

PARTAKERS OF ADOPTION: IRENAEUS AND HIS USE OF PAUL*

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It is easy to prove from the very words of the Lord, that He acknowledges one Father and Creator of the world, and Fashioner of humanity, who was proclaimed by the law and the prophets, while He knows no other, and that this One is really God over all; and that He teaches that adoption of sons pertaining to the Father, which is eternal life, takes place through Himself, conferring it on all the righteous.

—*Against Heresies* 2.11.1

I. Introduction

Setting the Stage

As one of the key theological figures in the latter half of the second century, Irenaeus (c. AD 140–202) presents us with one of the first Christian witnesses to the wide variety of ancient theologies and interpretations of the Christian scriptures.¹ Not only does he present a constructive picture of his own biblical theology, he also gives a window onto the panoply of views he opposes. At the center of this opposition is the dispute over the interpretation of the emerging biblical canon, with a special focus on the four Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline letters. Though not the center of his attention, the Pauline letters are notably important to his theological construction, and for him Paul is simply known as “the Apostle.”

Irenaeus’s reception of the letters of Paul is significant because we do not have any other extant sources from the second century that show the depth and nuance that Irenaeus provides. Of course, we see earlier evidence

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1 Throughout this essay I will refer to the Old and New Testaments and “the Bible.” I am, of course, speaking of a functional canon, since the canon was still being formed at the time of Irenaeus. By and large, the four Gospels and Paul were widely accepted. See Ben C. Blackwell, “Paul and Irenaeus,” in *Paul and the Second Century: The Legacy of Paul’s Life, Letters, and Teaching*, eds. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 190–206, at 191–193.

of interaction with the Pauline letters among a wide variety of early Christian literature,² and among some of these texts Paul is even the central figure, as in the *Acts of Paul* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*.³ At the same time, the Pauline letters formed the central part of Marcion's canon, and Paul's theological vision and language served as an impetus for key gnostic doctrines. With this heretical interest in Paul that seemed to dominate the mid-second century (and beyond), earlier scholarship promoted the idea that Irenaeus saved Paul for the catholics.⁴ However, with the more recent recognition that a wide variety of groups engaged the Pauline letters, Irenaeus did not save Paul or reclaim him; rather, Irenaeus represents a further step in the development of doctrine in which theological systems and exegetical readings are explored, defended, and rejected.

In line with the interest in the reception history of the Bible, growing attention has turned to Irenaeus, since he provides both early and significant engagement with the Pauline corpus.⁵ Fortunately, we are moving beyond the simplistic (and honestly ridiculous) idea that no one read Paul well in the time before Augustine.⁶ Importantly, assessments of how well patristic theologians interpreted Paul are based on contemporary interpretations of Paul. Sometimes Irenaeus is critiqued for getting Paul wrong on the (often implicit) basis that there is only one right reading of Paul, which is somehow represented by the one making the assessment. For example, Irenaeus has been charged with being too Catholic for not holding to certain Protestant

2 On this see, for example, Bird and Dodson, eds., *Paul in the Second Century*.

3 See Ben C. Blackwell, "Second Century Perspectives on the Apocalyptic Paul: Reading the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the *Acts of Paul*," in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, eds. Ben C. Blackwell, John Goodrich, and Jason Maston (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 177–197.

4 For example, Johannes Werner, *Der Paulinismus des Irenaeus* (TU 6.2; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1889); Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (New York: Dover, 1961), 2:250–253; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "Paulus in der griechischen Kirche des zweiten Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 75 (1964): 1–20, at 18–19; Calvin J. Roetzel, "Paul in the Second Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 227–241.

5 On the rising interest in and need for reception-historical studies, see my *Christosis: Engaging Pauline Soteriology with his Patristic Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 14–25. For some works that explore the reception history of Paul, see William S. Babcock, ed., *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990); Bird and Dodson, eds., *Paul in the Second Century*; the series edited by Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite, *Paul Among the Fathers: Pauline and Patristic Scholars in Debate* (London: T&T Clark, 2013–); Andreas Lindemann, *Paulus: Apostel und Lehrer der Kirche: Studien zu Paulus und zum frühen Paulusverständnis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); and Ernst Dassmann, *Der Stachel im Fleisch: Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Irenäus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979).

6 For example, J. Christiaan Bekker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 29–30.

standards,⁷ as well as for being too dogmatic about his interpretation of the resurrection.⁸ Of course, there is a wide diversity of contemporary readings of Paul, so assessing Irenaeus against just one of those readings is just a form of special pleading.

Several monographs and essays have explored Irenaeus's hermeneutical methods, interpretive choices, and theological integration on a macro level.⁹ As a result, I will not repeat those discussions here. Rather, I will take the opportunity to investigate an often mentioned but under-examined theme that has its roots firmly embedded in the Pauline letters: adoption. While the wider theme of God's family shows up throughout the Bible, Paul is the only scriptural author to use the language of "adoption" (υιοθεσία). As we will see, Irenaeus takes up this language and integrates this Pauline idea into his wider argument for the unity of God, the unity of Jesus Christ, and the unity of God's economy.¹⁰ However, before exploring Irenaeus's treatment, it would help to note the Pauline context first.

Adoption: From Paul to Irenaeus

The term "adoption" (υιοθεσία), while not frequently used, shows up at key points in Paul's argument in Galatians 4, Romans 8, and Ephesians 1. With its familial field of meaning, adoption fits within Paul's larger discussion of becoming sons/children of God (Gal. 3:26; Rom. 8:14, 21) and of Abraham (Gal. 3:7, 29; Rom. 4:11–12, 16–18), as well as of the inheritance of those who are children—the restored earth and resurrected bodies (Rom. 8:18–23).

Making use of these passages, Irenaeus links them with other related themes from the OT and NT. The term adoption (*adoptio*, υιοθεσία) arises some twenty times in the five books of *Against Heresies* (AH), with most occurring in Books 3 and 4. As we examine his discussion of adoption, we will see how Galatians 4 and Romans 8 especially help inform his description of his theology. In particular, the doctrine of adoption plays into the topics of

7 For example, John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), *passim*, esp. 231–251.

8 For example, Jouette M. Bassler, "A Response to Jeffrey Bingham and Susan Graham: Networks and Noah's Sons," in *Early Patristic Readings of Romans*, eds. Kathy L. Gaca and L. L. Welborn (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 133–151.

9 See my "Paul and Irenaeus," in *Paul and the Second Century*, 190–206; Rolf Noormann, *Irenäus als Paulusinterpret: Zur Rezeption und Wirkung der paulinischen und deuteropaulinischen Briefe im Werk des Irenäus von Lyon*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994); David L. Balás, "The Use and Interpretation of Paul in Irenaeus's Five Books *Adversus Haereses*," *Second Century* 9 (1992): 27–39; R. A. Norris, "Irenaeus's Use of Paul in His Polemic Against the Gnostics," in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 79–98.

