

# Chapter Four

## Commentary

**1–2 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.**

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The conclusion of chapter three brought Paul’s point-of-view into full clarity: the Gentile believers are genuine heirs of Abraham, and as such, fully participate in the blessings and responsibilities of being heirs. They are not second-class citizens of the people of God but are full heirs of the promise. This is because no one obtains the status of heir merely through physical lineage. The heirs of Abraham are participants in his faith. What is more, even the physical offspring of Abraham were chosen (adopted) by God, and so His sovereign choice of individuals from the nations (Gentiles) accords them equal status as adopted children in God’s family.

Now, like all good teachers, Paul moves to a fitting analogy in order to bring his point home to the minds of his readers. He selects for his analogy something from the Hellenistic culture of which his readers were well acquainted. It thus would ring true for them, and would illustrate his point. We can see how closely his current illustration maps his previous argument, and how he even sees the illustration as relevant for both Jewish and Gentile believers.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter Three - the Pedagogue	Chapter Four - Guardians & Stewards
The son is under the charge of the Pedagogue in order to assure that he is taken to the teacher.	The son is under the charge of Guardians and Stewards in order to keep him until he is declared an heir.
The Torah is the Pedagogue.	The Torah acts like the Guardian or Steward.
The coming of faith (=exercise of faith) completes the task of the Pedagogue.	The coming of Yeshua was the decisive event that sealed the chosen son as an heir.
The trained (graduated) student no longer needs to be led to the teacher.	The son is fully adopted and thus becomes the rightful heir.
The trained (graduated) student is given the privileges and responsibilities of his new position (=heir according to promise).	The son is no longer in the legal status of a slave, but enjoys all the privileges and responsibilities of a true heir.

In Roman law, the head of the family exercised complete authority over all family members and all property of the family. The *Patria potestas* sets up the

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn offers a different parallel between chapter three and four. He suggests Paul’s conclusion is that the Torah has been done away with, *Galatians*, p. 210. In the sense of the Oral Torah being done away with, i.e., the need for Gentiles to undergo the ritual of a proselyte in order to be received into the believing community, his remarks may offer good insights. But like many Christian commentators, he simply fails to see that the Torah is God’s eternal standard of righteousness for all of His chosen ones.

scenario that until such time as the head of the family enacted a formal *emancipatio* (emancipation) and *adoptio* (adoption), members of the family had no greater legal status than that of slaves. This meant that a natural son could own nothing until such time as his father declared him emancipated and adopted as his genuine heir. Physical lineage alone could offer no legal status. This time of emancipation and adoption was set at the age of 14, but even then the father had some discretion as to whether the son would be named an heir.<sup>2</sup>

This illustration from Roman law fits Paul's argument well, for it was the decree of the father regarding the son that gave him legal status, not merely his physical lineage.<sup>3</sup> Thus, whether Jew or Gentile, the declaration of righteousness, based upon one's faith (just as in the case of Abraham), was the foundation of one's legal status as heir of the covenant.

*as long as the heir is a child* – The Greek word for “child” here is *νήπιος*, *nepios*, which literally means “an infant,” but is used to denote the legal status of the son before coming to the age of 14. Even though it is presupposed that when he comes of age, he will in fact be the heir to his father's possessions, until that time he has no different legal status in terms of ownership than does a slave. Furthermore, in terms of status within the family, while everyone recognizes that he will inevitably become the heir, legally he is under the same restrictions as a slave (even if, in practical measures, he was no doubt treated differently). Paul's emphasis is upon the legal status, because this fits his current argument.

*but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father* – In Roman law, the father could appoint a tutor to teach the son until he turned 14. He could also appoint a curator to take charge of the son from age 14 to 25. If this is what Paul hints at by his use of Guardian (*ἐπιτρόπος*, *epitropos*) and Steward (*οἰκονόμος*, *oikonomos*), then the distinction would be that the Guardian concerns himself with the heir himself, while the Steward protects his property. Regardless, Paul's point is that the minor does not himself have charge, either of his own life nor of the property which he stands to inherit. He still remains in the status of a minor which legally was no different than a slave.

