

Attachment theory and the doctrine of adoption: Making the connections

Journal of Psychology and Theology
1–13

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DOI: 10.1177/00916471251351693

journals.sagepub.com/jpt



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Abstract

This article attempts new integration of attachment theory and the biblical doctrine of adoption, by proposing connections that (1) illuminate the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption, and that (2) provide theological resources for pastoral and clinical practices intended to mitigate negative effects of insecure maternal–infant attachments. Overviews of key aspects of the biblical doctrine of adoption and of attachment theory are presented, together with biblical justifications for attempting to integrate them for pastoral and clinical practice. The affective elements of the doctrine of adoption are highlighted in light of attachment theory, and meditation on biblical texts portraying God as benevolent and firmly attached is presented as a means of mitigating lingering negative effects of insecure maternal–infant attachments. Suggestions for further research are offered.

Keywords

attachment theory, maternal–infant attachment, biblical doctrine of adoption, sonship, biblical meditation, spiritual formation

Introduction

This article attempts new integration of attachment theory and the biblical doctrine of adoption, by proposing connections that (1) illuminate the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption, and that (2) provide theological resources for pastoral and clinical practices intended to mitigate negative effects of insecure parental–infant attachments. The outline is as follows: first, overviews of key aspects of the biblical doctrine of adoption and of attachment theory are presented. Second, biblical justification for the attempted integration of attachment theory and the doctrine of adoption is offered. Third, the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption are developed in light of attachment theory. Fourth, “whole-brain” meditation on biblical texts portraying God as firmly attached and affectionate toward believers is presented as a possible means of mitigating lingering effects of insecure maternal–infant attachments. In conclusion, the arguments are summarized and suggestions made for further research.

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Adoption: The Biblical and Theological Doctrine

In both the Old and New Testaments sonship and adoption are prominent metaphors for God's relationship with his redeemed people. Recalling Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus, Yahweh, speaking through the prophet Hosea declares, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1). The nation of Israel is God's son, and Yahweh is the father of the nation. ". . . I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son" (Jer 31:9b; cf. Jer 3:19; Isa 9:6; 63:16; 64:8; Mal 1:6; 2:10).

The basis of this familial, father-son language is not natural, biological descent or human merit on Israel's part. As Moses reminded the people prior the entry into the Promised Land of Canaan, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other people . . ." (Deut 7:7). This adoptive, father-son relationship was established on the basis of God's free election of Israel and his faithfulness to his promises freely made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 7:8).

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, there are few specific instances of the human practice of adoption in the Old Testament. In the face of Sarai's infertility, Abram reasoned that he would need to adopt his servant Eliezer of Damascus as the heir of his estate (Gen 15:1–4). After being rescued from a basket floated on the Nile by his mother, Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:10). Esther was adopted by Mordecai when her father and mother had died (Esth 2:7,15).

The Mosaic law had no provisions as such for the practice of human adoption—even though such practices were known elsewhere in the ancient Near East, as referenced in texts from Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and the Code of Hammurabi (Knobloch, 1992, pp. 76–79).

In the New Testament, however, adoption and sonship are more fully developed—especially by John and Paul—as metaphors for salvation through faith in Christ. In the prologue of his gospel, John declared that to all who received Christ, who believed in his name, ". . . he gave the right to become children of God (*tekna theou*)—children born not of natural descent (lit., "not of blood"), nor of human decision (lit., "not of the will of the flesh"), of a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12,13). The point here is that humans are not by nature "children of God"—redeemed and beloved sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, incorporated by grace into his family—but only so through faith in Jesus his Son (Barrett, 1958).

In his first epistle John declared—with considerable exultation—"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God (*tekna theou*). And that is what we are!" (I Jn 3:1). This Johannine language of "children of God" or "little children" (*teknia*; affectionate diminutive of *tekna*: I John 2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21; Marshall, 1978) is functionally equivalent to the Pauline terminology of sonship and adoption (*huiiothesia*; Rom 8:15,23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5). Becoming a "son" or "child" or "little child" or "adopted" all amount to the same thing: becoming by God's grace, through faith in Christ, a beloved member of the family of God the Father.

