

HEIR

A First-Century Understanding



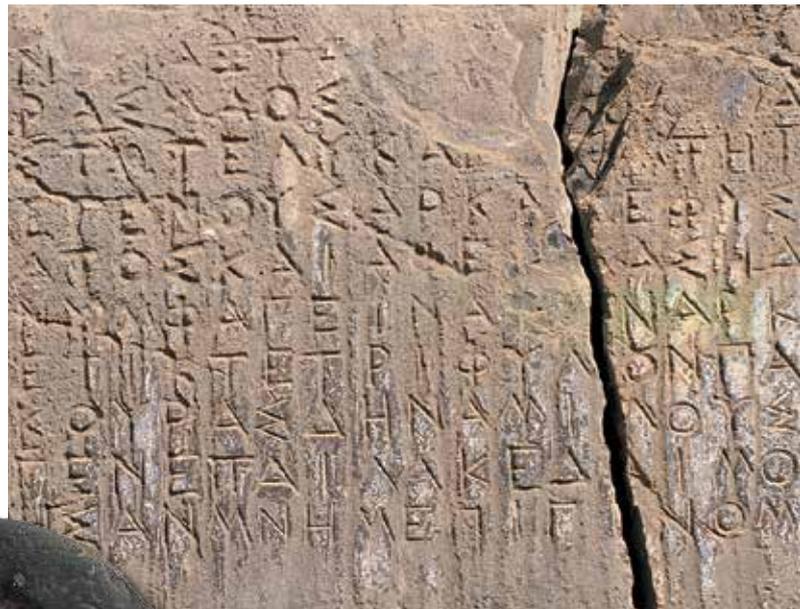
By Timothy N. Boyd

THE APOSTLE PAUL spoke of Christians as being “heirs” and “co-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17, HCSB). But, what would that have meant to a first-century believer? What were the rights and responsibilities of an heir in that context? To answer these questions, we will examine the legal and social practices of that day. Also, we will examine an adopted person’s unique role as an heir because we are the adopted sons and daughters of God.

All ancient cultures made some provision for passing one’s belongings and position from one generation to the next. This is why Abraham questioned his future in Genesis 15:2. Jewish culture saw a man as continuing through his male descendants. Abraham reminded God that his servant Eliezer would be his heir. He would have received Abraham’s property after providing for his and Sarah’s burials.¹ He would not have been able, though, to carry on Abraham’s lineage. The idea of adoption as a way of continuing lineage was not prevalent in Hebrew culture nor in the New Testament period.

The Greeks saw the role of the heir as continuing the existence of the person who left the inheritance. In a sense the son became the father. The Greek concept, in particular, focused on the religious duties of the head of household. Normally a son would become the family’s religious leader at his father’s death and continue making offerings to the family gods. When a male heir was not present, however, the Greeks did allow for the adoption of a son to carry out this role. A by-product of this adoption process was that the heir was often to take care of the testator

Right: Close-up of manumission inscriptions at Delphi, Greece. Some slaves, when manumitted (or set free), were added to the owner’s will. Paul explained it by saying, “So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Gal. 4:7, HCSB).



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Left: Signet ring from the time of Jesus; a son or daughter would have worn the ring as a sign of special affection from a father. The seal on top is carved in reverse so it could be used as a signature stamp.

Restoring his wayward son to the position of full sonship, the prodigal’s father ordered, “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet” (Luke 15:22, HCSB).

until that person and his family died. Thus, in the absence of a natural son, an adopted son could provide for members of the family in old age.²

Paul may have had some of these practices from Jewish and Greek culture in mind when he spoke of believers being heirs of God. More likely though, Paul was thinking about Roman practices. Romans 8 was addressed to people who would have been much more familiar with the Roman customs and laws. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, he was likely aware of the rules related to inheritance under Roman law.

In all cultures of that day, the ability to inherit was usually reserved for males. The Romans and Greeks, however, did make some provision for women to inherit in some instances. Further, although Roman citizens customarily were made heirs, slaves were sometimes freed by the will and made heirs as well. All of the laws surrounding wills and inheritance were quite complex.³

Those in Roman culture also made a connection between inheritance and religious duties. From Rome’s early history priests were involved in adoptions because of the religious implications of an adopted son becoming an heir and as such the family’s spiritual leader. As in Greek culture, an heir was responsible for taking up the religious duties of the head of the family at the death of the testator. By New Testament times, persons placed a greater focus on the inheritance of property and position in the family, but the religious element was still an underlying component.⁴

An heir in Roman culture did not have to be a natural child. A testator could, if he chose, bypass or disinherit his natural offspring in favor of another person. Natural children



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Left: Grapevines at Ein Karem, a village outside of Jerusalem; likely the birthplace of John the Baptist. Speaking to scribes, chief priests, and elders, Jesus told of a vineyard owner who sent slaves to collect fruit from the workers who tended the farm. The farmers abused the slaves. The scene was repeated. Finally, the vineyard owner sent his son: "He

still had one to send, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenant farmers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. Therefore, what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and

destroy the farmers and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:6-9, HCSB).

