Adopted heirs: A metaphorical exploration of Ephesians 1:3–14[1]

Abstract: This article demonstrates that adoption is the central metaphor in Ephesians 1:3–14, with the Roman's cultural model of household relations providing the framework for understanding the believer's relationship as sons of God. Applying cognitive linguistic metaphor theory, the analysis shows how the concrete logic of Roman adoption offers coherence to these verses, which are often viewed as a list of unrelated doctrines of salvation. Terms such as 'choosing,' 'inheritance,' 'redemption,' 'sealing,' and 'having access' are linguistic shortcuts that evoke the overarching Adoption metaphor. This perspective sheds light on Paul's portrayal of God as including both Jews and Gentiles in his family, yielding richer insight into the discourse's meaning for its original audience.

Keywords: Ephesians, cognitive linguistics, metaphor, adoption, Graeco-Roman contexts.

A fresh look at Ephesians 1

Picture a bustling Roman marketplace, where amidst the trade and chatter, a solemn ceremony unfolds. A man adopts another—not a child, but an adult—sealing a bond stronger than blood. This scene is not just a glimpse of Roman culture but the key to unlocking the heart of Ephesians 1:3–14. In this passage, the familial relations of God as Father and believers as sons provide the essential conceptual framework for its understanding.[2] Though many interpret this passage as a mere affirmation of theological concepts (such as predestination and election), it is the metaphor of Adoption that truly drives the discourse, with the intimate language of family permeating the text.[3] This text's emphasis falls on God's adoption of believers into his household through Christ. This perspective reveals that notions of intimate belonging and

[1] The author of this paper initially presented this same argument as part of the Tyndale House Conference in 2021, under the title, 'The medium is the message: How the "household" is key to understanding Ephesians 1:3–14.' This paper provided a metaphorical reading of Ephesians 1:3–14, grounded in cognitive linguistics and the Roman's cultural model.

[2] The use of the gendered term 'son' throughout this analysis, rather than the more inclusive 'child,' is crucial for this study. Adoption as 'daughters' would have conveyed different social connotations and expectations than adoption of sons. Sons had higher status, more honor, and more power. So even female converts share in the status of 'sons' in the household. Since the metaphorical logic of this passage derives its meaning from the household adoption customs of its original audience, it is important to preserve the term 'son' to preserve those contextual associations.

[3] Elma M. Cornelius identifies five attributes of God in this passage: holiness, love, grace, glory, and sovereignty; see 'Attributes of God in Ephesians: Meaning and Relevance,' *HTS Teologiese Studies* 77.4 (2021): 1–11.

conferred inheritance, rather than a list of disconnected metaphors related to salvation, unify Ephesians 1:3–14.

To start, the significance of kinship relations in Ephesians 1 has been overshadowed by scholarly focus on the familial language in Ephesians 5–6. As Daniel Darko observes, 'The appropriation of kinship lexemes in Ephesians has received little or no significant attention in the study of social identity of its readers/hearers.'[4] He concludes that, first, 'Ephesians uses kinship lexemes consistently to promote concord in the church and in the household of the readership'[5]; and, second, 'This notion of kinship is likely to evoke an emotive response based on the reader's concept and experience of household relations.'[6] Darko convincingly demonstrates that kinship promotes unity in the church, but he does not clarify how kinship language is present in Ephesians 1:3–14.

Timothy Gombis has rightly challenged approaches that would treat this letter as 'a doctrinal treatise, as if Paul sat down during one of his missionary journeys and composed a series of reflections.' [7] In Gombis's opinion, 'We are not rightly reading Ephesians if we view it as a collection of facts that need to be extracted, removed from their context and arranged into a doctrinal system in another setting.' [8] Gombis's overall argument is simple: Ephesians invites believers to inhabit and participate in the drama of redemption. Although I agree with Gombis's general thesis, his argument juxtaposes doctrine and drama, creating an unnecessary dichotomy and constructing a narrative at odds with the scenario depicted in Ephesians.

Erin M. Heim has published an excellent book on the adoption metaphor in Romans and Galatians. However, she chose to overlook Ephesians 1:3–14 because the 'adoption metaphor in Eph 1:5…occurs in the context of a prayer rather than within the main argument of the letter.'[9] Her reasoning reflects two misunderstandings that I am trying to correct in this paper.

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[4] Daniel K. Darko, 'Adopted Siblings in the Household of God: Kinship Lexemes in the Social Identity Construction of Ephesians,' in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 333.

[5] Darko, 'Adopted Siblings,' 345.

[6] Darko, 'Adopted Siblings,' 339.

[7] Timothy G. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2010), 14.

[8] Gombis, *Drama*, 15.

[9] Erin M. Heim, *Adoption in Galatians and Romans: Contemporary Metaphor Theories in the Pauline Huiothesia Metaphors*, BibInt 153 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1 n.3.

First, the adoption metaphor is an extended metaphor that unifies the whole section, it is not limited to Ephesians 1:5. Second, the theme 'in love you were predestined to be adopted as sons' becomes the foundation upon which Paul builds his argument in the rest of the letter, as this paper will demonstrate.[10] Ephesians 1:3–14 is not an isolated prayer, completely disconnected from the letter's main argument.

