Base on **Galatians 4:4–7** Luke 2:22–40 by Peter

Unfaithful spouses, divorce and remarriage, rebellious children, aging parents--today's headlines are filled with issues said to be responsible for a "breakdown" of the traditional family. Recent article about Russia elites having a raunchy party

The passage in Luke has lots of reminders that Jesus belonged to a traditional culture and was in a traditional, faithful family. (Let’s ignore the nature of his Fatherhood but even that reminds us that Joseph was, in essence, an adoptive father.)

Jesus is named on that day. Jesus meant ‘Yahweh is salvation’. Jesus’ family showed a preference for using names from the ancient epics of Israel, such as James (Jacob), Joses (Joseph), Jude (Judah), Simeon, and here Jesus (Joshua). The family was not very ‘trendy’ – it appears to have avoided fashionable Hellenistic (Greek) names like Andrew or Jason (a common equivalent for Joshua). Vs 40, so as not to leave anything in doubt, ‘when they had completed everything according to the Law’. This would have included the purification of Mary after childbirth. The inclusion of Simeon’s song celebrating the coming liberation and Anna’s praising God and looking forward to redemption is significant. Both are old, (therefore ‘wise’ although my grandchildren would contest this), both devout. Its inclusion shows respect for elders, another traditional value.

*Lion* was on ABC this week and we couldn’t help watching it again. The true story of a man tracing his Indian birth family but living in Tasmania with his adoptive Australian family. It means a lot to us as we, too, adopted an orphan from overseas. She’s visiting us at the moment with her own child.

In examining the varying approaches to adoption, it becomes apparent that the contrasts between the cultural and familial perspectives of the Semitic culture and the Greco-Roman are quite significant.

The position of children, and orphans especially was precarious in first century times. The death of parents from famine, disease, age, and war, all contributed to the possibility that a child would suddenly be left parentless. Every society has laws protecting the vulnerable but the old testament prophets often mentioned widows and orphans and the duty to look after the vulnerable. One of the most stinging rebukes is in Ezekiel 22 where God condemns the princes of Judah for oppressing the strangers in the land and "vexing" the fatherless and widows? This is clearly a very serious matter in the eyes of God, and it is mentioned right along with the princes' bloodthirsty desire to commit murder, profanity and sexual immorality.

While children in our society today have little to no economic value, children in ancient times were an extremely valuable commodity. The average family had to be a very closely-knit unit by necessity just to survive. Laziness and children who loafed simply were not options for first century families. Children were expected to work and to uphold the honour and respect the family had in the community.

Adoption that is practiced in modern secular society derives from Roman Law. The secular procedure for adoption involves the removal of all rights and responsibilities from the biological parents, which are then transferred onto the adoptive parent/s.

While Greek and Roman culture placed less importance or value on young human life, condoning and allowing such things as abortion and infanticide, Jewish law and tradition sternly prohibited these actions.

Hearing Late Night Live a few weeks ago on life in Roman times and learning about adoption and reading someoné’s PhD thesis adoption helped me understand the variety of reasons and methods.   
The main reason behind Roman adoptions was neither as a solution to the large number of orphaned and abandoned children or as a common response to infertility. The Roman idea of adoption was most frequently as a means of securing political and economic succession. Most of the records available for Roman adoption concern primarily the legal and political aspects of succession and inheritance. These political adoptions were often used by wily men looking to trump the traditional blood relationships that determined power and inheritance. While modern adoption and Semitic adoptions most often involved children, Roman legal adoptions were almost exclusively adoptions of adults?

Roman attitudes overall were much more at ease with the idea of legal adoption, but much less so to the concept of adopting to provide a home for abandoned or orphaned children. Roman adoption of children was discouraged or even illegal for some time.

Hebrew people did not adopt but take the fatherless in and raise them. As is the case of Esther and Mordecai her uncle. Hebrew adoption’’ was not official but an act of kindness to take pity and rescue a vulnerable child. Marriage laws also regulated who would care for widows.

Unlikely that Hebrew adoption went outside the family much – Story of Rebecca’, our daughter, and what we learned in Korea.

Romans – complete acceptance of the adoptee. An adoptee in Roman society was endowed with all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of his new family just as though he was a natural born son. The adoptee was expected to respect and honour his new parents just as though they were his real parents.

So which view of adoption does Paul have in mind as a Jew but also a Roman citizen? The Jewish practice of taking in the fatherless out of pity of duty for their survival or the Roman practice

Paul, living in a Greco-Roman culture but being a Jew, was no doubt writing to his audience from both points of view. But let’s look at his audience in Galitia from this reading but also in his letter to the Romans. **Galatia map** now part of Turkeya but originally a Greek colony, in Paul’s time, a Roman province. His audience was definitely Roman. Although he was a Hebrew, also a Roman citizen, he was most likely using adoption in the sense of Roman law.

So why do I tell you all this about different cultural view of adoption? It helps us interpret the passage.

