

Biblical Foundation for Adoption

B. Alan Keener, CAFA, Inc. (December 2004)

I. Biblical foundations for caring for the fatherless/orphan

- The biblical argument for caring for orphans draws on three lines of reasoning:
 - The OT verses that command that orphans be cared for
 - The NT doctrine of adoption
 - James 1:27 that encapsulates the OT teaching and exhorts followers of Christ to “care for” orphans in their distress

II. OT Support for Orphan Care

A. Introduction

- God’s primary metaphor of self-revelation is his title “Father”.
- OT uses the term “fatherless” approximately 40 times. The fatherless were, in Israel, at great risk. Because that society was patriarchal they had very little legal, social or economic security.
- The OT is full of admonition to God’s people to care for the fatherless. True followers of God the Father were exhorted to care for and demonstrate compassion to the fatherless in tangible and practical ways.

B. Selected OT Scriptures

The OT evidence for care of orphans is substantial and found in 12 of the books of the OT. This issue was not a minor issue of little importance, but was an important indicator of how just and compassionate a follower of Yahweh actually was.

Here is a selection of some of the verses from the OT. In these verses we see the pattern of God’s care for the orphan and His command that His followers likewise deal justly and mercifully with the orphan.

- Psalms 10:14, God is the “helper of the fatherless”
- Psalms 68:5-6 “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling, God sets the lonely in families . . .”
- Zechariah 7:8-10, “do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the alien or the poor.”
- Jeremiah 22:3, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Do justice and righteousness . . . do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless and the widow.’”

- Proverbs 23:10-11, “Do not remove the ancient landmark/boundary or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.”
- Isaiah 1:16-17, “wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”
- Isaiah 10:12, “Woe to those who make unjust laws . . .making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.”
- Deuteronomy 27:19, “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”
- Job 29:11-12, “Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him.”
- Deut. 14:28-29, “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”
- Hosea 14:3, “in you the fatherless find compassion.”
- Malachi and Exodus also include similar passages.

C. OT Key Passage: Deut. 24:17-21

This passage is in the midst of God’s extensive laws and commands to his people who have just been delivered from bondage in Egypt. They are creating a new society, how will it work? How should they relate to one another? What about the weak, the poor, the disenfranchised in their midst?

In this passage we find great insight regarding the motives and reasons why God expects his people to care for the fatherless.

v. 17. “You shall not pervert the justice due an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge.”

v. 18. “But you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.”

v. 19. “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

v. 20. “When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.”

v. 21. “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.”

v. 22. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.”

Why treat the orphan with justice? Why make provision for their needs?

First: God is a God of love and He cares for every person. We all, no matter how weak, poor, sick, or wretched are created in His image and therefore have infinite worth and value.

Second: From this passage in Deuteronomy we see that God expects his people to be motivated by his example of love, deliverance and compassion. (See vs. 18)

Like the nation of Israel, we were powerless and in slavery ourselves, not physical bondage, but spiritual! We know what being lost and alone is like. In this condition, God redeemed us from our bondage and therefore, He expects us to act from the same motivation of love that He does. The obvious application here is that we, as sinners redeemed and adopted by God, must never forget that we are to demonstrate to everyone the same offer of love and care that we have received!

God commands His people to make generous provision for the needy and helpless. When we do this God himself will “bless you in all the work of your hands”. (see verse 19) Jesus put this principle like this, “Give and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (Luke 6:38). Also, “freely you received, freely give . . .” (Matt. 10:8) There is a definite connection between how generous we are and how much we are given in life by God. How we deal with the helpless and needy, in this case the orphan, is one indicator.

God repeats a third time, make provision for the helpless! This repetition is an important emphasis. Justice is very important to God. Again, we must remember the helpless condition in which God came to our rescue! Therefore, God commands us to act toward the weak in the same manner in which he treats us! Why should a Christian care about the fatherless? Very simple. Because God does.