For both John and Paul, sonship and adoption focus on the individual believer, rather than on the nation of Israel as "son" of God—though Paul can still speak of Israel's national adoption (Rom 9:4). For both, God's gracious act of adoption in the new covenant implies a more intimate relationship of believers with the Father than was the case in the old (cf. I John 3:1; "Abba," Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

In Paul, the believer's adoption was planned by God from eternity. Far from being an afterthought, in Ephesians adoption is the central category used by the apostle to expound the nature of salvation and the believer's relationship with God:

⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^[a]predestined us for **adoption to sonship** through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his good pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we

have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding . . . (Eph 1:4–8)

Before God created the world (v.4), before time began, God had already decided to graciously adopt as beloved sons and daughters (vv.4b,5) those who were to believe in Christ and to be united with and in him (v.4a). This decision was not only an act of his sovereign and powerful will, but also an act of his love (v.4b) and good pleasure (*eudokia*, v.5b). This latter term (*eudokia*) indicates that God was not adopting out of a mere sense of duty, or in some austere, dispassionate way, but rather, “. . . took great delight in thinking of his future people and being kindly disposed toward them” (Arnold, 2010, p. 83).

It is rather remarkable that the soteriological category that was so prominent in Romans and Galatians and in the soteriological controversies of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods (McGrath, 2005)—justification—is absent from Ephesians—considered by some scholars to be the apostle's most profound and mature theology. Here the apostle has made central not the forensic language of the courtroom, but the more relational and familial language of adoption. God is not only the righteous Judge who says “Not guilty,” but also the loving and affectionate Father who welcomes us into his family. Adoption means that the Christian has become the recipient of God's fatherly care (Erickson, 2013, p. 894) and have been made members of his family (Grudem, 2020, p. 913). The readers of this epistle in the Roman world of the first century would have understood that an adopted child acquired all the legal rights of a natural born child, received the adopting family's name, and a share in the new family social status and honor (Lyll, 1969; Scott, 1992).

In one of his earliest writings—the epistle to the Galatians—Paul refutes certain Judaizers who were teaching his converts that it was necessary for them to observe the provisions of the Mosaic law concerning circumcision, dietary laws, and Jewish festivals (Keener, 2019; Moo, 2013; Schreiner, 2010). Paul taught these converts that to follow these Judaizing teachings was to abandon the true gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Becoming the spiritual children of Abraham (Gal 3:7), sons and heirs of God, recipients of the promised Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14), and being righteous before God—come through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:26), not through observing the cultic requirements of the law (Gal 3:11). Core elements of Paul's gospel are summarized in the fourth chapter of the epistle:

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive **adoption to sonship**.⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*, Father.”⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir (Gal 4:4–7)

Here *adoption to sonship*—with its full rights and privileges—is a central concept in Paul's understanding of salvation. The “good news” is not only about forgiveness of sins and right standing with God, but also about a conscious experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. This Spirit reduplicates in the believer's experience the prayer language of Jesus in Gethsemane—“*Abba*, Father” (cf. Mark 14:36). This prayer language of an adopted believer—“*Abba*”—is not “baby talk,” but rather the respectful, intimate language of a son or daughter (Barr, 1988)—who has experienced a new, warm, and firm attachment to the heavenly Father.

The apostle develops his doctrine of adoption in the eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans. Here he places adoption in the larger context of the Spirit's ministry in the believer's post-conversion spiritual experience. The Spirit is living in the believer (Rom 8:11); enabling the Christian to resist the temptations provoked by the yet-lingering sinful nature (Rom 8:13); leading and guiding in the decisions of daily life (Rom 8:14); affirming in the believer's heart his new “*Abba*, Father” intimacy with God (Rom 8:16); helping the believer in weakness, and interceding for him (or her) amid the perplexities of prayer (Rom 8:2:26):

⁹ . . . the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you . . . ¹³ if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴ because those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God . . . ¹⁵ you received the Spirit of sonship (or, *adoption*). And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children . . . ¹⁷ heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ . . . ²⁶ the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans words cannot express . . . (Rom 8:9,13–17,26)

