

Article

Space and Sonship: Paul's Familial Metaphors in Rom 8

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Abstract: Paul often uses metaphors as a method of persuasion. In Rom 8, Paul's use of kinship metaphors such as "sonship" and being "heirs" is particularly ubiquitous. Paul writes to an audience situated in Rome where they would have been well aware of kinship metaphors as this *inter alia* formed part of the Julio-Claudian Caesars' vocabulary and legitimization of their rule. Paul's familial metaphors would have resonated with an audience in Rome *au fait* with the notion of adoption and its implications. The use of the images of "sonship" and "heir" also function as spatial metaphors indicating a vertical and horizontal understanding which the audience would have picked up on. The spatial metaphors contribute to an understanding of "in" and "out", underscoring an alternative family identity found in Christ. These metaphors play a role in the formation and construction of what is later to be called early Christianity.

Keywords: familial metaphors; sonship; space; boundaries; letter to the Romans

1. Introduction

In Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 6.1, we read that Caesar proclaims his aunt Iulia to have sprung from kings and on her father's side to be descended from Venus. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (15.855–60), it is stated that "Jupiter governs the heavenly citadels and the kingdoms of the tri-formed world, but the earth is under Augustus' rule; each is father and ruler" (*pater est et rector uterque*). From these two examples, we glean the importance of ethnicity and kinship. Roman rulers used kinship and ethnicity as a means of persuasion (Hodge 2007, p. 19). It became part and parcel of Roman propaganda promoting Roman rule and legitimising their position as rulers descended from the gods.¹ The importance of the father–son relationship is often attested to in Julio-Claudian texts as a framework for the emperor's relationship with free men and particularly the aristocracy (Thate 2014, p. 221). This language of kinship is also prevalent in Pauline literature but employed to underscore an alternative family identity found in Christ. In Rom 8, Paul's use of kinship metaphors such as "sonship" and being "heirs" is particularly ubiquitous.² It is well-known that metaphors are not simply stylistic features, but can function as persuasive tools (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors can deepen the connection between an author and their readers, as well as between readers themselves (Heim 2017, p. 96). Throughout the argument in Rom 5–8, Paul uses spatial images to persuade believers that "Christ Jesus our Lord" (Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν) should be the controlling power of believers (see Potgieter 2020). Space plays an important role in the shaping of identity (Stewart 2011, p. 2). A corollary of Paul's familial metaphors is that they function as a boundary marker. Metaphors play a role in the identity construction of discerning who a group of people are, but also who the group of people are not. Wolter's (2015, p. 307) distinction of inclusive identity as something that is shared with the rest of society and exclusive ethos as what differentiates believers from their *Umwelt* is helpful in this regard.

When Paul writes, or rather dictates, the letter to the Romans, we know that he is not intimately acquainted with the community as he was not the founder of the church, but it is clear that he was well informed of the Roman believing communities' situation. His addressees were situated in the capital of Rome, entrenched in the propaganda of Rome as



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the centre of the oikoumene and familiar with the language of sonship. Paul encourages believers to orientate themselves towards/in God as seen, e.g., in Rom 6:13, “present yourselves” or “in Christ” (Rom 6:23). Orientation plays an important part in how humans perceive themselves and the world around them. Living in the ancient Mediterranean meant living in cities where the gods were an integral part of everyday life. Public spaces, such as the theatre, were venues for hosting festivals dedicated to these divine beings (Frederiksen 2017, p. 33). For any person in Rome, it was known that one should orientate oneself in relation to Rome and the cosmos it enveloped (Van den Heever 2010, p. 206). The way that humans define their geographic surroundings elucidates how they view their place in it. Delineating oneself as “in” or “out” serves as a boundary line for understanding oneself within a particular space.

Accordingly, this article will investigate the link between space and familial metaphors in Rom 8. Identity is complex and should not be understood as something that is “fixed”.³ Rather, it is the aim to illustrate the spatial metaphors that produce an understanding of being either “in” or “out”. Space is also interlinked with power. Accordingly, these images that Paul employs also inherently argue for believers to have God as the dominator or ruler alongside no other power. This is embedded within the “sonship” and “heir” metaphors. We do not know how the hearers reacted to Paul’s words, but we can see how Paul wants to persuade the audience to his idea of orientation to God. This orientation ultimately would affect the believers’ understanding of themselves concerning their environment.