*until the date set by the father* – Even though in Roman law the time at which a son comes of age was set by statute (being 14 years old), the father still had some discretion in the matter, and could (apparently) wait until the lad was older. Bruce notes that a will found in the Oxyrhynchus papyri fragments (491.8-10), contains one section where the father delineates 20 years of age to be the time at which his sons would enjoy ownership of his property. Thus, while the normal age was 14, apparently the father could appoint the time when a son would become heir. Once again, this fits Paul's argument perfectly, for the decisive event of “liberation” was the coming of Yeshua, an event appointed by the Father.

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2 F. F. Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 192 for details on the Roman law. See also D. Walker, “The Legal Terminology in the Epistle to the Galatians” in *The Gift of Tongues* (T & T Clark, 1906), pp. 118–20.

3 That a son who had come to the age of 14 could appeal to the courts in the event that his father neglected to complete his emancipation and adoption seems to be a possibility but this was the exception, not the rule. In broad strokes, however, the illustration fits Paul's argument.

### 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.

Paul now switches to the first person plural “we,” by which we should most likely understand him to be applying the illustration to Jews as well as to Gentiles. While the Jewish people considered themselves to be teachers of others (cf. Rom 2:20) because they possessed the Torah, in reality, the Torah (as Paul is here emphasizing) was given to lead to Messiah. As such, like the young boy in the Roman household who was under the guardianship of tutors and stewards, apart from matriculating to faith in Messiah, the Jewish people as well are viewed as minors without proper legal status. That is, in terms of the analogy, apart from faith in Messiah Yeshua, there was no genuine claim to being heirs of Abraham’s promise (covenant). This is emphasized by the fact the he uses the same Greek word (νήπιος, *nepios*) here as well: apart from faith in Yeshua, the physical descendants of Jacob are still minors in the household of God.

While this could sound like Paul is verging on replacement theology, we know he is not. For in Romans he explains himself further, that God’s plan for the natural offspring of Abraham (Israel) is that they should be saved (Rom 11:25), and thus that they will, in the course of God’s sovereign providence, be declared as rightful heirs as well. But for Paul, faith in Yeshua, the same faith that Abraham had, is the key to gaining legal status as an heir. For him, the covenant is entirely Christocentric, and apart from Messiah, eternal membership in the covenant is an impossibility.

... *were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.* – This phrase, “the elemental things of the world” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, *ta stoicheia tou kosmos*) has evoked much debate. It is found also in 4:3, 9, as well as in Col 2:8, 20. The word *stoicheia* means literally “things placed side by side,” and was used of the ABCs in early education. Thus, the word gained the meaning “rudiments,” and came to be used of the basic building blocks of the universe. The possible meanings include: (1) the basic building blocks of the universe as envisioned by the Greek philosophers, namely, earth, water, air, and fire, which were given names of divinities, Demeter, Poseidon, Hera, and Hephaestus, respectively; (2) the elementary forms of religion (cf. Heb 5:12); (3) the heavenly bodies, the stars, understood as divine powers which influence or determine human destiny, and from a biblical perspective, dealing with demonic deception.<sup>4</sup>

We know that for the Gentile believers, their former life was entirely characterized by idolatry (4:8) and that in the Hellenistic world, this was a worship of the gods (demons) who were thought to control the *stoicheia*. But Paul uses the phrase here of the Jewish people: “we were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.” It is easy to understand how this phrase could be used to characterize the pre-faith lives of the Gentiles, but how could it be applied to the Jewish people?

We may receive some insights from Philo’s use of the term *stoicheia*. While he is clear that the Greeks deify the *stoicheia* and worship them (*Decal.* 53), he also seems to recognize that the *stoicheia* are real, and that they play a vital role in the universe. In *The Life of Moses* we read (describing the High Priest):

[the breast plate is] rightly called the place of reason, for a rational prin-

4 For a complete study and description of the phrase “elemental things of the world,” see Burton, *Galatians* in the ICC (T & T Clark, 1921), pp. 510ff.