There are several new elements here, not developed in Paul’s earlier discussion of adoption in Galatians 4:4–6. The *human* spirit—that aspect of human personality that is especially sensitive to spiritual realities (cf. I Thess 5:23), and which is renewed and enlivened at conversion (cf. 8:10, “your spirit is alive because of [Christ’s] righteousness”) is distinguished from the Spirit of God dwelling in the believer (Rom 8:11). The experience described by Paul in v.16—“The Spirit himself testifies *with our spirit*”—called by John Wesley the “testimony of the Holy Spirit” (Outler, 1984, p. 84)—signifies a conscious experience of emotional resonance shared by both the Holy Spirit and the human spirit: a conscious awareness of the warm, affectionate love of the Father for his beloved, adopted children. F.F. Bruce noted that Martin Luther, commenting on this text, stated that it expressed the “affection of the heart” of a child who knew that “. . . I am thy child and thou art my father . . . I am beloved because of the Beloved” (Bruce, 1982, p. 166). Also new is the reference in v.23, “we eagerly await our adoption as sons, redemption of our bodies.” For Paul, adoption is both a present reality (“already”) and a future one (“not yet”), to be fully realized at the return of Christ and the final resurrection (Ridderbos, 1975, pp. 200–203).

Despite its intrinsic significance for a biblical understanding of salvation, adoption has been a relatively neglected doctrine in the history of Christian theology and ministry (Trumper, 2002)—overshadowed by justification in Lutheran and Reformed circles, and by regeneration—being “born again”—in the Wesleyan and revival traditions. In recent decades, however, there has been a renewal of scholarly interest in this doctrine as evidenced by the work of Packer (1973), Scott (1992), Burke (2006), and Garner (2016). Emphasizing its significance, J.I. Packer has even claimed, in his widely read book *Knowing God*, that a Christian understanding of the faith “. . . cannot be better than our grasp of adoption . . . Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher than justification” (Packer, 1973, pp. 182, 186). Its contemporary relevance for preaching, pastoral counseling, and discipleship training has been noted by Alister McGrath (2005, pp. 144–145):

Adoption is about *being wanted*. It is about *belonging*. These are deeply emotive themes which resonate with the cares and concerns of many in our increasingly fractured society. To be adopted is to be invited into a loving and caring community. It is about being welcomed, wanted, and invited. Adoption celebrates the privilege . . . in which the outsider is welcomed into the fold of faith and love.

The present article is offered as a modest contribution to these recent efforts to retrieve this important biblical doctrine, and then to make connections with attachment theory.

Attachment Theory

The groundbreaking research of John Bowlby in the 1960s and 70s on maternal–infant attachment gave birth to a fruitful new research paradigm and sub-discipline in developmental psychology (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979, 1980, 1988). Subsequent researchers extended Bowlby’s attachment theory across the human life span (Ainsworth, 1985; Ainsworth et al., 1978), and enriched the theory with recent findings in neuroscience and brain lateralization (Schore, 2019; Siegel, 2020). It is assumed that the readers of this journal are generally familiar with key aspects of attachment theory. Readers who wish an overview of the field and updates on current research are referred to

Cassidy and Shaver (2016), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 3rd ed., and also to Chambers (2017); Narayan et al. (2021); and Tomoda et al. (2024).

This article adopts basic assumptions from Siegel's construal of attachment theory ("interpersonal neurobiology") in which 1) earliest attachments are usually formed by the age of seven; 2) nearly all infants become attached; 3) attachments are formed with only a few persons; 4) these attachments are formed in social interactions with attachment figures; and 5) such attachments lead to changes in the infant's behavior and brain function (Siegel, 2020, p. 168). The specific focus of this article is on the possible negative effects of insecure, avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized patterns of attachment (Siegel, 2020, pp. 176–186) on a Christian's subsequent perceptions of God.

Relating Attachment Theory and the Doctrine of Adoption: A Biblical Basis

Previous authors have attempted, from various theological perspectives, to connect attachment theory, or parental faith stories, to human adoption (Buchanan, 2004; Fraser, 2010), or to connect attachment theory and spiritual formation, or discipleship training, or pastoral care (Chandler, 2014; Thompson, 2010; Wilder, 2020). However, few—if any—systematic theologians have attempted to explicate the doctrine of divine adoption with the help of attachment theory.

Biblical texts that use human birth as a metaphor for spiritual rebirth or conversion, together with texts that speak of strong, affectionate attachments of God and human mentors to spiritual infants and children, provide such a plausible theological basis. In the gospel of John Jesus compared conversion or entering the kingdom of God with being born again (John 3:3), to entering again into the mother's womb (John 3:4). The flesh gives birth to flesh, but spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:6). One must be born from above (John 3:7). In his last trip to Jerusalem, Jesus lamented over the unbelieving city: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Matt 23:37). Jesus' imagery of a mother hen and her chicks may suggest associations with the classic experiments of Harlow et al. (1965) with rhesus monkeys, demonstrating the importance of maternal comfort and care for human development.