2. Sonship and Space

In the ancient world, family mattered. However, family did not imply your next of kin; rather, it indicated a married couple, their children, slaves and the slaves’ children, all forming part of a collective group (Dixon 1992, p. 2). Referring to an ancient family as a “household” better represents its true composition. Values such as loyalty and piety were at the core of the household (Hellerman 2001, p. 215). Coincidentally, families functioned as the anchor, being at the centre of the religious, economic, social and political context of Graeco-Roman society (Burke 2001, pp. 121–22). At the helm of the household was the paterfamilias, who was responsible for ensuring that the family continued to worship its gods and protect the family’s wealth, status, and honour (Heim 2017, p. 140).

The ancients had a vertical focus. Ancient people were born into a relationship with their gods as well as the protocols for maintaining and safeguarding their gods’ goodwill (Frederiksen 2017, p. 35).⁴ A person’s status was determined by their family as their connections with patrons, wealth and military success or perhaps even their own ambition to ascend the cursus honorum, or the social path to public honour was dependent on their family (McKnight 2019, pp. 3–4), as family members inherited the status of their ancestors. The family as a corporation took precedence over and superseded the needs and wants of individual members of the family (Hellerman 2001, p. 51) since maintaining the family’s estate and cult was of vital importance. Accordingly, adoption offered a legal solution to a paterfamilias who did not father his own children or whose children did not survive to adulthood to fulfil this role (Burke 2001, p. 122).⁵

Ancient adoption was concerned with stabilising the future of the paterfamilias (Heim 2017, p. 140), thus ensuring that the link with the family’s cult continued. However, it is important to not project modern notions of adoption onto the ancient practice as the main focus was not the wellbeing of the adoptee. Also, the adoptee was usually an adult and not a child. Adoption meant that the adoptee relinquished the worship of the gods of his own family and embraced the new gods and cult of the new family (Heim 2017, p. 142). Usually, the adoptee would be *sui iuris*, which meant that the more common practice of *adoptio* would be possible, as the adoptee’s family did not need to be amalgamated into the new family. In contrast, the *adrogatio* involves the adoption of someone who needs to give up their family with their household dissolving into a new household, but this occurred rarely (Heim 2017, p. 141). The mother was also not involved in the process as she did not become the mother of the adoptee (see *Dig. 1.7.23*). The vertical father–son relationship as well as

the horizontal relationship between siblings was applied to the adoptee as the legal brother (*Dig.* 1.7.23).

Space is important for our discussion as identity and space are intricately linked. Paul particularly locates the body as the space where God interacts with humans (Potgieter 2020, p. 215). Lefebvre ([1974] 1991, p. 44) particularly mentions the role that bodies play in the production of space. It is in the connection between the body and its cognisance of the environment, geography, and the person's experience of place that orientates humans and that provides meaning to a place (Nasrallah 2012, p. 57). Jonathan Z. Smith (1987, p. 28) remarks: "human beings are not placed, they bring place into being. Space is a means by which bodies are and can be connected". Correspondingly, place is best comprehended as a locus of meaning. Identity is always placed. Apart from the influence of place, the body also becomes a site where culture plays out (Pernau 2014, p. 541).

However, power exists within space (Stewart 2011, p. 114). Space offers a lens to the "lived space" associated with the non-elite and represents a critical perspective from the margins (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, p. 33). Certain behaviours are often "hidden" by space produced by groups. Power relations are presented as "natural", producing the behaviour that is expected or required of a certain space (Stewart 2011, p. 116). Spaces can displace personal relationships between the controlled and the controller (Stewart 2011, p. 116). For example, ἐκκλησία as a space functions in this manner. In this manner, spaces in themselves can be the agents of control (Stewart 2011, p. 116); as space mirrors power, it can also be negotiated and is changeable. In a way, space can never be the same as the social relationships that give a certain space its meaning is never the same (Stewart 2011, p. 116).