10 The term adoption occurs in the following passages: AH 1.30.12; 2.11.1; 3.6.1 [x2]; 3.16.3 [x2]; 3.18.7; 3.19.1 [x3]; 3.20.2; 3.21.4; 4.pr.4; 4.1.1; 4.8.1; 4.11.1; 4.16.5; 4.20.5; 4.25.3; 4.33.4; 4.36.2; 5.12.2; 5.18.2; 5.32.2; Dem. 8.

Christology and salvation economy quite strongly. That is, it helps define the nature and purpose of the incarnation, the connection between the OT and NT, and the soteriological experience of believers.

Much of AH intertwines Irenaeus's positive statements of his theology with polemical rebuttals.¹¹ Within this "constructive polemic," adoption serves to contribute to two narrative arcs in Irenaeus's theology—the Adamic arc (from creation to new creation) and the Abrahamic arc (from promise to fulfillment). While these two arcs intersect and inform one another, they present distinct ways of narrating aspects of God's salvation economy. We see a respective employment of these two arcs—Adamic and Abrahamic—in Books 3 and 4, but the themes intertwine in various passages.¹² Our study of Irenaeus will explore those two Books, explaining how this doctrine relates to Irenaeus's theology and how this reading of Irenaeus gives a window onto Paul's letters. So, first we turn to Book 3 and the Adamic arc.

II. *Jesus, Adam, and Salvation*

In describing the discussion of Jesus and adoption as related to the Adamic arc,¹³ I do not mean that the explicit discussion is always about Adam. Book 3 of AH is more specifically an extended discussion of how the witness of the Scriptures by the apostolic writers supports Irenaeus's theology of unity—the unity of God, of Jesus, and of salvation history. However, a wider narrative of creation to new creation, the Adamic arc, undergirds his discussion of the identity of God and humanity. Within this arc, adoption helps describe Irenaeus's soteriology by explaining the participation of believers in God. We

11 The primary translations I use for AH 1–3 are St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies Books 1–3*, trans. Dominic J. Unger et al.; Ancient Christian Writers 55, 64, 65 (New York: Newman Press, 1992–2012). I then used sections of Books 4–5 translated by Grant, where available: *Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies: On the Detection and Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Routledge, 1997). Otherwise, the English translation in The Ante-Nicene Fathers collection is used: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies: Books 1–5 and Fragments*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. 1, The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885–1887). For critical editions, I consulted Irénée, *Contre les hérésies*, eds. A. Rousseau et al.; Sources Chrétiennes 100.1, 100.2, 152, 153, 210, 211, 263, 264, 293, 294 (Paris: Cerf, 1965–1982). For the *Demonstration*, I use St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

12 These two arcs roughly correspond to Noormann's two categories that explain Irenaeus's employment of adoption/sonship: "anthropological immortality" (*Irenäus*, 484n.89) and "heilsgeschichte" (*Irenäus*, 411n.195). Since the Abrahamic arc also entails the inheritance of immortality, a more explanatory taxonomy is necessary.

13 The explicit adoption passages that I would identify with this arc are these: 1.30.12; 3.6.1 [x2]; 3.16.3 [x2]; 3.18.7; 3.19.1 [x3]; 3.20.2; 3.21.4; 4.Pr.4; 4.1.1; 4.33.4; 5.12.2; 5.18.2.

cannot discuss every adoption passage, so I will focus on illustrative examples, beginning with AH 3.6.¹⁴

Adopted Sons as Gods (AH 3.6)

In AH 3.6.1, Irenaeus defends the singular identity of God, especially in light of biblical texts that suggest a divine multiplicity. The fact that both the Father and the Son are distinctly, though equally, called God explains several biblical passages that contain a plurality of divine names. For three passages that use the plural term “gods” (θεοί, *dii*)—Psalms 82:1; 50:1; and 82:6—he includes believers among those who share this appellation: The Psalmist “refers to the Father, the Son, and those who have received the adoption, and these are the church. For she is the congregation of God . . .” (AH 3.6.1). Later in the passage, he clarifies that the gods in Psalm 82:6 are “those, no doubt, who have received the grace of adoption (*adoptionis gratia*), through which we cry ‘Abba, Father’ [Rom. 8:15]” (AH 3.6.1). As a gift, becoming divine through adoption is not something humans experience by nature (as the gnostics proposed), but neither is it in opposition to God’s original plan.

Though he does not give a detailed exposition of Psalm 82:6, it is evident that Irenaeus has noted the synonymous parallelism between the phrases “You are gods” and “sons of the Most High.”¹⁵ Also implicit in this reading of Psalm 82 is his attention to the fact that these gods had died, drawing on the Adam narrative in Genesis, and so believers are now restored by “the grace of adoption.” Reading Psalm 82 in light of Romans 8, he argues that being an adopted child of God is equivalent to being a god; adoption is deification. He clarifies the nature of this sonship by adoption in AH 3.6.2–3. Though metaphorical, their identity as “gods” is no less real, as we see from his description of those who are falsely known as “gods” (AH 3.6.3). The ability to become adopted as gods is established by the Son of God who is God himself, and this idea is made even more explicit when Irenaeus returns to the topic in his extended Christological discussion of AH 3.16–19.

The Son and Adoption (AH 3.16–19)

Within his larger appeal to apostolic support of his theology, Irenaeus defends the full divinity and humanity of Christ in AH 3.16–19. He argues that the spiritual Christ did not come down and inhabit the human Jesus; rather, the son of Mary is one and the same as the divine Christ, the Son of God. Irenaeus does not merely discuss the God-man Jesus simpliciter; rather, he

14 I discuss these passages in more detail in *Christosis*, 43–59.

15 Ps. 82:6–7 reads: “I said, ‘You are gods and all the sons of the most High; but you die like humans.’” Irenaeus exchanges “Spirit of adoption” from Rom. 8:15 with “grace of adoption” (see AH 3.19.1), though he later uses “Spirit of adoption” in AH 4.1.1.

integrates the soteriological significance of the incarnation: Jesus the God-man unites God to humans, and likewise the Son of God makes believers adopted children of God.

By showing how the “Christ” (the Son of David) had flesh and suffered in AH 3.16, Irenaeus refutes the distinction between the spiritual Christ and the man Jesus. When discussing evidence from Paul, he quotes Romans 1:1–4 and 9:5 and highlights the association between Christ, flesh, and resurrection. He then quotes Galatians 4:4–5 and summarizes the key elements of all these Pauline passages:¹⁶

In his letter to the Galatians he says, “But when the fullness of time had come God sent forth his son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” . . . The Son of God was made the Son of Man, so that through Him we might receive adoption since human nature bore and contained and embraced the Son of God. (AH 3.16.3)

Using this key exchange passage from Paul, Irenaeus shows the correspondence between Jesus as *Son* and believers as *adopted children*. What is important about his description is that adoption is no mere status change, as if someone just received a new last name. Rather, the adoptive relationship is at the same time a participatory one: humans are united to God based on the union between the divine and human in Christ.