The apostle Peter urged the new converts in Asia Minor to crave, like ". . . newborn babes the pure spiritual milk" of God's word (I Pet 2:2). Paul wrote to his converts in Thessalonica, and reminded them that he had been ". . . gentle among them, like a mother caring for her little children" (I Thess 2:2), or like a father encouraging and comforting his children (I Thess 2:12). He wrote to his converts in Galatia, addressed them as his "little children," and said that for them he was ". . . again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19).

Old Testament prophetic texts employ parent-child and maternal-infant imagery to depict God's affection for and strong attachment to his redeemed people. As noted earlier, Hosea, recalling the days of the Exodus, declared that "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1). Ezekiel portrayed Israel as a helpless, abandoned newborn baby girl, thrown into an open field—then rescued and adopted by God, who entered into covenant with her (Ezek 16:4–7). Isaiah compares Yahweh's strong attachment to Israel to a mother's strong attachment to her infant nursing at her breast: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands . . ." (Isa 49:15,16). In the days of restoration, God's children will be ". . . nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the Lord, and your Savior . . ." (Isa 60:16). In the restored Jerusalem, God promises that ". . . you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts . . ." (Isa 66:11). In this new creation text, not only Jerusalem, but God himself is compared to a nursing mother, delighting to satisfy her children. While not explicitly invoking maternal-infant imagery, other texts such as Isaiah 62:4–5; 65:19; Jeremiah 32:40–41, and Zephaniah

3:14–17 speak of God’s joy and pleasure in beholding his redeemed children—mirroring the joy and delight of a mother beholding the delighted smile of her newborn child. These texts from both testaments, taken together, offer substantial justification for understanding God’s adopting love in light of modern attachment theory.

Making Connections: Affect and Doctrine; Mitigating Insecure Attachments to God

Current models of maternal-infant attachment, enhanced by findings in neuroscience relating to mirror neurons and brain lateralization—studies based on real time, fMRI brain scanning—can illuminate the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption. When a mother smiles at her newborn child in her arms, the mirror systems in both the mother’s and the baby’s brains are activated, causing the facial muscles of each to smile in response to the other’s smile (Cozolino, 2014; Lundqvist & Dimberg, 1995). Not only the facial muscles of mother and child imitate one another; the feelings of happiness associated with a smiling face are also felt by each (Dimberg & Ohman, 1996; Singer & Lamm, 2009). Face-to-face smiling and play between mother and child connects the right brains of both, and produces a dynamic state of emotional resonance—in which the joy and happiness of each amplifies the joy and happiness of the other (Schore, 2019, p. 224). The mother and child can be joined together in a shared consciousness of “we” in such a resonant state (Siegel, 2020).

The oxytocin released in the mother during breast feeding promotes positive feelings of trust, relaxation, pair bonding, and well being (LeWine, 2023; Neumann, 2007). An infant who experiences such a warm and secure attachment to the mother is more likely to experience healthy attachment relationship as an adult—able to pay attention to the feelings of others, value relationships, and be well integrated socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Thompson, 2010).

These dynamics of maternal-infant attachment, that can produce strong bonds of affection shared by mother and child, can, by way of analogy, provide a lens through which we can understand the strong bonds of affection between God and new believers that—under suitable conditions—are created by God’s gracious act of adoption. The emotional reality experienced by believers who have been adopted into God’s family and given the Holy Spirit is epitomized in the word “Abba” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). This “cry of the heart” signifies a conscious awareness of being a *beloved* son or daughter of God, the object of God’s good pleasure (cf. Matt 3:17; Eph 1:5). Receiving the Spirit of the Son into one’s heart (Gal 4:6) is to have the love of God poured into the heart (Rom 5:5), and to have a consciousness of the forgiveness of one’s sins, imputed righteousness, joy, and peace (Eph 1:6; Rom 5:1; 14:17b). The Holy Spirit can act as a spiritual and emotional “oxytocin” that makes the warmth and affection of God’s love a felt experience.