When referring to a spatial metaphor, it may be understood as a spatial concept that is employed metaphorically (see Horn 2016, pp. 9–20). Spatial metaphors have a persuasive, didactic and evaluative purpose (Horn 2016, p. 9), which can underscore a description of outsiders versus insiders.

3. Rom 8 Argument Recap

Rom 8 forms part of Paul's argument in Rom 5–8 in which he carves a new understanding for believers as no longer subjected to multiple powers and forces, but as located in Christ Jesus (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) (see Potgieter 2020). Rom 8:1–4 brings together the forensic and participatory themes of the preceding chapters into the dense and summative announcement of the core of good news, i.e., believers are free from the dominating powers of old such as Sin and Death (cf. 8:2, 3) and are now rendered without any condemnation (οὐδὲν... κατάκριμα (8:1a)). The metaphor of indwelling in 8:1, 2 and 8:9, 11, which is inadvertently also a metaphor of dominion, establishes Christ as the controlling influence in believers as it is the Spirit who takes up residence within believers (διὰ τοῦ ἐνοικουντος αὐτοῦ πνεύματος ἐν ὑμῖν). The indwelling of the Spirit is stronger than the indwelling of Sin. Powers and forces can no longer play any significant role within believers in Rom 8.

The believer has undergone a status change, which is already seen in Rom 6:4. This current state for believers of being without condemnation in Rom 8:1–4 and being free, is the climax of the preceding argument in Rom 7:7–25. The picture that had been painted of sin was dire. Sin has been personified and elaborated on as an acting subject that deceives, kills, works death, accomplishes and practises evil even if it inhabits and overtakes a person who wants to do good. The situation is so dismal that the phrase, τὴν ἀμαρτίαν ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ "the sin in the flesh", denotes a bodily existence as possessed and dominated by Sin. It reaches a point of calamity in Rom 7:24 as the wretched state of the "I" is "this body of death" (τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου). The body dominated by death is in desperate need of deliverance. Rom 8:1–4 is experiential and pneumatically rich. in terms of the affirmation of chapters 5–6. The singular "you" (σε) in 8:2 must be given its due force: the deliverance from condemnation brings good news precisely to the singular "I": that lament in Rom 7:7–24, crying out who will deliver me from this body of death? Sin as

a power conscripts human bodies with the result that the interactions and uses of these bodies are lethal.

However, in 8:3 “God’s sending of his Son” in “the likeness of the flesh of sin” means that Christ entered bodily into this relationally constructed existence a corporate “living death” yet without becoming fully reduced to it (Eastman 2014, p. 108). The purpose of God’s saving action is clear in Rom 8:4 as the embodied space “In Christ Jesus” (*ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*) is explicitly “is us” (*ἐν ἡμῖν*) (Potgieter 2020, p. 179). Christ’s incarnation is undergirded by a participatory anthropology that sees all human existence as constructed in relationship to communally mediated powers (Eastman 2014, p. 108).

The Spirit of God indwells the community (8:9–11), countering the power of sin that “dwells in me” 7:17, 20, “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). One must tread lightly not to interpret Paul’s language as individualistic. The community is the locus of the Spirit in Rom 8:9–11 as *ἐν ὑμῖν* is plural: the community in which Paul includes himself with the phrase “our spirit”—the possessive is plural, and the noun is singular. Käsemann (1978, p. 219) states that it is an anthropological reference to individual Christians and an ecclesiological reference to the whole community. Dunn (1988, p. 462) refers to an intense consciousness of sonship.

Paul has already sketched a possibility for believers of what the reign of favour or the lordship of Christ might entail for them. Up until this point of the argument, the audience has gone through the implications of their baptism and heard that their bodies have been liberated from Sin and Death. However, believers’ new status and the inherent meaning of life connoted to it unfolds with the adoption metaphor in Rom 8:12–17.