D. Summary of OT foundation for orphan care

We see four main points of emphasis in the OT regarding orphan care:

- **Principle of justice**

- **Principle of mercy**
- **Mistreating orphans is sinful**
- **Caring for orphans is recognized as righteous and given the blessing of God**

The fatherless must be treated with justice!

Ps. 10:14, God is the “helper of the fatherless”

Ps. 10:18, we are to “do justice to the fatherless”

Ps. 82:3, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless”

Zech. 7:8-10, “do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the alien or the poor”

Deut. 10:18, God “executes justice for the fatherless”

Jer. 22:3, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Do justice and righteousness . . . do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless and the widow’”

Prov. 23:10-11, “Do not remove the ancient landmark/boundary or enter the fields of the fatherless; for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.”

Is. 1:16-17, “wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

Principles of Mercy and Provision

God cares for the fatherless and expects his people to care/ provide for them also.

Hos. 14:3, “in you the fatherless find compassion”

Ps. 68:5-6, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families . . .”

Deut. 14:28-29, “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

Ps. 146:7-9, “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord sustains the fatherless and the widow . . . The Lord reigns forever . . . Praise the Lord.”

Jer. 49:11, “Leave your fatherless; I will protect their lives . . .”

Mistreating the fatherless is equated with sin.

Jer. 5:28, “They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness, they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless”

Job 24:3, “Some remove the landmarks, they seize and devour flocks. They drive away the donkeys of the fatherless”

Mal. 3:5, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment, . . . against those who oppress . . . the widow and the fatherless . . . and do not fear me”

Ex. 22:22, “You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.”

Is. 1:23, “Your princes are rebels . . . they do not defend the fatherless”

Is. 10:12, “Woe to those who make unjust laws . . . making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.”

Ps. 94:3-7, “How long will the wicked, O Lord . . . be jubilant? . . . They slay the widow and the alien and murder the fatherless.”

Deut. 27:19, “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen’”.

Caring for the fatherless is equated with righteousness and blessing.

Jer. 7:1-7, “Hear the word of the Lord . . . Reform you ways and your actions . . . do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood . . . then I will let you live in this place . . .”

Job 29:11-12, “Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him.”

Deut. 14:28-29, “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

III. The Doctrine of Adoption

A. What is the Doctrine of Adoption?

- Definition: Adoption is the act of God whereby he makes us members of his family thus granting us all the rights, privileges and responsibilities therein.
- This foundational doctrine has received scant attention in contemporary preaching and teaching, yet it is the way God has chosen to incorporate us into his family.
- Adoption encompasses the doctrines of:
 - justification, whereby we get legal standing before God
 - sanctification, whereby we are made righteous by God
 - regeneration, whereby we are given new spiritual life by God
- God has chosen, by his unsearchable love, to select individual persons to be incorporated into his family, this is the doctrine of adoption.

- Scripture refers to this process some five times, using the term for adoption more frequently than the more popular term “born again”.

B. NT Adoption scriptures.

- Romans 8:14-17, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the **spirit of adoption as sons** by which we cry out, ‘**ABBA, Father**’. The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are **children of God** and if children heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”
- Ephesians 1:3-8a, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as **he chose us** in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to **adoption as sons** through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished on us.”
- Galatians 4:4-7, “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that he might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the **adoption as sons**. Because **you are sons**, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘**ABBA, Father!**’ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then **an heir through God**.”

C. Results of being adopted by God.

- We have the privilege of calling God “Father” and of being called his children.
- We have the security that God deliberately chose us and included us, not based upon anything we bring to the deal, but by his unsearchable love!
- We have become members of a family with all the joys and blessings of being included. Scripture consistently uses familial terms to describe our relationships in this new Kingdom. We are brothers and sisters, God is our Father, Jesus our older brother.
- We have the indwelling Holy Spirit who bears witness that we are, indeed, children of God and leads us in life.
- As his children we are given many, many good gifts.
- We receive discipline from God, as any beloved child does.

