentiles* (London, 1993), 212.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* (see n. 6), 69–77, 198 n. 35. She takes the phrase “under the law” also to refer only to gentiles (124–125), though she admits that this is hard to justify in the reference to Jesus coming “under the law” (Gal 4:4).

so but from a divine call.<sup>41</sup> As if to underline the point, Paul finishes our paragraph with a lapidary phrase whose brevity worried the scribes: to be a son and heir comes to pass plainly and simply διὰ θεοῦ (4:7).

The argument that the narrative of adoption in Gal 4:1–7 could apply only to gentiles and not to Jews might be supported by an appeal to Rom 9:4, where, as we have noted, υἱοθεσία is the first of the entities attributed to Israelites. Thus for Hodge, “the whole analogy, in which the ‘slaves’ become adopted sons of God, makes no sense for Jews, who already enjoy this status (Rom 9:4).”<sup>42</sup> That takes us back to Rom 9–11 whose argument is that Israel, properly known as “children of God” (9:8), has its special status created and sustained not by some natural or enduring right, but by the will and the mercy of God.<sup>43</sup> The history of Israel, as Paul traces it in these chapters, has included many times when Israel was reduced to a remnant and sustained only then by the mercy of God (9:27–29; 11:1–6), and many cases of “hardening,” most especially in Paul’s own day (11:1–10). As he views his present, Paul sees many falling on the stumbling block which is Christ (9:30–32), and some branches of the olive-tree cut off for their unbelief (11:17–24). Any confidence he has for their future depends not on the secure position of Israel, but on the inexplicable mercy of God. In fact, God has consigned all (both Jews and gentiles) to *disobedience* in order that he may have mercy on all (11:32).

Thus “adoption as sons” – living from the creative mercy of God – is the proper condition of Israel, but is a function not of its ethnic continuity but of its life drawn, continually, from the mercy of God. The olive-tree analogy makes this point with remarkable clarity. Being God’s plant is Israel’s proper condition (Israel is the cultivated olive-tree, and this is “its own” tree, ἰδία ἐλαία, 11:24), but it is possible for branches to be cut off from that tree, even if they may be later regrafted by God (more naturally than for gentiles, who are the wild olive branches grafted in). Crucially, Israel’s source of life in this analogy is not its own resources (its history, its ethnic continuity, or its rights), but “the richness of the root” (11:17), on which gentile believers now also draw. A good case can be made that this

<sup>41</sup> According to Gal 4:9, it is more properly to be understood as the product of divine knowing than human knowledge. For this reason, the people of God is, as Givens puts it, “always visible but not totally visible to itself as it unfolds in time” (*We the People* [see n. 24], 116).

<sup>42</sup> Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs* (see n. 6), 71. She elsewhere writes: “[Paul’s] concern is not whether Israel will receive God’s promises and blessings; they already have these (Rom 9:4)” (99); “The *Ioudaioi* are marked by ethnic continuity and the Greeks by ethnic disruption and rearranging” (141).

<sup>43</sup> For this reading of Rom 9–11, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (n. 22), 520–561.

“root” may be identified as the mercy or the calling of God; or if there is allusion to the patriarchs, as many think, what is important about them (as is clear in Rom 9:6–13) is not their virtues but their calling and selection by God.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Israel is constituted by radical dependence on the election and the mercy of God: its proper identity is the paradigm of what all now become by trust in Christ. Israel’s identity has always been derivative and received, created and sustained by the calling of God. For Israel now to believe in Christ – to receive again its adoption as sons (Rom 9:24–26) – is to become more like itself, receiving the life of God in the form of the Spirit of God’s Son (Gal 4:4–6). The Christ-event for Paul creates not an alteration in Israel’s identity but its proper fulfilment, because its identity is and always has been of a peculiar kind. Even when Israel is perpetuated “according to the flesh” by the normal means of human generation, it is also at the same time, and much more importantly, generated by God.