Rom 8:12 starts as a conclusion drawn on the new status established in Rom 8:1–11 (Potgieter 2020, p. 181). Paul has continually woven the notion of “with” in the discourse. The familial imagery *ἀδελφός* “brother” depicts believers as close-knit with Christ. The status change is reflected in the metaphor of dominion illustrating the Spirit of God leading believers (8:14). Still, the highpoint is reached with the depiction of believers as *νίοι θεοῦ* “sons of God” (Rom 8:14) (Potgieter 2020, p. 189). This image is interchanged with an adoption metaphor, *πνεῦμα νίο θεοίας* “spirit of adoption”. To be heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ is to be in a relationship of shared inheritance with others that is mediated by the indwelling Spirit (Eastman 2014, p. 116). Paul employs the adoption metaphor to incorporate the patriarchal privilege of sons to all gentiles-in-Christ, including women and slaves (Hodge 2007, p. 69). The adoption metaphor used in the Bible compares the understanding of family to the relationship between believers and Christ. The apostle, Paul, further expands this metaphor by describing believers not as mere slaves, but as children who are equal heirs and participants in the glory of God. The repetition of this idea reinforces the status of believers as heirs and children of God, highlighting their participation in His glory (Potgieter 2020, p. 189). This shared experience with Christ comprises that believers are in their current mortal body subjected to suffering, but will have an eternal spiritual body. The adoption metaphor underscores believers’ understanding of the benefits of their new status (Potgieter 2020, p. 189).

In Rom 8:15b–16, believers cry “Abba! Father” as the Spirit’s presence is already in their hearts. The assumption is that the audience would have picked up on the language of adoption. Led by the Spirit believers are “sons of God”; crying Abba! Father.¹⁶ The terminology evokes the interaction between parent and child that human beings internalise and carry with them throughout adulthood transformed through the bond between the indwelling Spirit believers and each other (Eastman 2014, p. 117). The use of Abba signifies the reorientation of worship to the new God (Burke 2001, p. 127). Gentiles become “sons” (8:14) through adoption which means that they would have the same rights, responsibilities, and potential to inherit as sons born into the family (Hodge 2007, p. 69). Eastman (2014, p. 117) suggests that not only is the Spirit present with believers, but also that the reality of the relationship with one another is expressed as arising from the Spirit’s leading (8:14, 8:17).

Jewett (2007, p. 501) notes how Paul’s language of “children” rather than “sons” in 8:17 bypasses the competition for inheritance typical of the ancient world. In Rom

8:29, it becomes clear that brothers do not share equal status in the family as Christ is the “Firstborn”. Paul appeals to the hierarchy of the ancient household as the firstborn son would have held a higher status than those born after him (Hodge 2007, p. 115). Children in the household enjoyed higher status than slaves. The head of the household had the most status. Gentiles-in-Christ are Christ’s younger siblings in the new lineage (Hodge 2007, p. 115). Christ is the firstborn of many siblings. This makes sense as being a believer and part of a new family does not entail being gods. Already the idea of a god becoming human would have been difficult for the ancients as gods are supposed to be unchangeable and different (see Bird 2022).

Rom 8:28–29 also have σύν- compounds and familial metaphors. It becomes clear in Rom 8:28 that those who love God, are participants of his saving action (Wolter 2014, p. 528). The purpose of this joint action is a process of shared formation being conformed to the image of God’s Son (8:29) and thereby glorified together (8:30) just as in 8:17, those in Christ share the hope of co-glorification. There is a differentiation as believers are to conform to the likeness of Christ and do not become the same as Christ (Wolter 2014, p. 532). Again, in 8:17 the result and indeed purpose of this shared conformation to the image of Christ is participation in a new extended family—that Christ might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (Eastman 2014, p. 116).

The concept of being formed or shaped into the likeness of another person or an ideal model would have sounded like kinship to a first-century audience. This language is found in discussions of procreation and succession both in biblical texts and in Greek discussions of procreation. Rom 8:29 is a perfect description of newly adopted gentiles, who in their new status as adopted sons of God are now heirs to God’s promises (Hodge 2007, p. 111).