Commentators on these “Abba” texts (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15) have generally noted the historical and linguistic backgrounds of this Aramaic word, but given less attention to its affective dimensions. A survey of ten modern commentaries on Galatians found that eight (Betz, 1979; Bruce, 1982; Fee, 2007; Fung, 1988; Gupta, 2023; Keener, 2019; Schreiner, 2010; Wright, 2021) gave scant attention to the emotional aspects of this endearing term for father. Only two highlighted the deeply emotional dimensions of “Abba.” Douglas Moo (2013) commented that the term expressed the “. . . deep emotional reaction in the believer’s heart” caused by the “joyful conviction of . . . (becoming) God’s son.” Timothy George (1994) noted that the word was a “cry of the heart . . . not . . . spoken calmly with personal detachment or reserve.”

The situation is somewhat similar in a limited sample of modern commentaries on the “Abba” language of Romans 8:15. Eight of ten commentaries examined (Barrett, 1957; Black, 1973; Garland et al., 2021; Gorman, 2022; Jewett, 2013; Kasemann, 1980; Matera, 2010; Morris, 1988) discuss only in an incidental manner the emotive connotations of the term. Dunn (1988) and Moo

(1991) are exceptions. Dunn (1988, p. 462) notes that the verb Paul uses for “we cry out” (*krazomen*) expresses “. . . an intensity of spiritual experience” and a “fervent sense of sonship” that Paul assumes to be typical of Christian experience in the churches known to him. Commenting on the term “Abba,” Moo (1991, p. 535) states that “. . . no more beautiful picture of the believer’s joy and security is found anywhere in Scripture . . . (the Spirit) causes to well up within us a comforting conviction that we are God’s children.”

This relative lack of attention by commentators to the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption reflects the long-standing cognitive bias of much Western theology, which has tended, since the fourth and fifth centuries, to define Christian identity primarily in terms of assent to correct doctrine; only secondarily in terms of correct behavior; and third, if at all, in relation to healthy emotions (Kreider, 1999, pp. 102–107). The use of attachment theory to expound the doctrine of adoption could help to remedy this deficit—making it both more memorable in preaching and more beneficial in pastoral counseling, discipleship training, and clinical practice.

Mitigating Negative Effects of Insecure Attachments

This concluding section proposes a form of *lectio divina*—biblical meditation on scripture (Davis, 2012, 2021)—as a pastoral or clinical resource that may mitigate negative effects of insecure attachments—of infants to mothers, or of believers to God. It is hypothesized that insecure maternal-infant attachments 1) may impede healthy attachments to other persons later in the life cycle (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1969; Chandler, 2014; Schore, 2016, 2019) and 2) may contribute to mental schemas of God that diminish a believer’s capacity to experience a warm and secure attachment to God (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Hall & Brokaw, 1995).

A 2006 study by the Baylor Institute of Religion, “American Piety in the 21st Century” found that almost 72% of those Christians surveyed held personal images of God (mental schemas) that were either angry, distant or critical (Baylor University, 2006, pp. 26–30). Cognitively, they may have assented to propositions such as “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” but *affectively*—in their subliminal images of God, they may have felt that God was typically angry, critical or disappointed, or emotionally distant from them—in effect, weakly attached to them. The Baylor Study did not explore the root causes of these problematic mental schemas of God. It is hypothesized in this article that both insecure maternal-infant attachments, or subsequent hurtful experiences in family systems (Rustenbach, 2011; Scazzero, 2006, 2010), or experiences of trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014) may contribute to the formation of such problematic schemata.

The Case of Virginia Heslinga

Virginia Heslinga was raised in a devout, church-going evangelical Protestant family. At the age of twelve she was baby sitting her two younger brothers and one of their friends while her parents were out for a meeting one evening. Heat from a night light in the boys’ upstairs bedroom ignited some drapes, causing a raging fire that burned the entire house down. Virginia was able to rescue her older brother and his friend, but not her younger brother Andrew. When Virginia’s father returned to the burned-down home, he angrily confronted Virginia with the question, blaming her for the death of Andrew, his favorite son: *If you could get two out, why couldn’t you get three out?*

The father resisted all suggestions that he seek pastoral counseling, and fell into a state of depression and isolation that lasted for over twenty years. Virginia described the impact of decades of alienation from her father on her own faith and image of God (Heslinga, 2023, pp. 176–77):

Every day, Dad’s mood swings went from silent to angry, depressed to tearful. I had squashed down thoughts and fears from the fire, but I couldn’t squash the anger I felt toward my father. I resented the quick changes in his moods that made us learn ways to tiptoe around anything that could cause an angry reaction.