When gentiles trust in Christ they are grafted by God into this root. They do not become Israel but they join with Israel in becoming a “sharer in the root of richness” (συγκοινωνός τῆς ρίζας τῆς πλοῦτητος, Rom 11:17), that is, in the mercy or grace of God. To use the language of ethnicity, they are not given Israelite ethnicity, but they acquire *the same form of ethnic identity* that is proper to Israel, that is an identity derived *from God* and acquired by divine adoption. They are related, in common with Israel, to the God who constitutes Israel. To describe this God as “the God of Israel” might give the impression that the God in question is a national deity, like “the gods of Rome,” determined by the cultural history of Israel. Of course, Israel’s Scriptures and tradition have borne witness to this God, but God is, for Paul, not an ethnic deity but the God of all creation (1:18–22; 11:36), the God of gentiles as well as of Jews (3:30). In that sense, it is better to speak of “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16; cf. “the assembly of God,” 1 Cor 10:30–31), since Israel’s identity is always derivative from God and not the other way around. It is because Israel has been and continues to be generated by God, and bears witness to God, that it is special, but the admission of the gentiles in the wake of the Christ-event now makes its specialness, paradoxically, no longer unique. Now those who are called, both Jew and gentile, are constituted “sons of the living God” (Rom 9:26).

<sup>44</sup> Israel is “beloved on account of the fathers in accordance with the election, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28–29). For this reading of the olive-tree analogy and the root, see my *Paul and the Gift* (see n. 22), 550–556.



### 3 Conclusions

We may draw a number of conclusions from this brief survey of some key Pauline texts:

(1) If believers are accorded in Christ a kinship or “ethnicity,” it is important to be clear what sort of phenomenon this is. In discourse limited by anthropological or political tools of analysis, ethnicities may be represented as “primordial” (natural, given and inherited) or as “processural” (socially constructed and rhetorically negotiated), or as a subtle mixture of the two. Within these terms, some ethnicities seem more fixed, others more flexible, and others again a strategic combination of both kinds. What this analysis cannot handle (except as a mythological construct) is the specifically *theological* forms of identity evoked in the Pauline letters, which represent the believers’ identity as something received from outside human agency.<sup>45</sup> As “seed of Abraham” believers are “children born of promise,” generated by a divine calling. As “adopted sons of God,” whose sonship is constituted by divine *fiat*, believers are in the uncomfortable position of not deciding who they are. Their ethnicity is decided for them, not by powerful human agents but by the God who calls them into existence. This is for gentiles the fulfilment of what was promised to Abraham, and for Jews a re-grounding of their identity as the Israel of God. For both, the Christ-event forms the moment when the gift of identity from God comes to its climactic and definitive expression.

(2) Because the kinship received from God is not another form of human ethnicity, it is not in competition with human ethnic identifications. Those who are called include both Jews and gentiles (1 Cor 1:24; Rom 9:24) and they do not lose, and do not need to lose, their ethnic identities. Being an adopted child of God is not a higher identity on the same scale, but an identity of a different sort, which reconfigures the significance of those other identities but does not erase them. Thus the differential worth associated with ethnic labels, as with the labels “slave” and “free,” is discounted, because the only proper worth is to be found in the identity derived from God (Phil 3:2–11). But there is no necessary competition between being “Greek” and being “a child of the promise” because the latter is not an identity of the same sort. It is “spiritual” not in

<sup>45</sup> Where she notes Paul’s theological language, Hodge notably alters the terms of his discourse. Thus adoption “creates a kinship relation between gentiles and Abraham” (not between Jews and gentiles *and God*); this kinship is “defined and arranged by God” (not created by God); and “God is in charge of lineages” (Hodge, “Question of Identity” [see n. 7], 162–163).

the sense of being “non-material” or “non-embodied,” somehow floating free from the physicality of embodied practice, but in the sense that it is generated by the Spirit which penetrates and shapes material practices without being reducible to them. In this sense, the identity of those in Christ is universal, because it belongs to no-one and is not determined by any human condition; but it is not non-particular in the sense of abstracting believers from their cultural and ethnic identities. It is both universal *and* particular, because its universality pertains to its divine origin and its particularity to its varied human expressions.

