

ADOPTION (*νιοθεσία, huiotthesia*). A [Greek](#) phrase that describes the act of raising a child who is not biologically related. Used by [Paul](#) to describe God adopting humans—implied elsewhere in the [Bible](#) to represent membership in the family of God.

Adoption in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible

The absence of a word that translates as “adoption” in Hebrew suggests that Israel did not practice legal adoption. However, this does not mean that adoption as a concept did not exist (Scott, *Adoption as Sons*, 61): there are certainly instances of someone taking a child into his or her care. For example, “Mordecai took [Esther] to be his daughter” because she had no mother or father ([Esth 2:7](#)). Despite the absence of a term, it is clear that the concept of adoption existed.

There are several other instances in the Hebrew Bible where adoption is represented:

- [Moses](#) grows up in [Pharaoh’s](#) household ([Exod 2:1–10](#)). The story of Moses also says that [Pharaoh’s](#) daughter agreed to pay wet nurse fees ([Exod 2:9](#)). In ancient Near Eastern legal codes, a person who pays the wet nurse fees to keep a child alive—particularly a foundling, or child who has been abandoned shortly after birth—assumes the child in his or her household (Malul, “Adoption of Foundlings,” 107–108).
- [Ezekiel 16:1–7](#) uses much of the same legal terminology for adoption as the [Babylonian code](#) in its metaphor for God’s relationship to Israel (Malul, “Adoption of Foundlings,” 98–99). The metaphor suggests that [God](#) gradually becomes Israel’s father, not through sexual procreation, but through adoption (Miles, “Israel as

Foundling”).

- Ruth’s formulaic declaration to stay with her mother-in-law ([Ruth 1:16–17](#)) might represent a rite of adoption. This is comparable to Jesus’ declaration from the [cross](#), when he places [his mother](#) into the family of the disciple he loved ([John 19:26–27](#)).
- Abraham “adopts” his slave [Eliezer of Damascus](#) to be his heir before the birth of [Ishmael](#) and [Isaac](#) (Selman, “The Social Environment,” [125–127](#)).
- Josephus describes [Abraham](#) as adopting [Lot](#) ([Antiquities](#), I.7.1), although he was writing in a Graeco-Roman context where legal adoption was practiced.

Adoption in the Graeco-Roman World

Adoption was a legal act in the Graeco-Roman world. In ancient [Greece](#), there were three types of adoption. In each of these three cases, adoption is necessary only to preserve the estate (Edwards, “Introduction,” 8–10).

1. *Inter vivos* adoption occurred when someone adopted a son during his lifetime.
2. Testamentary adoption involved designating an adopted son in a will (Isaeus, “On the Estate of Appolodorus,” [119](#)).
3. If a man died without appointing a legitimate heir, the next of kin’s offspring would be adopted in the third type: posthumous adoption (Isaeus, “On the Estate of Hagnias,” [192–193](#)).

In the [Roman world](#), social standing (i.e. slave or free, male or female) determined who had the right to adopt, and who could be adopted under what terms. As in Greece, women were virtually removed from this system: They could not legally adopt because they were under the guardianship of

their male relatives. They were also adopted at a far lower rate than males, since the usual reason for adoption was to provide an heir—women were restricted in [inheritance rights](#). Additionally, children under the age of puberty were rarely adopted.

Adopting someone of age had an advantage in that “the adopter has the opportunity to engage with the individual before making a final choice” (Lindsay, “Adoption,” 201). Someone who had already proven abilities for managing a household would be a good investment as an heir. For this reason, young men who had at least reached puberty or adulthood were more likely to be adopted than an infant.

In the Roman Empire, there are also three types of adoption.

1. Adoption (*adoptatio*) and adrogation (*adrogatio*) both involve outsiders becoming children in another family, but the difference is in the overseeing authorities.
 - For *adoptatio*, the praetor, or local magistrate, must approve of the new relationship. The adoptee in this case is moving from one *paterfamilias* to another, so his social status has not changed.
 - In the case of *adrogation*, the adoption must be approved via a commission called the *comitia curiata*. This commission was located in [Rome](#). *Adrogation* occurs “when persons who are their own masters deliver themselves into the control of another, and are themselves responsible for the act” ([Gellius, Attic Nights, V.19.4](#)). The people were suspicious of *adrogation* because one *paterfamilias* (literally father-family; the basic familial organization of the Roman world) was dissolved into another. In a culture where the authority of a *paterfamilias* was the pinnacle of

personal relations, someone's willingness to go from independent to dependent status needed to be reviewed. The extinction of the adoptee's family of origin was legally and socially serious. There were some acceptable motivations under which *adrogation* might occur, like the intention of seeking an heir (Lindsay, "Adoption," 203).

2. Testamentary adoption is often mentioned in literary works, but does not appear separately in the writings of legal authorities. In this case, the beneficiary does not even leave his own family to become part of the household of the adopter. This type of adoption appears to allow someone to inherit at least a portion of an estate without dissolving his own ties to his *paterfamilias* (Lindsay, "Adoption," 203).

Roman emperors frequently had to adopt an heir. The emperors were plagued both with reproductive difficulties and the reality that their heirs were frequent targets of enemies. Emperors also sought competent heirs, and their natural biological children did not always fit the bill. In the span of accessions in the 97 years between Nerva and Commodus, every heir to the throne was legitimized by adoption (Goodman, *The Roman World*, 67).