As posited in this paper, the broader theme of the Household serves as the backdrop for the concept of adoption, and adoption, in turn, is the experience that provides meaning to what would otherwise be unrelated images.[11] The central extended metaphor present in Ephesians 1:3–14 is being in a relationship with god is being adopted as son; adoption focuses on the initiation of that relationship. The familial, relational language surrounding adoption then functions metonymically, with terms like inheritance, redemption, sealing, and access drawing meaning from their association with the adoption experience in the ancient world. This passage's key message is that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ becomes the believers' Father through adoption. In brief, the household with its kinship ties provides the conceptual glue that holds this passage together.

To build the house of this paper's argument, groundwork must be laid. The foundation is dug by defining key concepts from metaphor theory: frames, metaphors, and extended metaphors (the cognitive linguistics toolkit).[12] With the footing set, we can build the walls and structure by summarising the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultural backgrounds that form the framework and guide the original audience's comprehension of adoption (the cultural lumberyard). Finally, the roof beams and trusses come together by demonstrating how adoption

[10] The author of this paper is arguing from the understanding that Paul wrote Ephesians as a circular letter to churches throughout Asia Minor, including Ephesus, around A.D. 60–61. See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 50, 52; Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1—3*, AB (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 1–3, 41, 51; H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 60–61, 96; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 19; Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters:* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 268; Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 25, 47.

[11] In cognitive linguistics, it is customary to capitalise the first word of a frame: Football, Restaurant, Church, Journey, and Family. It is also customary to use small caps to name metaphors.

[12] Cognitive linguistics is a developing discipline that started in the 1980s with the work of Charles Fillmore, Len Talmy, Ronald Langacker, Mark Johnson, and George Lakoff. Other important pioneers in the field are Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (conceptual blending), Eleanor Rosch (categorisation), and Paul Kay (cross-linguistic colour categories and construction grammar). While linguists sometimes refer to cognitive linguistics as a single theory, it constitutes a group of theories and approaches (linguistics, neuroscience, embodied cognition, and computer science) that study the connection between language and thought, see Mark Johnson, *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason: How Our Bodies Give Rise to Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1–34.

functions as the extended metaphor of Ephesians 1:3–14, unifying and structuring the discourse (the textual blueprints). Ultimately, this study's foundation, framework, and blueprints elucidate how the household metaphor architecturally grounds Ephesians 1:3–14. We will move from room to room through each element, all of which are vital for this reading.

1. The Foundation: terms in cognitive linguistics

To better understand the discussion that follows, consider this: in a heated conversation, someone calls someone else a heretic. Those observing this conversation immediately know that a broader picture exists, without knowing the details of the dissent. As expected, this requires a dissenter, a community or group, and a doctrinal corpus against which the heretic's views are measured.[13] Thus, a term or word evokes a scenario, and the scenario has participants, interactions between the participants, events, and objects that fulfil a role. It is in this 'script' that a linguistic expression finds its meaning, and this script is what cognitive linguists call a frame. A frame is 'a script-like conceptual structure that describes a particular type of situation, object, or event, and the participants and props' involved in it.[14] It is important to keep in mind that 'when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text…all of the others are automatically made available.'[15]

Biblical scholars have highlighted the significance of 'background' knowledge. Similarly, cognitive linguists have emphasised 'how frame semantics offers a more precise path to visit cultures and contexts, particularly by the way the frame and its elements become structures in the cognition of the individuals that constitute a community, in this case the authors and audiences of the biblical texts.'[16] In order to lay the foundation for this study, it is important to explain the framework of cognitive linguistics to understand how culture and context shape meaning.

[13] Charles Fillmore, 'Frame Semantics,' in *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*, The Linguistic Society of Korea, ed. (Seoul: Hanshin, 1985), 111–38.

[14] Josef Ruppenhofer, Michael Ellsworth, Miriam R. L. Petruck, Christopher R. Johnson, Jan Scheffzyk, 'FrameNet II: Extended Theory and Practice,' (2010) 5 (https://framenet2.icsi.berkeley.edu/docs/r1.5/book.pdf).

[15] Fillmore, 'Frame,' 238; Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17.

[16] Oscar E. Jiménez, *Metaphors in the Narrative of Ephesians 2:11–22: Motion towards Maximal Proximity and Higher Status*, eds., Stanley E. Porter, Jesús Peláez, and Jonathan M. Watt. *LBS* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 34. For a fully developed treatment of frame semantics, metaphors, and metonymies, see Jiménez, *Metaphors*, 28–35.

The study of frame semantics is important for this paper for two reasons. First, frame semantics help us understand metaphors and how they work. At the outset, Lakoff and Johnson defined metaphors as the 'understanding and experiencing [of] one kind of thing in terms of another.'[17] Recently, Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser refined this definition, explaining that a metaphor is understanding and experiencing one frame (the target) in terms of another (the source).[18] Typically, a source is more concrete, while a target is more abstract. For example, when someone says 'GOD IS MY ROCK,' aspects of that person's understanding and experience of a rock are used to explain and understand that person's experience of God.