Though the wider argument is a defense of Christ’s identity as the God-man, a primary aspect of his treatment is the reality believers experience through Christ—adoptive union of human and divine. In AH 3.17, Irenaeus extends this filial argument and makes the Spirit’s role clearer. The Spirit did not descend on Christ at his baptism to add divinity to the human Jesus, but rather to restore the union between the Spirit and humans.¹⁷ He explains:

[The Spirit] descended on the Son of God, when he had been made the Son of man, becoming accustomed to dwell (*assuescens habitare*) with him in the human race, to rest (*requiescere*) among human beings, and to dwell (*habitare*) in God’s handiwork, thus fulfilling the Father’s will in them and renewing them from their old selves for the newness of Christ. (AH 3.17.1)

16 See AH 3.16.7 and 3.17.4 where Gal. 4 is again discussed, though without mentioning adoption.

17 On the wider discussion of Jesus’s adoption in Irenaeus, see Daniel A. Smith, “Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 618–642.

Though he does not explicitly note the idea of sonship or adoption here, we see that Irenaeus's participatory soteriology includes a union between the divine Spirit and humanity,¹⁸ something he later associates with baptism (see AH 3.17.2).¹⁹ Without mentioning Adam, we see the Adamic arc of creation to new creation through the restoration of the presence of the Spirit.

In AH 3.18, Irenaeus returns to the theme of "Christ" as the one who suffers in order to show the unity of the God-man Jesus Christ. After demonstrating this scripturally, Irenaeus provides the reasoning why this unity of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ is significant, even necessary, for soteriology (AH 3.18.7). Thus, in one of the most important passages in AH, Irenaeus brings together multiple key ideas—participation, adoption, and immortality—when he writes:²⁰

Therefore, as we have said, He caused humanity to adhere (*haerere*) to and to be united (*ἡνωσεν, adunivit*) with God. For if humankind had not overcome the enemy of humankind, the enemy would have not justly have been overcome. Again, unless God had given salvation, we would not possess it securely, and unless the human race had been united (*συνηνώθη, conjunctus fuisset*) with God, it would not be a partaker (*μεταχεῖν, particeps fieri*) of incorruption. For it behooved the Mediator of God and humanity, by his kinship to both, to lead them back to friendship and concord, and to bring it about that God would take humankind to Himself, and that humankind would give itself to God. Really, in what way could we be partakers (*participes*) of filial adoption, unless we had received through the Son participation in Himself; unless His Word, having become flesh, had granted us communion (*communione*) in God? (AH 3.18.7)

18 See my "Two Early Perspectives on Participation in Paul: Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria," in *'In Christ' in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theological Vision of Union and Participation*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Constantine R. Campbell, and Michael J. Thate, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/384 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 331–355.

19 Some note the association between baptism and adoption: Lawson, *Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*, 267; Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 129. They list these: AH 1.21.1; 3.17.3; 4.14.2; 5.15.3; 5.18.2; *Dem* 41, 96. While there are thematic parallels, the two topics are not often discussed together.

20 One key idea missing in this passage is that of image and likeness; however, when setting the stage for AH 3.18, Irenaeus frames this whole section in terms of Christ restoring the image and likeness of God in 3.18.1.

The primary focus of this passage is the participatory union between God and humans that was achieved in Christ, the God-man. Irenaeus uses a wide variety of terms to reinforce this restored relationship: adhere, unite, commune, and participate. As earlier, “adoption” is also one of these terms, and the context shows it to be more than just a status change. It is, rather, a participation in incorruption through a union with God.

Irenaeus argues that those who assert that Christ did not represent the true union of God and humanity cannot escape the problem of death as explored in Romans 5. Taking this Pauline passage as his basis for discussion, he focuses on the dominion and bondage of death from Adam. In contrast, the incarnate Word was able to defeat death. Anticipating his wider argument about Eve in AH 3.22, Irenaeus discusses Christ’s recapitulation of Adam by his being “molded by virgin soil” (AH 3.18.7). The identity of Christ as the son of Mary the Virgin briefly expresses a wider theme in Irenaeus’s work: through generation as a human from the virgin soil, Christ brings regeneration to the rest of believing humanity through adoption.²¹ As in Romans 5, death and life are the key lenses: since sin introduced death and mortality, salvation is cast primarily as life and incorruption. This incorruption is not merely an item transferred from God to humans, nor death merely something destroyed. Only through union with God, communion with God, and participation in God are the divine attributes of life and incorruption enjoyed. Similar themes are explored as the argument progresses in AH 3.19.

Continuing his discussion of the God-man Jesus Christ, in AH 3.19 Irenaeus focuses on Christ’s true deity because he was not fathered by Joseph, as some argued.²² He styles Christ as “God,” the “incorruptible Word,” and the “Son of God,” which all point to his deity. Fundamental to his argument in AH 3.19.1 is that becoming an adopted child of God is necessary for humans to experience the liberty of incorruption and immortality, in contrast to the bondage of disobedience and death. Reading Psalm 82:6–7 in light of Galatians 4:4, Irenaeus brings together a confluence of several key ideas:

Since they are ignorant of the Emmanuel who was born of the virgin, they are deprived of his gift, which is eternal life. And since they do not receive the incorruptible Word, they continue in the mortal flesh and are debtors to death,

21 He connects this generation to adoption in AH 4.33.4. See Tyson Guthrie, “Irenaeus’s Use of Galatians 4:4–5” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, CA, November 2014), https://www.academia.edu/9583960/Irenaeuss_Use_of_Galatians_4_4-5, accessed 20 April 2016; M. C. Steenberg, “The Role of Mary as Co-Recapitulator in St. Irenaeus of Lyons,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 58.2 (2004): 117–137. For the importance of Mary as the Virgin see also AH 3.19.3; 3.21.4–3.22.4.

22 One of the only times that he mentions a false view of “adoption” is in relation to those who argue on behalf of an adoptionist Christology (AH 1.30.12).

because they do not accept the antidote to life. In reference to them the Word, speaking of his gift of grace, said, "I have said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you die like men.'" Doubtless He speaks these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption, but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God who was incarnate for their sakes. For the Word of God became man, and the Son of God became the Son of Man to this end, that a human, having been united with the Word of God and receiving adoption, might become a child of God. Certainly, in no other way could we have received incorruption (*in corruptela*) and immortality (*immortalitas*) unless we had been united with incorruption and immortality. But how could we be united with incorruption and immortality unless incorruption and immortality had first become what we are, in order that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruption, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption to sons (*filiarum adoptio*)? (AH 3.19.1)

Again, Irenaeus defends his Christology by turning to soteriology: if Christ is not truly God who has become truly human, then humans cannot experience a corresponding union with God. Building from his previous focus on union with God, he now applies that concept of union to incorruption and immortality. Since the Son took on true humanity, namely flesh and blood, these aspects of humanity can be transformed as well: being united to God is being united to the life of God. What is interesting here is how he again identifies human deification with adoption as children of God (see AH 3.6.1). From Irenaeus's discussion and other ancient sources, we see that the experience of immortality was fundamental to ancient conceptions of deity.²³ (For example, the "immortals" were the gods.) We saw earlier that Irenaeus used the language of "gods" metaphorically, though it is not less real. That is, he interprets the experience of deification and adoption as participating in divine immortality, overcoming the problem of death resulting from Adam's sin.