Table 1. Biblical images of a smiling and happy God.

God's "Smile" Promised in the Old Covenant:	God's "Smile" Fulfilled in the New Covenant:
*Numbers 6:23–24+	*Matthew 3:16–17+
*Isaiah 62:4–5+ 65:19+	*Galatians 4:6–7+
*Jeremiah 32:40–41+	*Luke 15:3–24+
*Zephaniah 3:14–17+	*John 15:14–15+

He could yell, but it was when he talked in a low voice that we knew he was really angry, and he threw things. If he wasn't close enough to grab one of us, he just threw something at us when he didn't like our noise or actions.

I felt such a growing depth of anger that it affected my view of God (it. added). I couldn't hear the word *father* without thinking of mine. Although I still prayed, I stopped saying the first words of the Lord's Prayer. It seemed better just to concentrate on Jesus.

It was only decades after the tragic housefire and death of her younger brother that Virginia and her father were able to achieve some measure of reconciliation—and for Virginia, substantial healing of her wounded image of God.

Biblical Meditation: The Smiling Face of God

Meditating on biblical texts that portray God with a smiling face—pleased and delighted with his children—may mitigate implicit mental models of God as angry, critical, or distant—a God weakly attached to his children. Biblical texts portraying a God who is pleased with his children are presented in the Table 1 below. Neuroscientific studies indicating therapeutic benefits of meditation will then be discussed. The following section is adapted from Davis (2024).

These texts provide biblical warrant for a believer to have images of our heavenly Father and of Jesus—looking at us with *smiling and happy faces*—as we pray, meditate on scripture, or worship. By God's grace and mercy, believers are beloved children—objects of the Father's pleasure and delight.

Zeph 3:17 epitomizes much of the Old Testament's witness to the love of God, and could rightly be called the "John 3:16" of the Hebrew bible. This remarkable text declares to the returning exiles God's love and favor for his people, and the pleasure and delight that he feels in beholding them:

The Lord your God is with you; he is mighty to save. *He will take great delight in you*; he will quiet you with his love, *he will rejoice over you with singing* (italics added).

The Old Testament scholar O. Palmer Robertson has called this passage Yahweh's "poem of personal love"—an inspired declaration of ". . . the deepest inner joy and satisfaction of God himself in his love for his people" (Robertson, 1990, p. 339). This is the only time in the Old Testament that God is depicted as *singing*—and here, he is singing because he is feeling joy and delight as he looks at his beloved children.

In the New Testament, Matt 3:16–17—Jesus's baptism in the Jordan—and Gal 4:4–6—our adoption, sonship, and reception of the Spirit—have important implications for our image of God, and God's image of us. All three Persons of the Trinity were present at Jesus's baptism: Jesus, the Son of God incarnate; God the Father speaking from heaven; and the Holy Spirit descending visibly on Jesus in the form of a dove.

The baptism of Jesus is a picture of Jesus' reception of the Spirit—and also of ours. Because we, by faith, are forgiven and adopted sons and daughters of God the Father, we too have been given the Spirit (Gal 4:4–6) through which we experience the love of our “Abba” Father, and know that we, too, are seen as a beloved son or daughter. In Gal 4:4–6 the baptismal experience of Jesus is reduplicated in us. We, like Jesus at his baptism, can see through the eyes of faith the shining face of God beholding us (cf. Num 6:25–26), and rejoice in our new status as the objects of God's love and delight.

Jesus tells three parables (Luke 15:3–32) that portray God's gracious character and the joy and happiness that he feels in a restored relationship with us. God is like a good shepherd (cf. Ezek 34; Ps 23) who rejoices when he finds his lost sheep, and calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him—an image of the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:3–7). God is like the woman who searches her house to find one lost coin, and calls her friends and neighbors to share her joy in finding it (15:8–10). God is like the father of the prodigal son, who seeing his returning son, is filled with compassion, embraces him with affection, and calls for a feast to “celebrate and be glad” (15:11–32). All three parables enable us to see happy, smiling faces on the shepherd, the woman, and the prodigal's father. All three parables—especially the parable of the prodigal son—reveal Jesus's heartfelt teachings about how to see God—and ourselves in the light of how God sees us.