Second, since this article aims at understanding how first-century readers might have understood and experienced the household, we need to try to reconstruct the potential conceptual frame evoked in the audience's minds. For instance, someone deeply involved in theological discussions possesses a more intricate cognitive association with 'heretic' than someone with a cursory understanding of religious dissent. However, both would grasp that a heretic challenges established doctrines. Despite variances, people draw on common experiences as part of their frame. And these shared cultural/social experiences are called a prototype or an ICM (idealised cognitive model), defined as 'the encyclopaedic, flexible, slightly idiosyncratic nature of knowledge networks that we have in our heads,' in reference to a particular experience when a term is used.[19] In brief, words evoke underlying frames learned through accumulated encounters within a particular culture. With this background in cultural frames, it is time to examine metaphor theory and its terminology more closely.

Metaphor and metonymy derive from frames that shape people's conceptual systems. As mentioned, frames represent knowledge structures in people's minds, based on common experiences. However, metaphors and metonymies function in different ways.

A metaphor is understanding one conceptual frame in terms of another, often mapping from a more concrete experience onto a more abstract experience: mapping some attributes of the experience of Roman adoption onto the believers' relationship with God. In contrast, metonymy relies on conceptual proximity and association within the same overall frame. It activates relations within the same frame (or experience). For instance, referring to a 'crown' metonymically evokes an entire royal scenario involving power, rule, and sovereignty. These

[17] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

[18] Dancygier and Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, 14 (italics original).

[19] Jeannette Littlemore, *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10–11.

distinctions will be important to understand why Ephesians 1:3–14 is an extended metaphor, while many of its images, often understood as isolated metaphors, are actually metonymically connected—that is, they all belong to the same frame (or experience). Equipped with this understanding of metaphorical mappings and metonymy, we are prepared to see how adoption functions as an extended metaphor in Ephesians 1:3–14.

2. The Walls: the household frame in the first-century world

What do people envision when they hear words like 'father,' 'family,' or 'household'? The possible connotations attached to each of these words are endless. Therefore, to avoid imposing our modern and personal frame on the text, researchers need to immerse themselves in both the world of the first-century and the intertextual connections between the various, relevant frames that might inform the audience's conceptual system: the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds.

Of course, 'communication is always culturally embedded, and cultures are never monolithic (not now, not then). Instead, we should expect overlap, clash, and blending from beginning to end.'[20] However, the differences between cultural specifics are minor when compared with the cross-cultural similarities and dynamics of households in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman contexts. As Sandra Richter has helpfully summarised, Israel's society was patriarchal (the oldest living male member of the family helped structure the larger society), patrilineal (ancestral descent, tribal affiliation, and inheritance were traced through the male line), and patrilocal (the living space/household of the family unit was built around the oldest living male).[21] In harmony with the Jewish frame, Roman familial life was patriarchal and patrilineal. *Familia* refers to all the persons who are under the power (*potestas*) of the *pater familias* either by nature (i.e., descent) or by law (i.e., adoption or ownership).[22]

Jewish Household	**Roman Household**
Patriarch: The oldest living male	*Pater familias*: The oldest living male
Household: The *bêt ʾāb*	Household: The *domus*

[20] Jiménez, *Metaphors*, 96.

[21] Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010) 25–40. Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968); Max Weber, 'Bureaucracy' and 'Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism,' in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds., Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 2.956–1069.

[22] R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75.

Jewish Household	Roman Household
Household members: Wife, his unwed children, and his married sons with their wives and children.	Household members: wife, children (born to or adopted), relatives, domestic slaves, and other dependents, freedmen, or clients. [23]

As demonstrated, the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds of the first-century had household practices in common: both were patrilineal and patrilocal. However, Roman-era adoption was centred on the adoptive parents' interests: securing an heir to continue the family line and to steward wealth. It was less about the adoptee's welfare and more about finding someone suitable for receiving the privileges and duties of inheritance. For this reason, when interpreting the Adoption frame in Ephesians 1, it is reasonable to conclude, as Erin Heim asserts, that Paul 'is trading primarily on the Roman concept.' [24]

By contrast, traditional Jewish laws emphasised blood lineage (e.g., the Levirate law) rather than adoption. When the idea of adoption does arise in the Old Testament—Moses and Esther being two primary examples—it is similar to modern notions of adoption, being focused on protecting and caring for the children. Given the difference between the New Testament and Old Testament concepts of adoption, each one evokes a different frame for adoption that maps and conveys different connotations onto the metaphor BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING ADOPTED AS SONS. Using a modern notion of adoption (more similar to the Old Testament understanding) leads to a less than accurate understanding of the metaphor that Paul never intended.

So far, we have established that the household was central to life in the ancient world, and I have suggested that the frame that is evoked in the audience's experience is the Roman practice of adoption. This experience of adoption is used metaphorically to explain the status and relationship of believers with God: BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING ADOPTED AS SON. After concluding that Paul is trading on the Roman concept, it is important to reconstruct a reasonable approximation of the frame—the prototypical script that would come to mind, with the relevant participants, purposes, and their relations in the Roman experience of adoption.

[23] L. M. White 'Paul and Pater Familias,' in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, Vol. 2, J. P. Sampley, ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2016) 172).

[24] Erin Heim, 'Adoption,' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed., Scot McKnight, second edition (Downers Grove: IVP, 2023), 12.