Accordingly, the Adamic arc—the move from creation to new creation—is now made explicit through Romans 5 and helps set the framework for the discussion that started back in AH 3.6. Christ's becoming human and imparting the experience of the Spirit to humanity was to restore them from the problem of death and corruption that Adam's sin imparted. This shows the necessity of the incarnation, and it allows Irenaeus to employ his

23 See Blackwell, *Christosis*, 46–48.

famous exchange formula: “the Son of God became the Son of man, that a human, having been united with the Word of God and receiving the adoption, might become a child of God” (AH 3.19.1). While the renewed relationship is important, the repeated focus here is on the outcome of that relationship—a return to immortality. Believers take on a real family resemblance, in that as children of God they participate in the life of God, even to the extent that they are called gods.

Adoption and the Adamic Arc

With AH 3.19 we saw how the Adamic narrative forms the substructure for understanding adoption.²⁴ This arc tells the common story of humanity: people were created by God, but through sin they died because they lost a participation in God. God, however, restores humans—uniting them to himself through Christ and the Spirit and adopting them as his children—with the result that they are freed from bondage to death and become immortal.²⁵ The central way of expressing his exchange formula is through Christ becoming the *Son* of Man so believers can become *sons* of God through adoption (AH 3.10.2; 3.16.3; 3.18.7; 3.19.1; see 3.20.2; 5.Pr.1).²⁶ This correlation of Christ’s sonship with that of believers is drawn directly from Galatians 4:4–6, as well as Romans 1:3–4 and Romans 8:14–17. Accordingly, we see how adoption helps characterize the identity of Christ the Son of God, the identity of believers, and the nature of salvation.

Through the lens of adoption we gain a clarity on the identity of Christ, the Spirit, and believers. With regard to Christology, he distinguishes between Christ who is the Son of God by nature and believers who are children of God “by the grace of adoption” (AH 3.6.1). One of the most repeated descriptions of adoption in these passages is the identification of adoption with deification.²⁷ Humans, through sin, have become mortal and corrupted, but through union with God believers are called gods because they share in the divine attribute of immortality. The fact that believers are adopted means that they are children by grace, since it is a “gift of adoption” and a “gift of grace.” They have a changed status and experience, whereas Christ, as God by nature, does not change in that fashion.

24 At the beginning of Book 4 Irenaeus summarizes key ideas from Book 3 and recounts his discussion of adoption and deification that we saw come to a climax in AH 3.18.7–3.19.1. In particular, reading Ps. 82 through the lens of Rom. 8 and Gal. 4, those who receive adoption through Christ and the Spirit are rightly called gods, along with the Father and Son (AH 4.Pr.4; 4.1.1).

25 Noormann, *Irenäus*, 149.

26 The only other exchange formula is in AH 4.33.4, but sonship does not seem to play a role here.

27 See Blackwell, *Christosis*, 43–54.

While not explicitly employing a “by nature” versus “by grace” distinction in this Christological context, as later patristic writers will,²⁸ the effect of his argument prefigures their language. This corresponds to his equivalent distinction between those who are God in reality and those who are gods metaphorically (AH 3.19.2). Taking his cue from Paul’s exchange formula in Galatians 4:4, the Son of God who becomes the Son of Man (that is, fully human) recapitulates and restores humanity: he takes on the generation of humanity, is raised from the virgin soil of Mary, the new Eve, and unites God and humans again (AH 3.19.1; 4.33.4). It is the presence of the Spirit of adoption that grants a new generation to humanity, the experience of vivification and immortality, which Irenaeus styles as adoption (AH 4.1.1; 5.12.2; 5.18.2).²⁹

While restoration to the image and likeness of God is the ultimate goal of human restoration, in these adoption texts the focus is more specifically on the participation in God’s immortality,³⁰ which allows Irenaeus to identify adoption as deification. In particular, this immortality is described as a liberation from the bondage of sin and death. Coming to unite humanity with God, Christ transferred God’s adopted children from the slavery of death to the freedom of life (AH 3.18.7; 3.19.1). This slavery-to-freedom theme is not always associated with adoption and the Adamic arc,³¹ but the influence of Galatians 4:4 and God’s action in the fullness of time is evident (AH 4.22.1; cf. 3.23.2; 3.23.7). In relation to another Pauline passage, Irenaeus links this freedom of the children with readings of Romans 8, where Paul makes a similar connection (AH 5.32.1; 5.36.2). Of course, the association between adoption and immortality that Irenaeus focuses on is highly informed by Irenaeus’s reading of 1 Corinthians 15.³²

When considering all this material together, we see how the concept of adoption helps narrate the Adamic arc in Irenaeus’s theology. As humanity moves through the creation-fall-new creation progression, one primary lens on this is participation in God’s immortality, which is lost and then restored. The Pauline language of adoption, interpreted in conjunction with Psalm 82, helps communicate this restoration. This wider arc is prominent in most con-

28 For example, Cyril of Alexandria, *In Jo.* 1.12. See Blackwell, *Christosis*, 91.

29 Though the incarnation is the focus in these discussions, the union of divine and human in Christ was not in itself salvific because death must be defeated and the Spirit restored (AH 3.17.1; 3.19.2–3; 4.1.1; and esp. 5.12.2; 5.18.2), yet this union in Christ begins to restore the division caused by sin.

30 Lawson, *Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus*, 158.

31 In fact, note below how the slavery-freedom dialectic is recast in terms of the Moses-Christ dialectic within the Abrahamic arc.

32 Noormann, *Irenäus*, 150. See Ysabel de Andia, *Homo vivens: incorruptibilité et divinisation de l’homme selon Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1986), 177.

temporary interpretations of Irenaeus, but a salvation-historical, or covenantal, narrative is also fundamental to Irenaeus's theology. This covenantal arc is the focus of Book 4 in *Against Heresies*, and in this narrative it is Abraham, rather than Adam, who primarily informs his understanding of adoption and sonship, so we turn there now.