(3) The particularities of ethnic (and other differences) are thus by no means erased, but they are re-evaluated for their coherence with, and serviceability for, an over-riding loyalty. Particularity cannot be absolutized, because difference is not accorded an independent, self-justifying value, and in the evaluation of specific particularities there can be no prior assumption of unqualified endorsement. Whatever damages the human fulfilment that is entailed in kinship with God has to be exposed and critiqued, whatever its ethnic pedigree. At the same time, the new identity given by God takes its shape (not its origin) in a life of human reciprocity and mutual construction, and within that process difference is of inestimable value. As is indicated by Paul’s body metaphor (in which ethnicity is named as one form of internal difference, 1 Cor 12:12–14), differentiation, and the particularity from which it arises, is essential for the well-being and mutual development of the whole. The erasure of ethnic difference would create a homogenization deeply damaging to the life of everyone, and in this sense difference is to be cherished, not for its own sake, but for the sake of its contribution to the community as a whole. Ethnic and cultural plurality is thus highly valuable, and no ethnic tradition can be considered complete and sufficient unto itself.

(4) Israel is not a typical ethnic group for Paul, and what his letters say regarding Israel cannot be taken to be typical of his attitude to “ethnicity” in general (assuming he had such a thing). Israel is a unique phenomenon for Paul, a people created and sustained by God through a merciful design that now, in Christ, includes Jews and gentiles alike. When being a Jew becomes a matter of human pride, divorced from the “upward calling” which is Israel’s proper orientation, it is discounted for the sake of “knowing Christ Jesus” and being grasped by God in him (Phil 3:2–16). But when being a Jew, or (in more resonant theological terms) being an “Israelite,” is a witness to the elective grace of God, this must be affirmed as a sign that God has not abandoned the people he created, but sustains them still by grace (Rom 11:1–6). The particularity of Israel, a people

uniquely called by God, witnesses, paradoxically, to the universality of grace, because the mercy that sustains Israel is unconditioned and therefore unconstrained by ethnic limits.

(5) This reading of Paul provides exactly what Buell and Hodge are looking for, but were unable to find: a form of universalism that is equipped to combat racism without ending up anti-Jewish or denying the particularity of Israel.<sup>46</sup> So long as one figures Pauline identities in purely human terms, it seems impossible to escape the horns of the dilemma, validating either a human universalism that threatens to obliterate particularity (especially Jewish particularity) or human particularities that all too quickly reinstate ethnic hierarchies. One may, of course, take up a stance outside of Paul's own theology, and categorize his language of a God-determined identity as a form of ideological mythology. And one may certainly point to the ways in which Pauline theology could be (and has been) used to suppress cultural difference in the name of a Christian universalism that was simply Western colonialism in disguise and contributed to a supersessionist rhetoric that has had appalling consequences for Jews. But if one reads Paul's theology on his own irreducibly *theological* terms, one may also find in Paul the tools for a non-supersessionist construal of ethnicity that can critique both our modernist analytical tools and our long and calamitous history of faulty Christian reasoning.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Note their disappointment with their own solution: "We find that a dynamic approach to race and ethnicity does not produce an interpretation of Paul's vision as ideal, insofar as it structurally subordinates one ethnoracial group [gentiles] to another [Jews/Judeans]" (Buell and Hodge, "Politics of Interpretation" [see n. 6], 250).

<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to colleagues at the Lausanne colloquium, at which a first draft of this article was aired, for their shrewd suggestions, and to David Horrell for his typically incisive questions through email correspondence. I am fully aware that many of my comments only touch on exegetical problems and theological questions that deserve much fuller treatment.