... ciple (logos), ordered and firmly established, creates the transitions and seasons of the year.... When the high priest enters to offer the ancestral prayers and sacrifices there may enter with him the whole universe, the long robe a copy of the air, the pomegranate of water, the flower trimming of earth, the scarlet of fire ..., the twelve stones on the breast in four rows (*stoichoi*) which holds together and administers all things.<sup>5</sup>

This is only an example. Philo is rather taken up with the vital role of the “four elements” in the universe, and even how the four seasons parallel the *stoicheia*. For Philo, since the universe was created out of the “four elements,” (he did not believe that God created into nothing, but that the four elements were eternal), the number four reigned supreme in mathematics and in the basic structure of the universe. That is why, for instance, there are four seasons. It is no wonder then, that he also considered the *stoicheia* to be integral for the right understanding of man and God, and the relationship between them.

What might we make of this? We know that by the 2nd Century CE, Gnosticism had risen to a place of prominence, both in emerging Christian groups, as well as among some Jewish mystics. It seems quite probable that Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians was written, in measure, to address the Gnostic heresy. In short, Gnosticism combined the mysticism of the Hellenistic world with the worship of Israel’s God. Postulating circles of knowledge gained through mystical experience, the Gnostic believed that through intellectual pursuit, one could lift himself from the physical world in which he was trapped, to the purely spiritual (non-physical) world of the divine. Of course, in order to do this, one must be in possession of the mysteries which only the Gnostic teachers knew. It was the apprehension of the mystery that enabled a person to climb the spiral of gnosis, true knowledge, by which one could escape the evil, material world.

It seems clear that some of the Judaisms of Paul’s day believed in a kind of “fate,” whether personal or impersonal. For instance, Josephus writes:

The sect of the Essenes declares that Fate is the mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree.<sup>6</sup>

This whole notion that the universe is somehow bound up with the “four elements,” and that these deified entities control that fate of mankind was not something restricted to the pagan religions of Greece and Rome. This demonic “worldview” had also influenced the Judaisms of the day, and had, to one extent or another, may have become the thinking of many a common man, whether Jew or Gentile.

If indeed a pre-Gnosticism was already extant in the Judaisms of Paul’s day, he could well speak of being under the “elemental principles of the world” when he considered the manner in which the rabbinic interpretations of his day had combined Hellenistic thought with the study of Torah. But for Paul, the Hellenistic concept of the *stoicheia* was not merely an errant form of philosophy—it was pagan and the realm of demons. Not unlike the kabbalism that would captivate Judaism in the middle-ages, the nascent

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5 *Vit. Mos.* 2.121, 125.

6 *Ant* xiii.172.

Jewish Gnosticism in Paul's day was a mixing of things that essentially differ. Before coming to faith in Yeshua, Paul had fully espoused the rabbinic theology of his day, with its increasing anti-Gentile bias, and its security in man-made rituals. But after faith, he recognized that the promises of his former Pharisaism were akin to the shepherds of Jeremiah's day who proclaimed "peace, peace" when there was no peace. The idea that one's ethnic connections could secure a place in God's eternal covenant was, in one sense, no different than the deception taught by the philosophers, that the universe was made up of, and in some measure controlled by, the "four elements." In this way, both the Greek and the Jew were in bondage before they came to faith. And the greatest strength of this bondage was that neither knew about it. The true concept of liberty could only be known in Yeshua.

This is not to negate the great body of truth which the Judaisms of the 1st Century (including Pharisaism) held. Nor to negate the revealed truth of the Torah which in many ways guided the Jewish communities of Paul's day. But apart from seeing Yeshua in the Torah, its ultimate truth was veiled, and all attempts to live out its lofty precepts were destined to failure.