III. Abraham, Moses, and the New Covenant of Freedom

In Book 4, Irenaeus explains the continuities and discontinuities between the OT and the NT.³³ His purpose is to demonstrate how God "is one and the same" (*unus et idem*) in the OT and the NT, where, respectively, he is "announced by the law and the prophets" and "confessed by Christ as his Father" (AH 4.5.1). We see a foretaste of this discussion in AH 3.9–12, where Irenaeus explains how the four Gospels demonstrate that Jesus represents the one God, and he links the faith of the NT writers to Abraham and other key characters of the OT. In that way, he desires to show that it is the "one and the same God who had given the promise to Abraham . . . and who through his Son Christ Jesus called us from the worship of stones to the knowledge of himself" (AH 3.9.1). In AH 3.11.8, he associates the four Gospels with the progression of four covenants (*testamenta*) in the Bible, which progress from Noah (with the rainbow), to Abraham (with the sign of circumcision), to Moses (with the law), and climaxes with Jesus.³⁴ Thus, Abraham's role is foundational for Irenaeus's understanding of salvation history.

While Irenaeus explores the unity of the OT prophetic message with that of the NT, he also notes the distinct shift from Moses to Christ as one of bondage to freedom. The concept of adoption is one primary way that Irenaeus characterizes this new dispensation of liberty, and he links it back to God's promise to give Abraham many children. Like Paul, Irenaeus uses this Abrahamic story to explain both the inclusion of the Gentiles and the inheritance that awaits the children of God. Accordingly, within this Abrahamic arc the discussion of adoption helps display the coherence in God's *oikonomia*, linking together some of Irenaeus's central doctrines—namely, the unity of God's work in the OT and NT, the formation of the church, and the

33 For a discussion of the coherence of the argument of AH 4, see Philippe Bacq, *De l'ancienne à la nouvelle Alliance selon S. Irénée: Unité du Livre IV de l'Adversus Haereses* (Paris: Éditions Lethielleux, Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1978); Balás, "The Use and Interpretation of Paul," 35–36.

34 See my discussion of the textual issue, in which Abraham (in the Greek) is preferred over Adam (in the Latin): Ben C. Blackwell, "The Covenant of Promise: Abraham in Irenaeus," in *Irenaeus and Paul*, vol. 3 of *Paul Among the Fathers: Pauline and Patristic Scholars in Debate*, eds. Todd Still and David Wilhite (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming 2017).

restoration of all creation.³⁵ We will again selectively examine key passages, beginning with AH 4.5–8.

Children from Stones (AH 4.5–8)

Abraham comes to the fore of Irenaeus's argument in Book 4 rather quickly. Abraham's faith unites the economic work of God in the OT and NT, both through his progeny and through his own willingness to sacrifice Isaac (AH 4.5.2–5). In fact, in his several discussions of John 8:56, where Abraham "rejoiced that he should see [Christ's] day, and he saw it and was glad" (AH 4.5.3; see 4.7.1), Irenaeus describes how Abraham was able to see the Word's advent and suffering by pre-enacting the event himself. Accordingly, Abraham serves as evidence for how the whole economy from creation to Christ holds together.

Abraham, Irenaeus tells us, is able to rejoice through his descendants, in that his rejoicing is passed to them and their rejoicing is passed back to him (AH 4.7.1). Like the Isaac-Christ sacrifices, these mutual rejoicings embody the reality of the other. Another unitive reality is the promise of descendants to Abraham. Moving beyond Abraham's physical descendants, Irenaeus employs several Gospel texts (via Pauline passages) to affirm that Christian believers, in particular Gentile believers, are really the children of Abraham. However, since these are not physical descendants, Irenaeus draws on God's act to make descendants from stones (see Matt. 3:9):

Now, Jesus did this by drawing us off from the religion of stones, bringing us over from hard and fruitless contemplations, and establishing in us a faith like Abraham's. Thus, Paul also testifies, saying that we are children of Abraham (*filios Abrahae*) because of the similarity of our faith [*secundum similitudinem fidei*] and the promise of inheritance (*et repromissionem hereditatis*). (AH 4.7.2)³⁶

Irenaeus, like Paul, brings together the idea that a faith common to Abraham's leads to a sharing in Abraham's family and inheritance.

The work of Jesus accords with God's promises to Abraham, even if the Jews did not accept it (4.7.3–4). Marcion, Irenaeus says, uses the discontinuity of the OT and NT, between Jews and Gentiles, to seek to "exclude Abraham from the inheritance" (AH 4.8.1).³⁷ In contrast, the Gospels speak of the numerous children of Abraham being made from stones who will celebrate with Abraham eschatologically. The church, as adopted children of

³⁵ See a fuller discussion of Abraham in my "The Covenant of Promise: Abraham in Irenaeus."

³⁶ See Rom. 4:12; Gal. 4:28.

³⁷ See AH 1.30.10; 1.27.3.

both Abraham and God, receive that inheritance: “. . . through Jesus Christ God . . . introduces to the kingdom of heaven Abraham and his seed, that is, the Church, upon which also is conferred the adoption and the inheritance promised to Abraham” (AH 4.8.1). Irenaeus describes this inheritance cosmically as the “kingdom” and also anthropologically as “incorruption.” Through the fulfillment of promises to Abraham, Irenaeus finds room for continuity between the OT and NT; however, the deeper challenge of Marcion still remains—how to understand the discontinuity between Moses and Jesus, between bondage and liberty (AH 4.8.2ff.). Much of the rest of AH 4 explores this salvation-historical progression.

From Bondage to Freedom (AH 4.9–20)

As he explores the interconnections between Moses and Christ, Irenaeus notes the purpose of this dispensational progression from bondage: after creation and bondage, God pursued the act of “setting free his servant, adopting him as a son (*in filium*), and, at the proper time, bestowing an incorruptible inheritance, for the purpose of bringing man to perfection” (AH 4.11.1). As earlier, adoption is identified with liberty and an incorruptible inheritance, though now the progression to perfection is added. While the economies of bondage and freedom are different from one another, they are not in direct opposition, as Marcion would argue. For instance, the Spirit who inspired the prophets is also the one who allows believers to call God “Abba, Father” (AH 4.9.2–3). Thus, adoption and sonship help narrate this salvation-historical progression in terms of Galatians 3–5.

In AH 4.16, Irenaeus does not shy away from the discontinuity between Moses and Christ. Since Abraham was righteous before the giving of the law, why then was the law given, if people could be righteous without it (as Abraham was)? The patriarchs “had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them” (AH 4.16.3). The Mosaic generation, Irenaeus writes, showed their desire for bondage to idolatry in the golden calf episode, so God gave the law of bondage to train them.³⁸ In the “new covenant of liberty (*novo libertatis testamento*),” however, he released them from this bondage “by means of adoption (*per adoptionem*) to know God the Father, to love Him with the whole heart, and to follow His word unswervingly” (AH 4.16.5). Adoption, then, is a means to liberty, though not a freedom from the law, but a freedom to know the law internally and to grow in one’s understanding and obedience, that is, to grow towards the perfection that God intended for humans to achieve in Christ through the

38 The Law has a pedagogical function like knowing evil does (see AH 4.37–38).

Spirit. As Irenaeus moves from Moses to the prophets (AH 4.20–35),³⁹ he furthers his case about the continuity between the old and new.