The household plays an indispensable role. It is the genesis of social life in the first-century. In the Greaco-Roman world, James S. Jeffers argues, 'the most significant feature of the Roman household (*familia*) was that its power was concentrated in the hands of the male head, the *pater familias*.'[25] According to Mary Beard, 'cultures differ about what it means to be human "in the sense of" what counts as a person with the rights and agency attached to that status.' In the case of ancient Rome, humanity 'did not legally start (emotionally is another matter) in utero, nor at birth, but when the father a few days later recognised the baby as a family member (before that, the baby could be disposed of – and I mean killed – with impunity).'[26] Given this context, the act of adopting someone into the household was the father's sole responsibility.

According to Cicero, the purpose of *adoptio* was to perpetuate a family's *nomen, pecunia,* and *sacra,* that is, its family name, property, and religious rites.[27] Adoption 'was the legal act carried out by the initiative of the *pater familias*, joining a citizen (or even the head of a family) under the absolute authority (*patria potestas*) of another…the son took the new father's name and rank and acquired all rights of succession.'[28]

According to Dixon, adoption 'did not seem to have extended often beyond the ruling [or elite] class.'[29] In this context, adoptions served to maintain family stability and the smooth succession of power between generations when a natural heir was unavailable or unfit. Therefore, girls and infants were not normally adopted.[30]

Various literary and epigraphical sources reveal examples of adoption in the Roman

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[25] James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 238.

[26] Mary Beard, 'Gifford Lectures: Lecture One: Introduction: Murderous Games,' https://giffordsedinburgh.com/2019/05/06/lecture-one-introduction-murderous-games/#more-1446. See also Christian Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire: Outsiders Within* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50–106; Margaret A. Brucia and Gregory N. Daugherty, *To Be a Roman: Topics in Roman Culture* (Mundelein, IL: Bolchazy Carducci, 2007), 10–12.

[27] Cicero *Dom* 35.

[28] Scott Carroll, 'Adoption,' in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity*, eds., Edwin M. Yamauchi & Marvin R. Wilson (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 15.

[29] S. Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 113.

[30] Kathleen E. Corley, 'Women's Inheritance Rights in Antiquity and Paul's Metaphor of Adoption,' in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, eds., Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, FCNTECW 6 (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 120-21; J. F. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 130, 159–65; H. Lindsay, *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 134–37.

world.[31] Gardner suggests that adoption was rare outside of the imperial family during the imperial period.[32] As he states, 'outside the imperial house, very few adoptions are directly attested in the sources for the imperial period.'[33] If this is the case, while not largely common outside imperial families, public knowledge of high-profile imperial adoptions was widespread on coins, inscriptions, and other imperial propaganda (the social media of their time). Emperors highlighted these adoptions, with the adoptee often portrayed as 'the "son of (a) god."'[34]

Imperial adoption became a political strategy: choosing a qualified heir through adoption rather than leaving succession to biological chance. Nero is indeed a case in point. Despite his initially disadvantaged upbringing, Nero prospered after Emperor Claudius married his mother and later adopted him as successor.[35] Joseph Fantin notes that the prominence of imperial adoptions—especially Nero's, which took place during the most commonly accepted timeframe for the composition of Ephesians—might have been particularly relevant for the letter's recipients.[36] As Fantin suggests, 'Even if adoption was not common, knowledge of the practice was likely prevalent. And who knows, like modern fairy tales, it is possible some dreamed of adoption into a noble family.'[37]

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[31] O. Solomies, *Adoptive and Polyonymous Nomenclature in the Roman Empire*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 97 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), 15–19.

[32] Gardner, *Familia*, 143.

[33] Gardner, *Familia*, 143.

[34] Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Twice Neokoros Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 116 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 23–121.

[35] Suetonius, *Nero* 6.3–4; Tacitus, *Annals* 12.25.

[36] Joseph D. Fantin, 'Adoption into the Family of God: Ephesians 1:5 in light of Roman Adoption,' in *God's Grace Inscribed on the Human Heart: Essays in Honour of James R. Harrison*, eds., Peter G. Bolt and Sehyun Kim (SCD Press, Australia, 2022), 358. Although Fantin and this paper's author both recognize that Roman adoption provides helpful cultural background for Ephesians 1:3–14, the scope and focus of their arguments differ. Fantin concentrates primarily on how adoption in verse 5 illuminates the concepts of election and predestination in verses 4–5. In contrast, this paper conducts a more comprehensive analysis of the entire passage from verses 3 to 14, drawing insights from metaphor theory. One of the strengths of Fantin's excellent article is his extensive exploration of primary sources related to customs and regulations surrounding Roman adoption. Whereas Fantin primarily concentrates on background sources, this paper analyses the metaphorical and metonymical relations within Ephesians 1:3–14 specifically, and also explores some connections between this passage and the wider letter.

[37] Fantin, 'Adoption,' 353.

Imperial adoptions—especially those in which the emperor is seen as the son of a god—were probably perceived as the epitome of belonging and privilege. However, as Jerry L. Sumney convincingly argues, 'adoption was a well-known institution in the Graeco-Roman world,' for four reasons: first, 'the lack of children in marriages.' Second, the infant and child mortality rates were estimated to be close to fifty percent. Third, in upper-class families, between two and nine percent of the children were adoptees. Fourth, fathers died when children were at a young age. 'One-third of all Roman children lost their father before they reached puberty and another third before they were twenty-five.'[38] In brief, even if most people had not experienced being adopted, they did know what the practice entailed.