One cannot help but think that this viewpoint of Paul was gathered from the words of Yeshua (John 8:32ff), when He claimed that the Pharisees who had rejected Him were themselves enslaved, and that only through Him could they be free indeed. He further questioned their rightful claim to Abraham as their father, for they rather did the works of Satan and were not following in the footsteps of Abraham, the father of the faithful.<sup>7</sup> In similar ways, Paul is claiming that before faith, both the Jew and the Gentile were enslaved to the deceptions of the world, and were held in bondage until the time of their liberation.

**4-5 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Torah, so that He might redeem those who were under the Torah, that we might receive the adoption as sons.**

Paul now takes his illustration and applies it to the theological lesson he wishes to teach. Just as the father could appoint a time at which the son would be emancipated and legally adopted, so God ordained, in the course of this world's history, that the Messiah, His Son, would be born of a woman (the incarnation), and would come to redeem those who were otherwise no different than slaves. It is this "Christ-event" that marks the decisive moment in earth's history, and in the plan of salvation for mankind. It was this event which Abraham longed to witness, and through the prophetic revelation of God, he saw (John 8:56).

In the phrase "when the fullness of time had come," Paul gives to us his understanding of the course of time. The world is not governed by the "four elements," nor is it the collective whole of random events. The universe is governed in its entirety by the sovereign Creator Who brings about all things according to the council of His will. Here Paul gathers together the prophetic vision of Israel's prophets, and pinpoints the fulfillment of their words in the incarnation of the Messiah.

The phrase is cast in the past tense: "had come" (ἦλθεν, *eilthen*, aorist of ἔρχομαι, *erxomai*, "to come"). This envisions, as it were, a container being

<sup>7</sup> He does not question that they are, in fact, the physical offspring of Abraham, for in v. 56 He says, "Abraham your father longed to see My day ...."



steadily filled (the passage of time) until it is full (this is the meaning of the Greek πλήρωμα, *plerōma*, “fulfilled,” “fill up”).

The implication is of a set purpose of God having been brought to fruition over a period and its eschatological climax enacted at the time appointed by him.... This conviction that the eschatological climax had already arrived set up the ‘eschatological tension’ between the already and the not-yet which was so characteristic of earliest Christian theology.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, the “times” were not entirely “fulfilled” in Paul’s perspective. He recognized that much was yet to be fulfilled which the prophets foretold. Yet the coming of Yeshua so sealed as inevitable the completion of God’s plan of salvation, that the fulfillment was a surety. In this way, the believing community, existing in this time of fulfillment, enjoys a foretaste of the ultimate victory to be realized in the complete redemption won by the Son. It is the hope of this final and ultimate fulfillment upon which faith lays hold, and the hope of eternal life thus allows the believer to experience its reality now. It is this “already/not-yet” that allows the believer to rejoice with joy unspeakable while at the same time groaning within oneself for the full redemption (Rom 8:23). It is in this “already/not-yet” that the believer both recognizes his position as an adopted son within the family of God, and awaits his final adoption.

Here, then, we see a foundational pillar of the Apostolic Judaism which Paul represented. Yeshua is the fulfillment of the prophetic vision of the Messiah, and He is so because He is the predetermined Messiah Who comes precisely as the determined will of God prescribed. His appearance in the course of history was not a random event, but was the culmination of God’s sovereign plan for effecting eternal salvation.

This pivotal truth may be seen in Paul’s statement of 1Cor 15:3-4:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . . .

It was in the manner in which the Scriptures (the Tanach) were interpreted as telling the story of Yeshua’s death, burial, and resurrection for sinners that Apostolic Judaism made its unique contribution to the community of the faithful.

*born of a woman* – This phrase was a common circumlocution for the human person.<sup>9</sup> Dunn and others deny that the phrase has any reference to the virgin birth, but this is predicated upon their idea that the doctrine of the virgin birth was not extant in Paul’s day, but was a later insertion to Christian dogma in the post-destruction era. While the phrase may have no direct reference to the virgin birth, it seems obvious to me that it does connect to the promise of Genesis 3:15 and the “seed of the woman.” Thus, in its common usage, the phrase first emphasizes the human quality of the incarnation. Yeshua came as a man like all men, “born of a woman.” He was not some unique blend of human and divine—a kind of “once-in-histo-

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8 Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 214.