4. Familial Metaphors

Metaphors can forge a particular ethos and identity for a community, especially when the images employed are amalgamated into a community’s distinctive vocabulary (Heim 2017, p. 96). For example, Paul often employs the familial metaphor, ἀδελφοί “brothers [and sisters]” in his letters to describe believing communities.⁷ Any person who would hear this metaphor would immediately make the connotation with the hierarchy of the family and the paterfamilias. Paul maps a new notion onto the target domain, namely that believers form part of a new family, with a different paterfamilias at the helm.

Paul’s use of the adoption metaphor should be understood in its context. Kim (2014, p. 134) mentions that Rom 8:15 describes the adoption of complete strangers, which would be peculiar. These adoptees have been slaves and to such an extent that they have been confined in the “body of death” which had been permeated by Death and Sin. But these forces no longer play a role in Rom 8. Rom 8:2–4 is crucial as the forensic metaphors indicate that the believer’s body becomes a space that is ruled by God when orientated to God. Here, lies a vertical orientation, as believers are put in a position to be able to orientate to God which has been initiated by God. The metaphor of the Spirit as indwelling comes to the fore in Rom 8:1–11. Accordingly, the adoption metaphor is not that strange. Rather, it indicates Paul employing language that would be familiar to an audience situated in Rome. Moreover, Paul has already indicated to believers that they are liberated from other powers, but it is with the adoption imagery that Paul starts to elucidate what this entails for their lives (Potgieter 2020, p. 188).

Rom 8:14 already sheds light on an identity that is broadened beyond the ethnic, familial, imperial legalistic and educational barriers. Within the new “family system”, the reality that follows from being adopted into God’s family is co-inheritance, co-suffering and co-glorification. As “children of God”, believers are joint heirs with Christ, suffering together in anticipation of being glorified together. This also has an inherently horizontal application as believers are also orientated as part of a family that shares in the same things.

Adoption is a boundary marker signifying a break with the past which separates the outside world (Burke 2001, p. 127). For the audience listening to Paul’s letter, this image of adoption would rather elucidate what orientating oneself to God would entail. Paul creates

a myth of collective identity for gentiles as they can trace their beginnings not only to their baptism into Christ but also to their ancestor, Abraham, in whose seed they were blessed (Hodge 2007, p. 67). Of course, people could belong to more than one group and thus have multiple social identities (Kok 2014, p. 2). On the one hand, Paul’s use of adoption includes gentiles who would not have been included as seen as within the line of Abraham. On the other hand, the metaphor also remaps the cosmos for believers.

Paul’s notion implies that believers participate in a universal sovereignty. In this sense, heeding the spatial implications are important. On 5 Feb 2BCE the Roman family changed forever as Augustus was declared pater patriae, “father of the fatherland” (Thate 2014, p. 218).⁸ This entailed that the Caesar viewed himself at the centre of all. This offers an answer to the question: would ancient people consider themselves as having a certain spatial orientation (Berquist 2002, p. 24)? With the passing of any Caesar, there would have been anxiety of succession (Thate 2014, p. 215). The ability to govern a household was often seen as equivalent to governing a city (Thate 2014, p. 222). In the case of the emperor, head of the empire, the place of the paterfamilias had to be maintained. Spreading good news in the Roman Empire entailed “a victory over an enemy of *res publica* or the gift of some benefaction to the citizens of empire or of course the succession of an emperor or the adoption of an heir” (Thate 2014, p. 223). Thus, orientation is vital for the continuance of the empire. Paul reconfigures this orientation, as the Roman configuration is not important as well as all other forces or ideas that could influence a person; rather, Jesus is Lord at the centre is the case in point for Paul. Redemption in Christ obliterates the quest for special public honours, and in their place, he concentrates on a new society of siblings designed to obliterate privilege and power (McKnight 2019, pp. 3–4).