**Galatians 4:4–7**

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Romans 8:14–17 NIV**

14For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, *“Abba,* Father.” 16The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. 17Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Roman law bestowed all the rights to property, inheritance, sustenance and other care that a genetically born child would have. Paul is saying that we have a Daddy- Abba with a personal relationship with God through Christ, and even somehow like the relationship that Jesus has with the Father. Surely our main inheritance is that eternal relationship where we are no longer slaves to sin and serving other Gods but live without fear. But like in Roman adoption, it is like a grown-up relationship rather than a little child with unequal power. It’s a covenant relationship like the simplest message of the Old Testament – I will be your God and you will be my people. It’s as simple as I will be your Father and you will be my child. Let’s embrace it. Our next song – No longer slaves – celebrates this.

**Also commentary from Bill Loader**

Christmas 1: 31 December Luke 2:21(22)-40

I include v. 21 which belongs appropriately to the passage. After the magic of the first half of chapter 2 we find ourselves back at the level of practicalities in Luke 2:21-40, at least to begin with. Like his cousin, John (1:59), Jesus is circumcised on the 8th day and, like his cousin, John, Jesus is named on that day. Luke deliberately sets both in parallel. According to popular etymology, Jesus meant ‘Yahweh is salvation’. Jesus’ family showed a preference for using names from the ancient epics of Israel, such as James (Jacob), Joses (Joseph), Jude (Judah), Simeon, and here Jesus (Joshua). The family was not very ‘trendy’ – it appears to have avoided fashionable Hellenistic names like Andrew or Jason (a common equivalent for Joshua). Luke probably assumes many hearers will know the etymology. Salvation will return as a key theme in the latter part of the chapter, as it was in the words of the angels to the shepherds: ‘To you is born ..a saviour’ (2:11).

In 22-24 Luke keeps us focused on practicalities. They are the practicalities of the Law. Mary had given birth to a male child. She was, according to Leviticus 12:2-4, unclean for 33 days. Luke, somewhat inaccurately, writes of ‘their’ purification, as though the impurity extended beyond the woman to the man. Are they being portrayed as especially observant, super-observant? This may be reflected in their going up to the temple, which was not required for the purification, but only for the offering in relation to the firstborn (Numbers 18:15-16). In relation to the latter Luke fails to mention the payment of 5 shekels. The offering of the pair of birds reflects the option for the poor, who could not afford a sheep (Leviticus 12:8).

This cluster of practical legalities in 21-24 has its purpose for Luke. That purpose is reflected in the refrain, ‘in accordance with the law of Moses’ (v. 22), ‘according to what is written in the law of the Lord’ (v. 24); and a few verses later, lest we forget: ‘according to the custom of the law’ (v. 27) and finally ‘When they had completed everything in accordance with the law of the Lord’ (v.40). There can be no missing the fact. Not only the names, but also the practices of Jesus’ family demonstrate that they are devout followers of Torah. They are the best of true Israel, as also was John’s family.

Luke is concerned with continuity. Christians are not another religion. They are the true successors, according to Luke, of biblical faith and nothing of that Bible is to be discarded, unless divine intervention indicates this is so (as in the waiving of circumcision in Acts – but only for Gentiles). This reflects Luke’s view that Jesus intended to set aside not a single stroke of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:17). Jews remain observant Jews when they become Christians. Paul is the supreme example, as he is portrayed in Acts (see 21:21; somewhat differently from in real life). Luke inherits this theology from Q; it is reflected also in Matthew (see: 5:17-20), but Luke makes much more of the fact that it required not just ethical but also ritual observance. New Testament writers had differing opinions about how to handle scripture, the law in particular. Mark could even have Jesus pour scorn on food laws and ritual washings (7:1-23); Paul could declare that both Jew and Gentile are no longer under the law; and for John such aspects retain symbolic value at most.

Notice how Luke continues this fairly conservative theme through the rest of the chapter. Simeon and Anna are true saints of Israel. Today we might not share Luke’s implied view that there was a special virtue in Anna’s remaining unmarried. But more to the point, they both moved and lived in the Spirit. They hail the child. They are prophets. They are also aged people; Luke reflects the honouring of wise elderly people. Probably frail and able to achieve little that counts on the scale of the economic rationalists, they are rich sources of wisdom. Congregations often have Simeons and Annas; are they heard?

Notice their focus. Simeon was ‘longing for the consolation of Israel’ (2:25). Anna speaks to ‘those who were awaiting the liberation of Israel’ (2:38). The same expression reappears in 23:51 and 24:21. Luke allows Simeon to continue the language of national liberation which is found also on the lips of Mary and Zechariah. For in Luke’s understanding of salvation, Israel’s liberation from oppression is not surrendered or spiritualised away to become a symbol of individual peace or a heavenly home. It remains on the divine agenda and is rather expanded so that ‘Your kingdom come’ means to pray for good news for the poor of every land (6:20-21). This is the ‘light which will enlighten the Gentiles’ (2:32). It is like Simeon is saying: through this child Israel will truly become a blessing to all nations, as once promised to Abraham. He also warns it will not be without opposition and conflict (rising, falling, swords – 2:34-35).