9 Cf. Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4; 1QS 9.21; 1QH 13:14, etc.

ry” oddity. He was fully human, and therefore exhibited His humanity as He walked upon this earth. As a man, therefore, Yeshua stands as the zenith of mankind, that is, as the very reality of what God intended man to be. He is therefore the last Adam (Rom 8:3) in that he fulfills the role which Adam failed to fulfill.

But Paul’s use of the phrase, especially in the context of the Abrahamic covenant (chapter 3) and the promise of blessing upon the Gentiles, must theologically connect to the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15. The Promised One, Who would remedy the schism between the Creator and mankind, was to come through the woman. He is therefore the Promised Seed and it is by Him that the serpent would be crushed.

*born under the Torah* – There are several possibilities for what Paul means by this phrase. He uses “under the Torah” a number of times in his epistles,<sup>10</sup> and twice already in Galatians.<sup>11</sup> At times it is clear that all mankind falls under the condemnation of the Torah:

Now we know that whatever the Torah says, it speaks to those who are under the Torah, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; (Rom 3:19)

Yet in some respects, “under the Torah” designates the Jewish people in particular:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Torah, as under the Torah though not being myself under the Torah, so that I might win those who are under the Torah; to those who are without Torah, as without Torah, though not being without the Torah of God but under the Torah of Messiah, so that I might win those who are without Torah. (1Cor 9:20-21)

We might be inclined to see the use of “under the Torah” in our verse to likewise be speaking of the descendants of Jacob, so that Paul’s meaning is that Yeshua came as a Jew who was raised and taught within the boundaries of Torah. This of course is true. But the parallel of this passage with what Paul has just written in chapter three shows that the idea of the condemnation which the Torah brings against sinners is well in view:

3:13-14	4:4-6
having become a curse for us	born under the Torah
Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the Torah	in order that He might redeem those under the Torah
in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit	in order that we might receive the Spirit of adoption

The parallels are close enough that we should understand Paul to be reiterating his former point. In this case, “born under the Torah” also carries with it the sense that as sinners, mankind finds himself under the curse of the Torah, a curse from which only the redemption proffered by Yeshua could bring a remedy.

<sup>10</sup> Rom 2:12; 3:19; 6:14-15; 1Cor 9:20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Gal 3:10, 23.

But was Yeshua born “under the condemnation of the Torah?” In one sense, He was not. As the perfect and holy Son of God, He did not partake of Adam’s sin, and as such, was not born a sinner (cf. Rom 5:12f). But in another sense, He was born for the purpose of carrying the condemnation of His people, and in this sense He was born “under the condemnation of the Torah” as it pertains to their sins.

In this passage, Paul presents the ministry of Yeshua as primarily soteriological. The emphasis is not so much on Yeshua as a teacher of Torah or of wisdom but as identifying with the human condition (“born of a woman”) “in order that, by His identification with the human condition . . ., His death might be the price necessary to free them from the slavery endemic to that human condition . . .”<sup>12</sup> In this regard then, we should most likely see Paul’s phrase “born under the Torah, so that He might redeem those under the Torah” to be a reference to Jew and Gentile alike. Even though the Gentile has no sense that he is condemned by the Torah until such time as he hears the message of the Gospel, he is nonetheless in a state of condemnation. He is “under the Torah” in the sense of being under its condemning power. Likewise, the Jew, who may have never considered that the Torah would condemn him, is under the condemnation of the Torah until such time as he places his faith in the redemptive work of Yeshua.