For Paul, the sonship metaphor becomes a way to reframe believers’ understanding of themselves as “in Christ”. The identity of the Christ movement is the locus for Paul that automatically fences the group off from the outside world (Lietaert Peerbolte 2014, p. 216). Another association becomes offered. There is a fluidity in hierarchy concerning the importance of dominance in certain groups (Kok 2014, p. 2). Accordingly, for Paul this understanding of being “in Christ” becomes more important than any other association. The spatiality helps to elucidate this understanding, since for believers they are liberated from any other powers—including the Caesar, who also would have viewed Rome as the centre of the universe—to not be the dominant power, but God in Christ who supersedes all earthly power structures (Phil 2:5–10; cf. Col 1:15–20; Eph 1:1–23). The believers’ (collective) body becomes the place/space where they are transformed into being sons (and daughters) and heirs.⁹ Paul understands the corporate body of Christ as a space where God and Christ are embodied and present. This provides an alternative for believers to place their own understanding of themselves, as this different hierarchy of God and Christ challenges the hierarchy of the authority of the Roman Caesars. Believers are not defined by the Roman Caesars as they do not provide the locus of their orientation in the cosmos. Paul’s language of being “in” or coming “out of” ancestors reflects a notion typical of the ideology of patrilineal descent (Hodge 2007, p. 67), but Paul includes everyone who orientates “in Christ”, thereby transcending the established socio-cultural and ethnic boundaries of that time. These metaphors play a role in the construction of how the early communities perceived themselves and their relationship with outsiders (see Heim 2017, p. 104).

5. Conclusions

Identity is complex and is difficult to trace within early Christianity as Paul did not set out to start a new religion. Rather, we see the construction of Christianity unfold as Paul employs the language of insiders and outsiders. This is highlighted in the adoption metaphors that create a boundary that demands a break with previous worship of different deities and to regard the “family of God”, with God as paterfamilias as the new primary association. Paul uses known imagery and maps a new understanding of what it entails to be orientated “in Christ”. The spatiality of the metaphors undergirds early believers’ understanding of themselves. They are part of the family of God with Christ as the Lord.

There is a vertical understanding with a definite hierarchy with God as ruler in place, but Paul also cultivates a strong horizontal understanding of being “in Christ” as fellow believers are part of this new inclusive family of God. Believers draw on the benefits of their new status and are to grow more into the likeness of the firstborn Son.

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Notes

- 1 See *Aen.* 6.789–94: “Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who will establish once more … the Golden Age in fields once ruled by Saturn”.
- 2 The imagery is unique to Pauline literature (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15, 23, 9:4; (Eph 1:5)) and is not found in the LXX or Jewish literature of the period (Burke 2001, p. 119).
- 3 Paul did not write to the believers in Rome with a notion of what “Christianity” is. Rather, the metaphors that he employs are instrumental in the construction of an “in” and “out” understanding. Identity is fluid and must be understood within a pluralistic and diverse context. In this regard, Kok (2014) cogently sheds light on the possible pitfalls of applying Social Identity Theory.
- 4 What we translate as “religion” in Gal 1:15 should be “ancestral custom”. See Cicero *Leg.* 2.10.27: “the preservation of the rites of the family and of our ancestors means preserving the religious rites which we can almost say were handed down to us by the gods themselves since ancient times were closest to the gods”.
- 5 Being born into a family did not automatically confirm being part of the household as the paterfamilias first had to accept the child. In ancient Hellenistic culture, this usually took place with the ritual Amphidromia where the child would also be named (see Ogden 1996, pp. 88–91).
- 6 Abba does not need to be seen as “daddy” to recognize the intimate familial nuance of language that children and adults use within the family circle (Eastman 2014, p. 117).
- 7 Harland (2005, p. 494) draws on first-century archaeological evidence from Paul’s home province, Cilicia, to indicate that the kinship language, and especially the metaphor of sibling solidarity, was also found in familial expressions of identity within associations and cults of various kings in the Greek-speaking, eastern part of the empire.
- 8 Clem 1.14.2.
- 9 Patrilineal ideology traces a lineage through a line of male descendants. Sons inherit property from their fathers and typically incorporate wives into their own line (Hodge 2007, p. 22). The language that Paul uses to create boundaries includes women and gentiles.

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