Right: Field of Boaz, which is located outside of Bethlehem. If Boaz bought Elimelech's land, he bought the field for Ruth's heir, not his own; and he agreed to provide for Ruth and her family. In doing so, he forfeited his right to pass the field to his sons.

Right: One of the better-preserved texts from Ugarit (a Canaanite port city located in what is now Syria) is the legend of Danel and his son Aqhat. After praying for an heir, Aqhat

was born and in time became a great hunter. In gratitude, Danel exclaimed, "Now I will sit and rest in peace and my soul will rest, my heart will be at ease." Dated to the 15th-13th centuries B.C.

were sometimes deemed as unfit to carry on the family fortune and heritage. Because debts as well as assets were part of an inheritance under Roman law, a slave might be made an heir when the estate was insolvent so that the natural children were not financially crippled.⁵

In the Roman system an inheritance was often more than wealth and lands. Position could also be a key part of the inheritance. The Roman family was structured differently than those of other cultures. A Roman father exercised tremendous power over his extended family. Even grown children were still subject to their father's discipline and rule unless they had been emancipated from his control. So, an heir could not only receive properties and land,

he could also become the head of the family. Adoption was an acceptable practice in Roman culture to provide for family leadership in the absence of a natural son or in the case of an unworthy son.

Those making a will could also designate multiple heirs and define what portions went to which heir. Natural children as well as adopted children inherited. Adoption meant that you became an heir of your adoptive father. This provision in Roman custom could be behind the "co-heir" language in Romans 8:17. Jesus is the "natural son" and we

are the adopted sons and daughters. Paralleling Roman law, this adoption guarantees our inheritance.⁶

Another important aspect of being an heir was that the Roman system considered a person an heir even before the death of the testator. Romans regarded a natural son to be an heir from birth unless his father disinherited him. And the moment a person was adopted into a family, he was considered an heir. Romans viewed heirs as already possessing the inheritance. Theologically that means that from the moment of our conversion or our adoption into God's family, we become heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We do not wait for some future date to inherit eternal life. It is ours immediately.⁷

Persons in Roman culture considered land and position to be the integral part of the inheritance, more so than other forms of wealth. Land and position defined a family and its place in society. Romans placed the greatest value on the heir being the recipient of the family's honor and position. This would imply that as heirs of God, we hold a unique inheritance and we are identified with a unique family heritage. Our most valuable inheritance is our connection to the family of God.

Because of the power associated with the father in Roman culture,

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heirs—whether natural or adopted children—were also completely under the father’s authority. They were subject to his discipline until he relinquished that authority in death or emancipated them.⁸ Applying this idea to the biblical concept of being an heir highlights a startling difference—God will never die. We will continue to be His heirs and under His authority for eternity.

For a modern heir, money and property are the usual inheritance. Becoming an heir is tied to the death of the testator. In the New Testament time period, being an heir was quite different. It involved more than money and property—although these

were involved. It was about family relationships and the continuation of the family. An heir had that status long before the death of the testator. Being an heir was related to one’s position in the family. Adoption brought equal rights for the adopted heir as those that any natural children held. These differences enhance our understanding of believers being heirs of God. We are part of a family, and our inheritance is already ours as adopted sons and daughters. 🗨️

1. Robert P. Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs: Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15,” *Themelios* 1, no. 1 (January 1975): 19–23.

2. Eduard Schweizer, “νιοθεσία” (*hiothesia*, adoption) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley,

vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 397–98.

3. William Smith, “*He’res*: Roman” in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), 598–60. [online; accessed 18 April 2013] Available from the Internet: penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Heres.html.

4. Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 84; James C. Walters, “Paul, Adoption, and Inheritance” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 52.

5. William Smith, “*He’res*: Roman” in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*.

6. Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons*, 114.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Adolf Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, v. 43, part 2 (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1953), 620.

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