In Roman society, adoption was a formal and legally binding process that involved several steps to ensure the integration of the adoptee into the adoptive family. Building on Erin Heim's work, the traditional adoption practice will be summarised. The adoptive father, who was older, adopted an adult male heir to carry on the family line. Legal consent from the adoptee's birth father was required to sever the legal ties. The adoptive father would make a formal declaration (*vindicatio*) claiming the adoptee as his chosen son. A symbolic transfer of authority (*mancipatio*) occurred when the adoptive father purchased the adoptee from the birth father at a nominal price. The proceedings required validation by a law court to ensure legal propriety. Once finalised, the adoptee assumed the adoptive father's name, left his former identity, and gained full rights as an heir for inheritance purposes. The goal was the complete integration of the adoptee into the new family, with the adoptee being granted the same rights as biological children.[39] In the following section, I will show how Paul taps into these connotations of honour, inheritance, and status when using the image of adoption in Ephesians 1:3–14.

3. The Roofing: adoption as an extended metaphor

Drawing upon the cultural frames and metaphor theory outlined above, we now turn to a close reading of how adoption operates as an extended metaphor in this passage. In this paper, Paul argues that: BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING ADOPTED AS SONS, with the adoption

[38] Jerry L. Sumney, 'Family and Filial Language in Ephesians,' in *Ephesos as a Religious Center under the Principate*, Allen Black, Christine M. Thomas, and Trevor W. Thompson, eds, *WUNT* 488 (Mohr-Siebeck, 2022), 206-9. See also Lindsay, *Adoption*, 103.

[39] Heim, "Adoption," 11–15.

element merely focusing on the initiation of such a relationship. Since the relationship is not established by lineage, the only way to initiate it is through adoption.

Adoption is a frame—a cultural category of experience with participants, goals, and relations, without which a term does not make sense. At times, this frame can be used metaphorically, when conceptual information from one frame is mapped onto another frame. In Ephesians 1:3–14, the believer's relationship with God is understood as an extended metaphor in terms of the Roman practice of adoption. A metaphor is extended when 'several metaphorical expressions evoking the same source [frame] and describing the same target [frame] occur in close proximity to one another in a text.'[40] Put differently, a metaphor is extended 'when two or more consecutive semi-independent clauses contain metaphors that display the same mappings between source and target [frames].'[41] In what follows, this work shows the textual and linguistic evidence that contributes to understanding Ephesians 1:3–14 as an extended metaphor.

Structurally, Ephesians 1:3–14 constitutes a lengthy, complex Greek sentence. Paul begins in verse 3 with the main clause, stating that God the Father is to be 'blessed' because He has blessed believers with every spiritual blessing. The rest of the passage, through verse 14, forms a series of subordinate clauses that explain why the Father is blessed: through adoption, believers have become God's heirs through Christ's work.

The preposition 'in' (ἐν) appears eleven times through the phrases 'in Christ' (ἐν Χριστῷ), 'in him' (ἐν αὐτῷ), 'in whom' (ἐν ᾧ), and 'in the beloved' (ἐν τῷ ἠγαπημένῳ).[42] This repetition serves a cohesive function, tying the complex Greek sentences together Christologically. The repetition signals that the Father's work is accomplished through the Son. So, the Father is blessed (praised), as a result of the work of the Father carried out through the Son. And the Father's purposes are achieved by the work of the Son on those who are 'in Christ.'

[40] Elena Semino, *Metaphors in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 227. The term 'domains' is sometimes used in the field in place of 'frames.' What seems to be happening is that frames can be used to model domains and their structure. Domains seem to be richer than frames, which strip a situation down to the absolute essentials.

[41] W. Grudun Reijnierse et al, 'The Role of Co-Text in the Analysis of Potentially Deliberate Metaphor,' in *Drawing Attention to Metaphor: Case Studies across Time Periods, Cultures and Modalities,* eds., Camilla Di-Biase Dyson and Markus Egg (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2020), 25.

[42] Ephesians 1:3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 (x2), 11, 12, 13 (x2).

Grammatically, adoption first emerges as the core metaphor in Ephesians 1:3–14 through its explicit mention in verse 5 (υἱοθεσίαν). Verses 4–5 set up an unresolved tension that is clarified by this mention of 'adoption.' Specifically, verse 4 states that believers were chosen (ἐξελέξατο) to be holy and blameless. On its own, this reads as a description of the believers' identity. However, viewing it through the lens of adoption reveals that being holy and blameless describes their new status as adopted children in God's family.

Similarly, verse 5 says that believers were predestined (προορίσας), but it does not specify their destination. The tension created by the unstated purpose in verses 4–5 is resolved when verse 5 goes on to reveal the believers' adoption as God's children. This clarifies that they were chosen and predestined specifically for adoption into God's family.

Linguistically, the overarching metaphor being developed in this passage is that BEING IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING ADOPTED AS SONS. Paul takes the event of adoption as the central conceptual frame and links the believer's experience to key aspects of this ancient process. Specifically, concepts such as predestination (v.5), redemption (v.7), access (v.12), and the sealing of the Spirit (v.13) are presented as important sub-events within the complex event of adoption. For this reason, the metonymy at work in Ephesians 1:3–14 is SUB-EVENTS FOR THE WHOLE EVENT, which means that every term is a shortcut in language that would evoke the experience of Roman adoption. Predestination reflects the deliberate decision of the adopting father to add an heir to the family. Redemption points to the legal transition as the adoptee leaves an old household to join a new one. Sealing ceremonies solemnised and finalised the new bonds. The sealing of the Spirit provides assurance and permanence. By couching these ideas as sub-components of adoption, Paul colours them with nuances from the overarching metaphor.