Adoption in the New Testament

A few New Testament instances allude to the Old Testament view of adoption, perhaps even indicating the legal kind (e.g., [John 19:26–27](#); [Jas 1:27](#), which is about caring for orphans). But adoption is most often used in a theological sense.

Paul uses adoption in Romans to describe the relationship between [God](#) and the followers of [Jesus](#) ([Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4](#); compare [Gal 4:5](#); [Eph 1:5](#)). He uses one Greek term for

adoption: νιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*). The term νιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*) is rarely found in literary sources, but is prevalent in inscriptions and documentary papyri. Still, Paul had other options of words meaning adoption that were more explicitly tied to religious concepts (Scott, *Adoption as Sons*, 27, 45, 55). So, why did Paul use νιοθεσία (*huiiothesia*)? It may be significant that he chose a word that contains the word (υἱός, *huios*), which means “son.” His use of a term that invokes adopted *sonship* may have linked the term with other masculine terms in Romans, such as “seed” and “circumcision.” He may also have been challenging the authority of the emperor over the sons of Rome.

Paul’s use of terms such as brothers and sisters, father, and adoption allows him to construct a family of people who are not biologically related—the community of believers (Rom 8:15–21; Gal 4:4–6). “Christ has enabled Jews and Gentiles to become related to each other as children of Abraham, but they do not cease to be Jews and Gentiles” (Eisenbaum, “Is Paul,” 521). In the Abrahamic line, the distinction is maintained biologically, but the family is created through adoption.

At the time Paul was writing, a series of laws referred to as the *Lex Iulia et Papia Poppaea* required Roman citizens to bear children to build up the Roman population. Paul’s use of adoption as the means to grow God’s family stands in direct opposition to these laws. Paul’s theology not only made the family of God more open than the family of the Roman state, it also created a community that valued those who could not produce biological heirs. The family of God, created through adoption, is open to anyone who wants to be a part of it.

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ADOPTION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST An act by which a man or woman acknowledges a person of different blood as his or her son or daughter and bestows on that person the legal rights and duties of a true **child**.

Overview

Literature from the ancient Near East indicates that adoption took place from very early times and held an important role in society. In **Mesopotamian** culture, children were valued for their ability to carry on the **family** name and care for parents in their old age (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 51). Childless couples had the options of adoption, **divorce** and remarriage, and even polygamy. Those who adopted a child agreed that the child would be their heir, regardless of how many natural children were born to them after the adoption. An adopted boy in particular enjoyed full rights of **inheritance** as well as all the other rights and duties that natural children would have. Parents who broke the adoption agreement could face a fine or risk losing their entire estate. A child who broke the adoption agreement could lose his or her freedom.

In the ancient Near East, kinship terms such as “son,” “brother,” or “eldest son” were not limited to biological relationships but instead “define special juridical relationships that can be created artificially through various types of adoption and specifications” (Frymer-Kensky, “**Patriarchal Family Relationships**,” 214). Thus, these terms essentially describe “a particular juridical relationship which may be entered into by contract as well as by birth. People adopt

others as brothers, brothers adopt each other as sons, brothers adopt women as sisters, and the designation of an individual as ‘first-born’ can also be a matter of choice” (Frymer-Kensky, “Patriarchal Family Relationships,” 214).

Mesopotamian [cuneiform](#) tablets illuminate the family customs described in the narratives of the [patriarchs](#) (Gen 15–31). The earliest written laws to provide clear definitions of adoption appear in  the 18th-century BC [Code of Hammurabi](#).

Adoption in the Old Testament

The [Old Testament](#) contains no laws regarding adoptions (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 51). The Old Testament narratives similarly do not specifically refer to adoption (compare Gen 30:1–13; 48:5, 12; 50:23). Various explanations have been offered for the lack of references to adoption in the Old Testament—especially considering the prevalence of adoption in regions neighboring the Israelites.

One such explanation concerns the [polygamous marriage](#) practices attested in the Old Testament. Those who hold this view argue that Old Testament marriage law allowed polygamy, which considerably reduced the likelihood of childlessness and reduced the need for adoption. In contrast, [Babylonian](#) marriage law, which was based on monogamy, increased the threat of childlessness and thus made the concept of adoption more attractive. One objection to this explanation is that polygamy was not necessarily the norm in ancient Israel. Furthermore, it is not easy to see why polygamy and adoption should be mutually exclusive (Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice*, 120).

Another explanation concerns the institution of so-called [levirate marriage](#), whereby the brother of a deceased

man was expected to marry and provide children for his brother's **widow** (e.g., *Deut 25:5–10*). The firstborn child of this new union was legally regarded as the dead man's child, even with respect to his right of inheritance (Raccah, *Widows at the Gate*, 326–36). However, the laws regarding levirate marriage acknowledged the possibility that a man might refuse to fulfill his duty. The paucity of references to levirate marriage practices in ancient Near Eastern literature portray it as a practice that is in addition to—not instead of—adoption. Thus, the custom of the levirate marriage cannot fully explain the absence of references to adoption in the Old Testament (Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice*, 121–22).

Raccah argues that “the Israelite family was based on the agnatic principle of blood kinship, that is, patrilineal descent,” and therefore adoption was not allowed (Raccah, *Widows at the Gate*, 326; see also Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, 69). Another explanation is that adoption is absent from the Old Testament for theological reasons, since having descendants was a sign and an expression of God's **blessing**. One could not and might not force God's hand, and adoption was clearly regarded as an unlawful human manipulation designed to substitute God's blessing by one's own means (Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice*, 122).