As a central discussion about prophecy, AH 4.20 is one of the climactic chapters in Irenaeus's work. It explores the revelation of God through Christ and the Spirit in both testaments and the resulting union with God for those who attend to this revelation. The progressive nature of this revelation is potentially a dilemma because it might be a reflection of ontological dualisms and not just salvation-historical ones. Defending the latter, the encounters with God in the OT are typologically united with God's later work, "in order that through them he might prefigure and show forth future events beforehand" (AH 4.20.12). Not only are the works of God revealed, but God himself is. Discussing the warning that one cannot see God and live (Exod. 33:20), Irenaeus argues that God can reveal himself in any manner he wants (AH 4.20.5). That is:

For God is powerful in all things, having been seen at that time indeed prophetically through the Spirit, and seen, too, adoptively through the Son; and He shall also be seen paternally in the kingdom of heaven, the Spirit truly preparing man in the Son of God, and the Son leading him to the Father, while the Father, too, confers [upon him] incorruption for eternal life, which comes to everyone from the fact of his seeing God. (AH 4.20.5)

We see a basic three-stage, trinitarian progression of revelation: prophetic, adoptive, and paternal, corresponding to the work of the Spirit, Son, and Father, respectively (see AH 4.20.5–7).⁴⁰ This continues the leitmotif of a progressive movement towards perfection (which again is associated with "incorruption"). In line with his wider discussion of increasing in perfection, this progressive revelation of God in history is intentional, for pedagogical purposes.

In addition to visions of God, God's people know him through his acts, particularly prophetic acts that prefigure the advent of Christ and the Spirit (AH 4.20.12). Abraham, like the other patriarchs, serves as a prophet and prefigures the inclusion of the Gentiles. Through an extended interaction with Galatians 3:1–9, Irenaeus argues: since "our faith was also prefigured in Abraham," he is "the father of those who from among the Gentiles believe in Jesus Christ," and they have the hope of "the inheritance in the kingdom

39 Bacq, *De l'ancienne à la nouvelle Alliance*, 153–161.

40 Antonio Orbe, S.J., *Teología de San Ireneo: Comentario al Libro V del «Adversus haereses»* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Crisianos, 1985), 3:626–628.

(*in regno hereditatem*)" (AH 4.21.1).⁴¹ The engagement with Galatians here deserves more discussion than we have space for, but we should note particularly how Irenaeus returns to the same concatenation of themes: the Spirit, inclusion of Gentiles as children (of Abraham), and inheritance of the kingdom. What is new here, in the context, is his inclusion of justification in this salvation-historical frame.⁴² The Abrahamic arc is evident, and in terms of AH 4.20.5, this prophetic revelation through the Spirit is fulfilled adoptively in Christ. Later in Book 4 the Abrahamic and Adamic come together.

Natural vs Adopted Sonship (AH 4.41)

We have been discussing Irenaeus's engagement with the OT prophets in Book 4, and one of his last sections is a treatment of the consistency between the OT prophets and the NT (AH 4.32–41). In this treatment, the issues of eschatological judgment and blessing are central (AH 4.36–41). Since he considers Abraham among the OT prophets, he ends chapter 36 with a discussion of Matthew 23:37 and Jesus's eschatological promise in Matthew 8:11–12: "Many shall come from the east and the west and shall recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall go into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (AH 4.36.8). This shows, Irenaeus argues, the coherence between Jesus's message and that of the prophetic promises to the patriarchs. The Gentiles, as part of this family, do not give evidence of a different God, but of the one and the same God fulfilling his promises.

The next several chapters (AH 4.37–41) serve as an extended discussion of children, free will, and judgment. Though the Abrahamic arc serves as the presenting issue (that is, AH 4.36.8), Irenaeus turns to Adamic themes in this section, showing that the two arcs are interconnected. He uses the topic of "calling" the children from Matthew 23:37 to highlight that humans are not determined by their anthropology, by their nature, but by their free will with which they can respond to the call. In particular, he argues that some are not by nature good or bad; rather, they receive blessing or punishment based on their choices (see AH 4.37.1–2).⁴³ Since humans have the freedom to strive towards maturity in perfection, Irenaeus famously describes in AH 4.38 why

41 The Gentiles, Irenaeus argues, have the same faith as Abraham, and it is through this common faith that they become his descendants. Just as Irenaeus has argued for the unified work of the "one and the same God" in other passages (for example, AH 3.9.1; 4.9.1), he now emphasizes "one and the same faith." See Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 74.

42 Though not our focus here, this raises the possibility of his voice for a New Perspective reading.

43 See AH 1.5.5–1.7.5 for the deterministic anthropology that Irenaeus is refuting.

humans were not perfect from the beginning. But his larger argument is that eschatological judgment and blessing are concordant with human disobedience and obedience, rather than being determined by one's nature.

To conclude the larger section, he addresses what might be interpreted as a deterministic status: being children of God or of the devil (AH 4.41). It is in this chapter that he addresses being a child by nature in distinction to one by adoption, though he does not explicitly use the term "adoption."⁴⁴ He begins the chapter in this way:

Inasmuch as the Lord has said that there are certain angels of the devil for whom eternal fire is prepared, and as again he declares regarding the tares, "The tares are the children of the wicked one," it must be affirmed that he has ascribed all who are apostate to him who is the ringleader of this transgression. But He neither made angels nor humans so by nature. (AH 4.41.1)

Even though unbelievers are children of the devil, they were not created that way by nature. All humans, he argues, are children of God according to nature, but there is a second order relationship—with God or the devil—that is determined by one's faith as he later explains:

According to nature, then—that is, according to creation, so to speak—we are all children of God, because we all have been created by God. But with respect to obedience and doctrine we are not all the children of God: those only are so who believe in Him and do His will. And those who do not believe and do not obey His will are children and angels of the devil because they do the works of the devil. (AH 4.41.2)

Though he does not use the terminology of adoption, he distinguishes between a child "in the order of nature (*secundum naturam*) because he is born a son so (*natus sit filius*), [and] the other is reputed a son (*reputatur filius*), in that he was made so (*factus est*)" (AH 4.41.2).

Bringing the discussion back to his larger theme of eschatological judgment and blessing, Irenaeus describes the outcomes in terms of inheritance (AH 4.41.3). One's naturally born children can be disinherited because of their disobedience. Irenaeus presumes universal sinfulness, in that all have turned towards sin, but "when they shall be converted, come to repentance and cease from evil, they should have the power to become children of God

44 See Minns, *Irenaeus*, 128–129. See esp. AH 4.41.2–3.

and to receive the inheritance of immortality which is given by him" (AH 4.41.3). As with AH 3.19.1, we see the direct interconnection between being a child of God and the experience of immortality.⁴⁵ This topic of inheritance is evident in Book 5, where Irenaeus discusses the final restoration of the world.