IV. New Testament/James 1:27

A. Introduction to the book of James

- James is the most “Jewish” of NT books.
- Written by James, Jesus’ brother, specifically to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” (James 1:1).
- James is a NT “prophetic” book full of commands and imperatives. It is pastoral in that it is filled with both encouragement and rebuke.
- James majors in action and is extremely practical in application.

B. James 1:27, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

- This OT phrase, “orphans and widows”, is used over 40 times by OT writers, but only once in the NT. These groups are the disenfranchised both socially and economically. They were in grave danger of being neglected or even exploited, even by God’s people.
- The Greek word *ORPHANOS* only occurs twice in the NT. Here in James 1:27 and in secondly in John 14:18 where Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans”, that is, unprotected, uncovered, or alone.
- James 1:27 only truly makes sense if we understand the OT context of the phrase “orphans and widows”. The first century Jewish Christian readers immediately knew what James was calling for based upon their knowledge of the OT. Readers of James must have had an “Oh, that’s what it means to serve God!” moment.
- Followers of YAHWEH, true disciples, will actually extend real care toward the orphans and widows.

C. *EPISKEPTOMAI*, to “care for”

- Basic definition is “to look upon”, “to care for”, “to exercise oversight of”. The traditional translation, “to visit”, does not come near to capturing the depth and meaning of this word.
- It is from this same root word that the term “Episcopal” comes.

D. OT/LXX usage of *EPISKEPTOMAI*

- The LXX is the Greek translation of the OT that was used extensively by the Jewish people in their many dispersions. This translation completed around 280BC by a team of 70 (72?) scholars in Alexandria, hence the title LXX, Septuagint.
- *EPISKEPTOMAI* is used in: Jeremiah 23:2; Zechariah 11:16; Ezekiel 34:11-12; Zechariah 24:6 with the meaning: “to be concerned for” as in shepherd and sheep. The clear meaning is caring for with full responsibility. In 2

Chronicles 34:12 this word means “to take oversight of”. Here foreman supervised the work. In Exodus 30:12ff it means “to account for or number” by taking an exact census.

- *EPISKEPTOMAI* in the LXX has a breadth and depth of meaning and always means serious accountability, care, and responsibility.
- This is the background meaning that the early Jewish believers would have understood to be contained in James 1:27.

E. NT/Examples and uses of *EPISKEPTOMAI*

- Matthew 25:35ff. Jesus at the final judgment .
- Acts 7:23. Moses “visits” his brothers. Here the verb clearly means to visit with active interest in and for well being.
- Acts 15:36. Paul “visits” the churches he has planted to “see how they are”. As a result of his “visiting” verse 41 says Paul was “strengthening the churches.” His visits were for care and impartation, not mere observation.

F. Significance of James 1:27

- James is not claiming that this is the sum total of knowing and serving God. James is not telling his readers to abandon prayer, worship, giving, serving, etc., etc. But he is saying something significant.
- “Pure and undefiled religion” is to *EPISKEPTOMAI* the orphans and widows. Could this possibly mean merely to “visit” them?
- James is gathering all the OT teaching on orphans and widows and applying it to those who want to truly follow God in a pure or sincere sense. He did this because he knew his readers understood and had familiarity with the OT.
- Therefore, today James 1:27 must be read and understood in its true OT context.
- This pivotal verse, James 1:27, is the NT foundation for the call to minister to the fatherless. It must be read and understood in relation to the many OT texts that call for justice and provision for the fatherless.

V. Conclusion

- A. These three areas, OT scripture/commands, NT doctrine of adoption, and James 1:27 lead us to our conclusion. These three witness to God’s care for the orphan and His clear desire that His people do likewise.
- B. Why should Christians support adoption and consider doing so themselves? Because God has adopted us and He care passionately about these helpless ones.
- C. When Christians adopt and make clear that doing so is a Kingdom activity, we will provide a strong witness to the world and bring praise to our Heavenly Father.