In v. 40 Luke returns to his parallel with John the Baptist, who also grew and became strong by the Spirit (1:80). The child, Jesus, became filled with wisdom (as the next scene will demonstrate) and ‘the grace of God was upon him’. The 30 years till adulthood leave room for wild speculation. Jesus visited India? Jesus visited Alexandria? Jesus spent time at Qumran? Jesus strolled on England’s green hills? It is better to remain with Luke’s eloquent silence. As Simeon and Anna grew old, nourished by the passions of hope and liberation, so this child grew as a child of his people’s hope, nurtured in a household devoted to taking scripture seriously, including cultural practices which are strange to us but were real to them. Luke wants us to be ‘on side’ with the cry of Jesus’ people, with the cries of people everywhere who long for liberation – big liberation which reaches from individual release to community justice and peace. Luke was not just indulging in fantasy when he has the angels sing of peace. As we begin the new year it remains just as urgent to imagine oneself into what for some is the stark reality where our living with more means their living with less - and then to act, but without pretending we can or should do it all.

Christmas 1: 31 December Galatians 4:4-7

There is a clear bias against slavery - and why not! Yet slavery remains part of our world under different guises. Israel's foundational story is about liberation from slavery. It is part of the divine script: God is the redeemer, liberator. We should not be surprised that good news takes this form. The obverse is that the goal is freedom; not a free wheeling looseness without purpose and direction, but the kind of freedom where people are able to be what they were created to be, where they can reach the goals from whose glory they have fallen short (Rom 3:23). It is interesting how our text describes this in the language of intimacy: the Spirit has us addressing God as our own caring parent and knowing God as the one who is going to be generous (alluded to in the language of inheritance - but as an image, because God is not about to die!).

The script is carefully laid across new contours of history. Paul sets it out in relation to the Galatians and their past, which he sees as serving other gods. We find this most clearly in the verses which follow. The 'elements' appear here as dangerous or at least 'weak and destitute' (4:9). Paul speaks in the same breath of gods who are no gods. We have to imagine how Paul saw that leading people into slavery and what kind of slavery that was. He would probably respond in terms of the attitudes and behaviours he later lists as 'works of the flesh' (5:19-21). But his focus is not on the former lives of the hearers but on their present prospects, particularly if they succumb, as some had, to the influence of those Christians who sought to impose biblical law on them.

This then creates an interesting situation: for the script of liberation from pagan gods becomes the script also for liberation from biblical law and the elements which were weak and destitute gods in paganism become elements now associated with adherence to biblical law. This switch is most evident where Paul in 4:3 includes himself as a Jew in saying: 'we'. Paul is treading a fine line. At best he is saying we were infants needing the biblical law; at worst he is saying the biblical law is no better than the weak and destitute elements which enslaved pagans. The paradox seems to find its resolution to some degree in the notion that the biblical law had a legitimate role once but has none now, so that what once served us well as children becomes the opposite when we have reached maturity.

Some of the statements are potentially ambiguous and doubtless landed Paul in even greater trouble among those who read him unsympathetically. Paul is not tip toeing through the fine points of an intellectual argument, but giving voice to a passionate concern. We need to see where he is coming from. His opponents, or at least those who went to Galatia in part to 'correct' his influence, are probably taking a consistent stance which says that the Law is given by God and not to be tinkered with. What the Bible says is true and it is not for people like Paul to water it down or pick and choose among its demands.

It was a kind of primitive fundamentalism. So the Galatians needed to be fully obedient and that meant circumcision (so Gen 17) and the rest, including observing holy days and feasts (so 4:10). Paul has become convinced that the implications of God's action in Christ is that such requirements are set aside and that now what matters is faith in Christ and living out that faith and only that. He will argue that the Spirit will in fact more than fulfil any legitimate demands contained in the law ( mainly ethical ones). He makes that clear in 5:13-24 (see also Romans 8:1-4).

Paul assumes that when people enter into a relationship such as he describes, that of a grown up son to a father, then there is a oneness which generates continuity between what the father wants and what the son wants. **It is a first century ideal of family life. Applied as an image to Christian living**, Paul is arguing that the Spirit generates God's life in and through the believer and it will show. By contrast, to perpetuate submission to the Law, even though it was given by God and is in the Bible, is to perpetuate a form of slavery which - and here he is quite daring - is not much better than serving other gods!

We need to bring Paul into conversation with today's fundamentalists. We need to recognise that Christianity (along with other religions) is capable of stunting people's growth, of enslaving them, and using the Bible as its main instrument to do so. In that sense Paul would argue that the good news and the real message of the scriptures is that we can be freed from the oppressive forces of religion and ideology, including those which harness the Bible in all sincerity to their cause. Paul's opponents had not misunderstood the Bible. It was a question of seeing the wood for the trees. Even that is a little unfair. Paul and others like him made a deliberate choice to make the relationship with Christ and through Christ with God the sole criterion for what mattered and to read the scriptures in that light.