Additional aspects of Roman adoption expand the metaphor further. The inheritance believers receive (v.11) mirrors how adoptees became co-heirs with all the rights and privileges of the one adopting them. The language of 'sonship' underscores the new identity formation as equal members of God's family. Access to the Father (v.12) resonates with the adopted child's direct access to the *pater familias*. According to Ephesians 1:10, believers have access to the 'plan for the fullness of time'—οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν. The word οἰκονομία used here, is a word specifically used in a household context, literally referring to the

'management of a household.'[43] Thus, adoption implies access. The concept of sealing with the Spirit adds connotations of confirmation and proof.

If the text instead switches between disconnected source frames, such as sports, architecture, and agriculture, it would come across as less unified in focus. However, containment within the common Household canvas allows these sub-events stemming from adoption to meaningfully expand the core image rather than introducing fragmentation.

Furthermore, the trinitarian outline present in Ephesians 1:3–14 supports the claim that the unifying theme of this passage is the believers' adoption into God's family. In all the other passages where adoption appears, we find a clear trinitarian outline. For instance, in Galatians 4:1–7, Paul refers to God (the Father) sending his Son, and the Spirit enabling believers to cry out 'Abba, Father.' In Romans 8:12–17, Paul mentions that we are led by the Spirit, who bears witness and waits eagerly for adoption as sons. According to our focal text, the persons of the Godhead cooperatively enact adoption, with the Father electing, the Son redeeming, and the Spirit sealing. This prevents us from viewing adoption merely in legal terms, emphasising the intimate familial relationship between believers and God. In brief, Ephesians 1:3–14 explains how the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enabled believers to become part of the divine family.

In what follows, I will examine how these mappings lead and constrain our reading of Ephesians 1:3–14. The Father is the main subject or agent of the passage. This pericope has a clear, trinitarian shape, where the Father's agency is intensified throughout the pericope: he chooses or elects, predestining us (4–5); he lavishes his love by making his will known (8–9); his plan is to unite all things under Christ (10); He destined all things according to his purpose (11).

All of this happens according to the Father's will. Θέλημα is repeated three times throughout these verses, highlighting the Father's freedom to choose who will become part of his household (5, 9); the privilege of those within the household to be privy to the Father's will (11); and his 'plan for the fullness of time' (10).

Additionally, Ephesians 1:11 repeats the participle of προορίζω from Ephesians 1:5, linking adoption with inheritance. Having a suitable heir was the very reason why a *pater familias* would adopt in the first-century. 'In Roman law, as in Greek law, adoption and inheritance are closely linked because the starting assumption for Roman inheritance law was

[43] BDAG, 'οἰκονομία,' 697.

the succession of the *familia*.'[44] As expected, the language of inheritance at the end of the passage (14) evokes the Father-son/adoptee relationship (cf. Eph 1:18). However, the repetition of κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν αὐτοῦ (5, 9) in connection with θέλημα, as well as the repeated mention of χάρις (6, 7), indicates that the Father does not *need* an heir.

God's adoption was not, like Rome's, a political strategy to ensure continuity. In fact, the Father's choice in adoption is an incongruous gift that is 'given without regard to worth.'[45] The pagan philosopher Celsus looked down upon Christianity as a detestable and servile religion that only attracted 'the foolish, the dishonourable, and stupid; only women, slaves, and little children.'[46] Quite shockingly, the foolish, dishonourable, and stupid are now members of the divine family.

Since this group of believers is adopted without regard to worth, it is important that Paul states that the love of God is the basis for their adoption. But Paul goes so far as to say that God's plan from the beginning was to bring people in through divine adoption, not biological ties. Indeed, the extended metaphor of adoption established in Ephesians 1:3–14 shapes the trajectory of the entire letter. The purpose of adoption was to intentionally incorporate outsiders into a family, which Paul models as Gentiles being adopted alongside Jews into God's household by grace. This emphasis on undeserved familial inclusion recurs throughout Ephesians: believers gain access to the Father through Christ.

In chapter 1, Paul prays for the Spirit to enlighten God's children to grasp the riches of their adoption and access. Chapter 2 contrasts children of wrath with children of love, stressing that God's surpassing love has overcome the believer's former state of death, enabling both Jews and Gentiles to come to the Father. The prayers in chapter 3 underscore Christ's love and the privilege to approach the Father directly. Adoption confers familial identity tied to the one Father, as chapter 4 clarifies: believers should live in humility, gentleness and patience. In chapter 5, the text starts with 'beloved children' (verse 1), and concludes in 5:20 by giving thanks to God the Father. Finally, chapter 6 completes the arc by affirming that adopted believers themselves can now pray to their Father, modelling Paul's petitions for spiritual empowerment in Ephesians 1:15–23. More importantly, the letter forms an *inclusio*, opening

[44] Walters, J. C., & Sumney, J. L., 'Paul, Adoption, and Inheritance' in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed., J. P. Sampley (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 46.

[45] John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 6.