The Children's Inheritance (AH 5.32)

The last major section of Book 5 (AH 5.16–36) treats the establishment of God's kingdom within creation.⁴⁶ After reiterating the reality of Christ's incarnation and his salvific recapitulation of humanity, he recounts an eschatological scheme that culminates in the restoration of the whole created order, including the flesh of individual believers. As he describes this "inheritance of the kingdom" in AH 5.32, he argues that believers should reign in the same creation in which they previously suffered (AH 5.32.1). As evidence, he quotes Romans 8:19–21, a biblical passage that ends with a statement about the glory of the "sons of God."⁴⁷ Irenaeus then immediately turns to a discussion of the promise of land given to Abraham,⁴⁸ quoting Genesis 13:14–15, 17 and later Genesis 15:18:

Though he did not receive the inheritance of the land (*hereditatem terrae*) during all the time of his sojourn there, if God promised it to him, it must be that he shall receive it at the resurrection of the just together with his seed, that is, those who fear God and believe in Him. (AH 5.32.2)

Though God promised the land of Canaan and its environs to Abraham, Irenaeus interprets this as a promise of the land of all creation. He juxtaposes this expansion of the inheritance with the expansion of Abraham's progeny: Abraham's "seed is the church, which receives the adoption (*adoptionem*) to God through the Lord" (AH 5.32.2). The extension of the filial promise to include the Gentiles thus serves as the basis of an extension of the land promise.

45 Were this the only passage about becoming children, the sole emphasis on the agency of humans here might be perceived as (semi-)Pelagian, but when considered in the wider scope of Irenaeus's corpus, we know the necessity of the incarnation and the presence of the Spirit to achieve this outcome of a restored filial relationship.

46 See Balás, "The Use and Interpretation of Paul," 37–38.

47 On the wider topics related to Rom. 8 in this passage, see D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Irenaeus Reads Romans 8: Resurrection and Renovation," in *Early Patristic Readings of Romans*, 114–132, at 127–128.

48 He is likely associating the "sons" language (Rom. 8:14–17, 23) with the promise of being children of Abraham (Rom. 4:11–12), thus reading Rom. 8 in light of Rom. 4.

Adoption and the Abrahamic Arc

Now that we have explored the key adoption texts that are associated with the Abrahamic arc, we can see several themes that have emerged. A central focus of the biblical testimony about Abraham are the ideas of election, salvation-history, and eschatology.

Through the Pauline association of Abraham with faith and the promise of children (Gal. 3; Rom. 4), Irenaeus identifies those who share in Abraham's faith as his children. In other words, those who are adopted as children of God are at the same time identified as children of Abraham, as a fulfillment of the promise. With the strong Gentile presence in the church,⁴⁹ Irenaeus sees this as a raising up of stones as children (for example, Matt. 3:9) and that they will be as stars in the heavens.⁵⁰ The narrative of the Bible does not run directly from Abraham to Christ, so Irenaeus must explain the Mosaic economy as well.

Against those who found only discontinuity between the OT and NT, Irenaeus argues for a coherence in the divine plan, and adoption serves as one key element of his portrayal of salvation history. We saw in AH 4.20.5 how he presents the progression of revelation as three stages: prophetic (Spirit), adoptive (Son), and paternal (Father). This is not to say that there is a simple progression because Irenaeus does highlight the distinct shift from bondage to liberty between the economies of Moses and Christ. However, with the link between adoption and the Abrahamic promise, Irenaeus sees a wider arc of coherence between Abraham and Christ within which the arc of discontinuity between Moses and Christ sits. This both/and approach is reflected in the Galatians 3–5 passage to which Irenaeus often returns.

Since contemporary scholarship often focuses on Irenaeus's defense of salvation-historical continuity, the Moses-Christ discontinuity in AH is not a theme often highlighted, but the contrast between bondage and freedom is very central to the focus of Book 4. In distinction to Abraham, who obeyed from the heart (AH 4.13.4), the Laws of bondage were given to train the Israelites so their hearts might learn to serve God freely without the need for bondage (AH 4.13.2; 4.15.1).⁵¹ The new covenant of liberty in Christ,

49 Though highlighting the Gentiles, the Jewish nature of Jesus and his promises are evident: see AH 3.11.8; 3.12.3; 3.16.2; 5.32.25.

50 Interestingly, Irenaeus regularly correlates the promise that they will be as the stars in the heavens (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4) with being "lights of the world" (Phil. 2:15) or "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). See AH 3.9.1; 4.5.3; 4.7.3; *Dem* 24; 35. See Real Tremblay, *Irénée de Lyon: L'empreinte des doigts de Dieu* (Rome: Editions Academiae Alfonsianae, 1979), 75; J. Roldanus, "L'héritage d'Abraham d'après Irénée," in *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A. F. J. Klijn*, eds. T. Baarda et al (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1988), 214.

51 This is in contrast to those who said bondage of the Law is ultimately from evil angels (AH 1.23.3).

then, brings freedom from this bondage (AH 4.16.5) for those who have been adopted in Christ (AH 4.36.2). This promise of liberty in Christ is explained as the inheritance due to Abraham and his progeny.

Irenaeus sets the hope of restoration within a cosmic frame of enjoying the fruits of the kingdom of God. Just as the promise of descendants was expanded beyond the people of Israel, so the promise for inheritance (and restoration) of the land is also expanded beyond the land of Israel to include the whole world (see AH 5.32.2). Using Romans 8:15–23, Irenaeus shows the mutual coherence of adoption and inheritance as both cosmic and anthropological restoration. By linking this inheritance to Abraham, Irenaeus appears to be reading Romans 8 in light of Romans 4. The anthropological hope of transformation, which is characterized as growth towards perfection and incorruption, is also necessary to his argument. Irenaeus is well known for his dogged defense of the resurrection of the body, which serves as the inheritance,⁵² but he also is very concerned to demonstrate the growth believers experience. This serves to refute the argument of his opponents, that people are limited by their nature into specific, fixed categories.

In this Abrahamic arc, we see how Irenaeus draws together the coherence between the different economies. The restoration God provides through Christ was distinct in some ways from Moses, but since Moses and Christ are the outworking of his promises to Abraham, we can see that they are not at odds with one another. Abraham's prophetic role through prefiguring the faith of believers and the sacrifice of Christ draws together economic progression of God's revelation. Accordingly, as humans share in Abraham's faith they become his children, the adopted children of God, who therefore share in his promised inheritance—the restoration of the land (now the whole of creation), as well as the immortality of the body. Likewise, as children of God they are released from the role of slavery and bondage to the Law in order to have the liberty originally intended. While these themes are distinct from those of the Adamic arc, we see an overlap as well.