*so that He might redeem those who were under the Torah* – The word Paul uses for “redeemed” is ἐξαγοράζω, *exagarozō*, used only in 3:13 and here in terms of human salvation.<sup>13</sup> Its basic meaning is that of paying the necessary price to secure the deliverance or freedom of a person, particularly in the price to redeem a slave. While the common word for redemption (λυτρόω, *lutroō* and forms built upon this root) emphasizes “deliverance” or “salvation,” this word focuses upon the price necessary for one’s “freedom.” Paul thus casts the redemption of the sinner into the world of commerce by way of metaphor. The holiness of God demands payment for sin, because sin by its very nature is a detraction from His holiness. In order for the sinner to be declared righteous, there must be payment equal to the negative value of his sin. This payment must therefore be of an infinite sum, for any detraction of God’s infinite holiness requires an equally infinite payment. Mankind, therefore, is without means to make such a payment, and unless another offers the sum necessary, man remains condemned in the slavery of his sin.

This is not a Pauline invention. Isaiah, in the context of the promises of the Davidic covenant, proclaims:

Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. (Is 55:1)

This prophetic vision, cast in the metaphoric language of commerce at the market, implores Israel to accept the bounty of life freely, because the purchase price has been paid by the Almighty. The satisfaction of the Father in terms of the Son’s sacrifice (Isaiah 53:11) means that the price has been paid—the debt has been satisfied. And thus the justice of God is also satisfied. In this way He is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in

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<sup>12</sup> Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> It is used in Eph 5:16 and Col 4:5 of “redeeming the time.” It is found no where else in the Apostolic Scriptures, nor is it found in the Lxx.



Yeshua (Rom 3:26). It is on this basis that Paul can affirm: "There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Messiah Yeshua" (Rom 8:1).

*that we might receive the adoption of sons* – The redemption that Yeshua has made for all who are His is not only a payment of the price owed because of sin, but also secures membership in the family of God for the redeemed slave.

The metaphor of adoption has been hinted at already at the beginning of the chapter, in the Roman custom of the father adopting the son as a legal heir when he reached the age of 14. But adoption as a picture of God's sovereign election and salvation is a theme drawn originally from the Tanach.

----- Excursus on Adoption -----

Adoption was not uncommon in the ancient Semitic world.

Adoption differs from fosterage in that the latter is a temporary arrangement which is not legally binding. The foster child receives support but not the status of son or daughter.<sup>14</sup>

Adoption in the Ancient Near East was primarily for the purpose of giving legal status. Thus, adoption could result in giving someone the status of "son" or "daughter," but also "brother," "sister," or even "father." From Nuzi we discover that a husband could adopt his wife, giving her the status of "sister" or "sister-in-law" which would secure the transfer of family inheritance to her in the event of his death.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in a Babylonian text, slaves are adopted in order to give them their freedom.<sup>16</sup> It was not uncommon for a Suzerain to adopt his Vassal king in order to give him royal, family status.<sup>17</sup> This is the meaning of Psalm 2:

You are my son, today I have begotten you. (Ps 2:7)

The choosing of Abraham is for the purpose of covenant, that is, to give him legal status in God's world.<sup>18</sup> That the giving of land is an integral part of the covenant (Genesis 15) shows that God has chosen Abraham to give him

14 Knobloch, "Adoption" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (Doubleday, 1999), 1.76.

15 Ibid. Note also the same legal adoption of a wife in the Elephantine Aramaic Marriage Contract (AP 15), Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "A Re-Study of an Elephantine Aramaic Marriage Contract (AP 15)," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William F. Albright*, Hans Goedicke, ed., (John Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 140.

16 J. J. Rabinowitz, "Semitic Elements in the Egyptian Adoption Papyrus Published by Gardiner," *JNES* 17(1958), 145-46. Some have suggested that adoption of slaves in order to give them freedom figures into the exodus narrative, J. Swetnam, "Diatheke in the Septuagint Account of Sinai: A Suggestion," *Biblica* 47(1966), 442.

17 See the comments of Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90.2(1970), 191 where Hittite treaty texts include the statement by the Suzerain to the Vassal: "I will make you my son."

18 Gen 18:19 uses the Hebrew word *yada'* ("to know" in the sense of "covenant relationship": "For I have chosen him" is literally, "for I have known him." Cf. Amos 3:2, "you only have I known (chosen) among all the families of the earth.")