[46] Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.44.

and closing around the theme of God as Father (1:2–3 and 6:23).[47] All along, Ephesians consistently interweaves the privileges, ethics, and motivations emerging from the believers' new status as God's beloved, adopted children.

Returning to Ephesians 1:3–14, while honour and legal rights are bestowed on the recipients of this adoption, there is also a clear expectation that those adopted bring honour to the head of the household, living εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης αὐτοῦ - 'for the praise of his glory' (12). The aim of the whole process of adoption and redemption is to bring glory to the Father (6, 12).

If we zoom out, we will note that the ensuing sections are linked with the Father: in Ephesians 1:17–19, Paul prays to the Father; in Ephesians 1:20–21, the text focuses on what God the Father did in Christ; and, in Ephesians 2:1–10, what the Father did previously to Christ (1:20–21) mirrors what the Father does to the believers (2:4–6). Therefore, in Ephesians 1:3–14 Paul explains how 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' becomes our Father through adoption.

Adoption and redemption

One question still remains: How does the redemption that is brought about by the agency of Christ (Ephesians 1:7) fit in the realm of the household? Adoption and redemption are intertwined, with redemption clearing the path for adoption. The noun for 'redemption' (ἀπολύτρωσις) is used ten times in the New Testament, three of which occur in Ephesians. This term is not widely used in the Greek world. In the few examples of its usage, it communicates deliverance and often payment or ransom for prisoners or slaves.[48] Margaret MacDonald affirms that 'The only use of the term in the LXX (Dan 4:34) and many instances of cognate terms in the LXX suggest that the term could be used as a general word for deliverance from danger, and especially for deliverance from the Egyptian bondage and the Babylonian exile.'[49]

[47] The opening and closing of Ephesians suggest that the entire letter needs to be read through the household lens more generally, and the Father's adoption more specifically. The letter begins with the recipients' blessing of grace and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ (Eph 1:2). This immediately introduces the fatherhood of God. The letter ends by invoking grace and love from God the Father and Jesus Christ (Eph 6:23-24). Other Pauline letters (e.g., 1 & 2 Corinthians and Philippians) may follow a similar pattern; however, Ephesians is emphatic in only referring to God as Father and the Father of Jesus Christ. By exclusively using the Fatherhood of God to bookend Ephesians, the adopting work of the Father and its attendant framing becomes the overarching theme. As Sumney concludes, the 'filial and paternal language' is a central lens for interpreting the letter's major theological themes, 'including its soteriology and its ecclesiology,' see 'Family,' 224.

[48] Ernest Best, *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 130.

[49] Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 200.

In the Old Testament context, redemption (Hebrew *gāʾal*) was an expected act of the patriarch to ransom enslaved or endangered family members, as seen in cases such as Boaz redeeming Ruth.[50] As Richter notes, 'redemption was the act of a patriarch who put his own resources on the line to ransom a family member who had been driven to the margins of society' because they ended in poverty (Naomi and Ruth), were attacked and taken captive by an enemy (Lot), or were enslaved by the consequences of sinful decisions (Gomer).[51] Christ's redemptive work echoes this precedent: he pays the price to release believers from old ties and enables their adoption into God's household.

It is significant that Paul links adoption and redemption in Romans 8:23: 'and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption (υἱοθεσίαν), the redemption (ἀπολύτρωσιν) of our bodies.' Paul presents the household as the place where people are brought to be in a relationship with the Father through adoption. The patriarch or *pater familias* chooses. Since believers do not belong in the household by birth, adoption becomes vital. More importantly, in Ephesians, redemption limits who is restored to the household as a member, it is only those who are Ἐν ᾧ—in him (7, 11, 13).

Returning to our focal text, Ephesians 1:8–14 underlines different aspects that belong within the Adoption frame: being accepted /having access (v.9), which turns the household into a place of identification, belonging, and participation. Once believers belong in the house, they have an insider's understanding of the family's business. And finally, the adoptee is entitled to the inheritance.

The concept of sealing by the Spirit is also rich in meaning in this passage. As was customary in ancient procedures, the sealing carried out by the Spirit (v.13) serves as a visible confirmation that the adoptee is now legitimately part of the family. Just as wax seals containing insignia impressed into legal documents verified their authenticity in Asia Minor, the Spirit's sealing confirms the validity of the believer's new status as a child of God.

However, as the text suggests, the seal of the Spirit is more than a mere external formalisation. Paul describes it as the 'guarantee of our inheritance' (v.14). The Spirit Himself, given to indwell believers, is a down payment that assures full future payment. The

[50] I am not arguing that every time Adoption is present Redemption is also evoked. These two frames belong together because, in Ephesians 1:3–14, the Household unifies them. Election, Adoption, Redemption, Inheritance, and the Spirit are important aspects of the Adoption process in the Roman world.

[51] Richter, *Epic*, 45.

Spirit guarantees the glory yet to come for God's adopted children. Beyond legal ratification, the Spirit provides an inward, experiential foretaste of belonging to God's family. His presence enables adopted children to know and feel—even amidst present suffering—the love of their Father and the assurance of the home that awaits. The sealing of the Spirit gives adoption tangible substance.

In this way, Ephesians 1 beautifully demonstrates how the trinitarian roles intersect to bring us into God's household—the Father elects, the Son redeems, and the Spirit seals. Each person secures our adoption from a unique angle, providing multiple unbreakable bonds tethering us to the family of God.