IV. Conclusion

In this analysis we have seen how Irenaeus often frames his discussion of adoption within two arcs—the Adamic and the Abrahamic—by expanding upon the key Pauline texts that treat adoption. Though only sprinkled throughout the five books, the use of adoption language is not immaterial to his larger argument. In fact, Mosser argues: “For Irenaeus, all the benefits of the new covenant are summarized in the work of adoption to divine sonship spoken

52 In addition to the resurrection body as the inheritance of believers, Irenaeus also describes the body as the inheritance (that is, possession) of the Spirit in AH 5.9.1–4.

of by Paul in Galatians 3:26–4:7 and Romans 8:1–30.”⁵³ By incorporating adoption into his Adamic and Abrahamic arcs, this contributes to his wider argument that there is only one God who both created the world and is restoring it through his two hands, the God-man Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The Two Arcs

Though we use the phrase Adamic arc, the discussions in Book 3 where adoption arose were just as focused on Christ. The nature of Christ’s divine and human identity—as both Son of God and Son of Man—was the primary lens for understanding the nature of believers as adopted children of God who become gods. However, this pattern of restoration only makes sense, Irenaeus argues, within the creation-to-new creation narrative, and this is where the Adamic arc becomes clear. The restoration of believers through deifying adoption is in line with God’s creational intention, and humans are able to experience the freedom of divine immortality that God desires for them as they are united with God.

That promise of an inherited immortality fits directly in line with the Abrahamic arc that we primarily found in Book 4. This covenantal and salvation-historical lens on adoption served to help Irenaeus explain the progression of the OT and NT: through Abraham and the promise that he would have many children, Irenaeus was able to explain the continuities and discontinuities between Abraham, Moses, and Christ. Namely, even though the Mosaic Law was framed as bondage, Christ came to bring liberty to the adopted children of Abraham, who are primarily Gentiles raised up as stones. These adopted children will therefore receive the inheritance offered to Abraham—the restoration of this world and of their bodies, now made immortal.

Adoption, as established through Christ and the Spirit, therefore, unites the story of creation (with Adam) with that of the covenantal economies (with Abraham). In short, adoption is an integrative metaphor where, through Christ and the Spirit, the reconstituted divine-human relationship (becoming children of God) entails an anthropological experience of incorruption and immortality. This gives strong evidence that a relational ontology undergirds Irenaeus’s soteriological anthropology: the nature of human existence is determined by their participation in God.⁵⁴ Minns therefore argues: “When Irenaeus speaks of our adoption as sons of God he does not mean that God simply chooses to look upon us as though we were his sons; he means that God has *established us* as sons by incorporating us into his only begotten

53 Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (2005): 30–74, at 44.

54 See Blackwell, “Two Early Perspectives,” 349–354.

Son.”⁵⁵ Irenaeus bases this understanding on his readings of Romans 8 and Galatians 4, which both include the work of Christ and the Spirit. Especially important was the exchange formula from Galatians 4:4 that grounded in Christ’s identity his adoption affirmation, as well as his affirmation about believers becoming gods. In addition, these Galatians and Romans passages integrate the promises of freedom and inheritance, which can be described as a future kingdom or an inheritance of land, as well as the anthropological inheritance of immortality and eternal life.

Irenaeus’s main work, *Against Heresies*, is constructive polemic, and his discussion of adoption fits exactly into this purpose. While Irenaeus uses the adoption concept to refute aspects of his opponents’ theology, he does not spend much time refuting their direct views of adoption. Though we have not fully explored this here, I would argue that Irenaeus’s use of Adam more directly refutes his (Valentinian) gnostic opponents who disparage physical creation and the resurrection of the flesh, whereas his use of Abraham serves to refute Marcion and his disparagement of the Jewish aspects of Christianity.

Re-reading Paul

Studying Irenaeus’s use of adoption is illuminating in and of itself, but does his discussion shine light on Paul’s meaning? Can we find the Adamic and Abrahamic arcs in Paul’s argument? I would argue yes, that Galatians 4 and Romans 8 do indeed track these similar arcs, and within these passages we see Paul intertwine the two.

In Galatians 3–4 Abraham is the primary lens for understanding the Christ event, and central to Paul’s argument is that all Christ believers, both Jews and Gentiles, are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29).⁵⁶ However, within this Abrahamic arc, the exchange formula that Irenaeus finds so useful from Galatians 4:4 shows an Adamic emphasis on the humanity of Jesus—he is born of a woman.⁵⁷ This is the basis of Paul’s claim that believers are adopted as God’s children. We see, then, a correlation between being adopted children of God in an Adamic sense and being children of Abraham.

In Romans 8, the Adamic themes are most primary with its focus on the results of death from sin and the recreation of the cosmos and believers through the life-giving work of the Spirit.⁵⁸ In the midst of this argument, Paul introduces the idea of adoption and the hope of inheritance. With the

55 Minns, *Irenaeus*, 129, emphasis original.

56 See Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 267–272.

57 See especially Morna Hooker’s discussion of the interchange motif in Paul: *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 13–69.

58 For the Adamic focus, see Ben C. Blackwell “The Greek Life of Adam and Eve and Romans 8.14–30,” in *Reading Romans in Context: Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, eds.

introduction of the inheritance language, we hear echoes of Romans 4 and God's promise to Abraham about having many children and that he would inherit the world (Rom. 4.13). So again, we see the Adamic and the Abrahamic arcs inform one another.

When speaking about reading Paul in light of this interesting perspective on adoption, I am drawn to the potential comparisons here with the doctrine of justification in Paul. Kevin Vanhoozer has recently argued that adoption is an analogue for justification (or "incorporated righteousness"), in that it relates to a reestablished divine-human relationship and a newly created social reality.⁵⁹ I agree that it provides a helpful illustration of a soteriology that is at the same time vertical and horizontal in orientation. However, in light of Irenaeus's discussion of adoption, I think we can take this understanding of justification a bit further. Adoption, in this reading, is not just a new status, but a new reality of participation in the triune God, which allows for participation in God's life (that is, incorruption and immortality). What if we viewed justification as this participation in God and his life? Perhaps we could much more easily make sense of the resurrection in Paul's Abrahamic (Rom. 4) and Adamic (Rom. 5) passages.⁶⁰ Adoption is a union with God that produces both present status and an inheritance; justification likewise would be a union with God that entails present status and resurrection.⁶¹ John Kincaid has helpfully used the term "Ancient Perspective" to describe this kind of position and to distinguish it from the "Old" and New Perspectives on Paul.

While this preliminary conclusion about Paul's theology needs much more development, I think we can clearly affirm that interesting readings of Paul's letters can be found before Augustine. With his constructive polemic, Irenaeus often answers questions and employs Paul's letters in new ways, but these redeployments spark new light for understanding both Irenaeus and Paul, and these enlivened texts pay dividends to those who attend to them.

Ben C. Blackwell, John Goodrich, and Jason Maston (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 108–114.

59 Kevin Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, eds. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 235–258, at 252–257.

60 N. T. Wright is one who does explicitly frame justification in terms of the Adamic and Abrahamic arcs: *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 34.

61 I am currently working on a monograph—*Participating in the Righteousness of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming)—in order to demonstrate a reading just such as this.