The picture Paul describes in Ephesians 1:3–14 is one in which the Father presents himself as a patriarch who is sending the best he has in his household, his son, to share his inheritance with those he has adopted and redeemed.[52] According to the text, familial blessing and honour are inherited and restored by the *pater familias*; they are not earned, not even as rewards for obedience or exemplary moral behaviour.

In sum, the familial adoption language in Ephesians 1:3–14 is a shortcut to the Adoption frame, evoking the entire social experience of familial belonging within a household. 'Inheritance' activates associated privileges and assets conveyed to adopted sons. 'Redemption' implies a release from old ties necessary to join a new family line. Each expression taps into the cultural practices and experiences surrounding adoption far beyond mere legal transaction.

The Cosmos: The Father's household

In verse 10, the phrase ἐπὶ τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς suggests that the cosmos is God's household; it encompasses both heaven and earth. The rest of the letter not only stresses that believers are seated in heavenly places, but that every family in heaven and on earth comes from the Father (3:14–15). The household was so central to life in the first-century that it became a metaphor that explained and structured the nation's understanding of the Roman Empire: the nation was a household, and the emperor was the *pater* of the Empire.[53] According

[52] In this passage, the Son is the one who redeems, not the Father. The reason for this could be tied to the responsibility of the elder son, who represents and acts on behalf of the Father, in his absence. Also, the preposition ἐν positions the Son as the instrument of the salvific action.

[53] Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, J. C. Rolfe, trans. (LCL 300), 8–9. The concept of the *paterfamilias* influenced a number of other key terms and ideas in Roman culture, including *dominium* ('dominion'), *imperium* ('sovereign authority') of emperors and magistrates, and *patrocinium* (or 'protection, patronage') of a person or the state over

to Cicero, 'the first bond of union is that between husband and wife; the next, that between parents and children; then we find one home *[domus]* with everything in common; and this is the foundation [*principium*] of the city and, as it were, the seedbed *[seminarium]* of the state.'[54] Paul's vision in Ephesians is that the nations and households within it are the microcosms; the Father's household is their macrocosm.

The depiction of the cosmos as God's household in verse 10 stems directly from the central adoption metaphor. Just as the *pater familias*' household expanded generationally through adopted heirs, God welcomes adopted believers from all nations into his expansive divine household. This household began with Israel as adopted 'sons' but now incorporates adopted Gentile heirs as well, expanding across the earth. Believers are now adopted members of God's universal family. In Roman culture, a *pater familias* managed the household. Likewise, God's adopted children worldwide participate in and contribute to the growth of his cosmic household. Thus, the spatial depiction of God's household in verse 10 is derived from and extends the Adoption metaphor.

Conclusion

In closing, we have seen how the Roman practice of adoption provides a framework that Paul leverages metaphorically. While later systematic theologians have particularly focused on the terminology of election and predestination in Ephesians 1:4–5 to systematically teach on doctrine, the original audience likely understood these concepts through the concrete social experience of Roman adoption practices. While this passage may contribute to later doctrinal formulations, imposing those systematic interpretations onto the text risks missing how Paul uses the familiar logic of adoption to underscore God's intentionality in incorporating both Jews and Gentiles, by his divine initiative, into his family.

In the profoundly religious cultural milieu in Asia Minor, pagan gods were seen as unpredictable powers that controlled all spheres of life.[55] Ephesians 1:21 celebrates that Christ triumphed over the powers and principalities; Ephesians 2 points to the prince of the

another. The word *dominium* itself comes directly from *domus*, and thus signifies one's rule over something, like that of the *paterfamilias* over the household.

[54] This notion is found extensively in Stoic discussions; cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.17.54: See also the article by W. K. Lacey, '*Patria Potestas*,' in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed., Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 121–44.

[55] Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene: Baker Book House, 1989) 123–124.

air; Ephesians 3 shows that the wisdom of God is displayed to the powers and principalities through the church; Ephesians 4–5 clearly state that unresolved anger gives space to the devil; and Ephesians 6 presents the need for the armour of God amidst the devil's pervasive influence. In this context, Paul presents a God who purposely 'chose' (ἐκλέγομαι) believers and 'predestined' (προορίζω) them to be adopted as sons into his household. The purpose of this language was to provide assurance and security. The adoption of believers means 'that they have been transferred to the control of another and more powerful *pater familias*.'[56] Consequently, believers live in their Father's power, protection, ownership, and responsibility. Amid competing deities and uncertainties, God's adoption of Gentiles as co-heirs powerfully assures Paul's readers of their secure place in God's household. After all, this security is certain because of the work of the Son.

The metaphor BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BEING A SON is best understood within the household. Adoption is a necessary metaphor in the process of identity construction, since it answers the question, 'Who are we as a group?' Thus, the household and adoption are not simply a medium but the message. After all, the household is the genesis of social life; it is itself an image of unity, and it is ultimately an experience that fosters unity. Christ reveals a generous Father who extends grace and lavishes his love on his adopted sons.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul invites his readers not only to understand themselves as members of the Father's household but to live out the implications of it. With the language of God as Father and believers as heirs and brothers, Paul evokes multiple mappings using the Household as the canvas on which the story is told.

[56] Sumney, 'Family,' 218.

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