In John 15:13–15 Jesus tells the disciples that they are no longer only servants, but now considered *friends*—“. . . for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (15:15). Christ wants us to see ourselves as his friends, if indeed we obey his commands (15:14). John 15:13–15 justifies our seeing, through the eyes of faith, Jesus smiling at us, enjoying us just as we enjoy our friends.

When we look at a smiling face—of a person actually present, or even a picture held before us, or even only *imagined*—the mirror systems of the brain activate our facial muscles to imitate that smiling face (Cozolino, 2014; Lundqvist & Dimberg, 1995). The smiling face of a mother triggers a smiling and happy face in the baby held in her arms (Schore, 2019, p. 171). Not only do we imitate the smiling face we see, but we also mirror the feeling of happiness that we associate with a smiling face (Dimberg & Ohman, 1996; Singer & Lamm, 2009). This triggering of the imitation of a smiling face—even in the absence of a conscious awareness of the stimulus—prompts our brains to resonate with the happy emotional state of the image that we are viewing or imagining (Decety & Grezes, 2006).

These findings on the beneficial effects of viewing a smiling face have important implications not only for private meditation and professional counseling, but for congregational worship and small group ministries as well. Believers who see one another through a mental lens of grace and acceptance foster a spiritual community where the image of Christ is formed in the body (Crabb, 1999, pp. 174–175). Seeing smiling faces in worship services or small group fellowships can reinforce the images of God's smiling “face” attested in the scriptures.

The method of meditation proposed here is a form of ancient *lectio divina*—the slow, prayerful, meditative reading of scripture—as variously described, for example, by Casey, 1996; Magrassi, 1968; Pennington, 1998; and Painter, 2011. The biblical meditation proposed here (Davis, 2012, 2021, 2024) combines narrative and didactic texts with artistic images. Narratives activate both the left- and right- hemispheres of our brains, while scientific texts primarily activate the left (Siegel, 295). Narratives enable our brains to integrate in ideas, images, feelings, and behaviors in our conscious memory (Cozolino, 390). Whole-brain meditation engages multiple regions of the brain forms new neural pathways, and may mitigate negative implicit memories in the meditator's mental images of God.

Over the course of several weeks, the reader can meditate on the texts listed in Table 1: Numbers 6:23–24; Isaiah 62:4–5; 65:19; Jeremiah 32:40–41; Zephaniah 3:14–17; Matthew 3:16–17; Galatians 4:6–7; Luke 15:3–24; John 15:14–15. Each text in turn could be the focus of meditation for a period of 10 to 15 minutes a day for a period of 1 week.

Meditation on these texts could also take place in a group setting, during a retreat or workshop, under the guidance of trained counselor or spiritual director. Group members could be directed to privately meditate on one or more of these texts. Afterward, with the guidance of a facilitator, group members could share and discuss their experiences with the others.

Ruminating on negative experiences with clergy or church members, or thinking of God as a punishing figure, can contribute to poorer health and depression (Koenig et al., 1998). Mental models of God as an authoritarian or critical deity activate limbic areas of the brain that trigger feelings of fear and anger—priming the brain to fight (Newberg & Waldman, 2010, pp. 110–111). Seeing a picture of an angry or harsh face triggers circuits in the amygdala that produce feelings of anger in the viewer (Hariri et al., 2002).

On the other hand, meditating on any form of love, including the love of God—such as expressed in the biblical texts in Table 1—strengthens the neural circuits that enable us to feel compassion toward others (Lamm et al., 2007). Perceiving God as a benevolent God—a God with a compassionate and happy face, like the father of the prodigal son—activates the anterior cingulate and the brain’s prefrontal cortex, generating feelings of empathy toward those who are suffering or hurting (Newberg & Waldman, 2010, p. 111). Our images and mental models of God can inhibit or enhance our ability to feel securely attached to God and his love—the love that God has poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

Summary and Conclusions

This article attempted a new integration of attachment theory and the biblical doctrine of adoption, by proposing connections that (1) illuminated the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption, and that (2) provided theological resources for mitigating negative effects of insecure maternal–infant attachments. Overviews of the biblical doctrine of adoption and attachment theory were presented. Biblical bases for integrating of attachment theory and the doctrine of adoption were offered. “Whole-brain” meditation on biblical texts portraying God as firmly attached and affectionate toward believers was presented as a possible means of mitigating lingering effects of insecure maternal–infant attachments.

Further research is needed to (1) examine larger samples of biblical commentaries and systematic theologies in regard to the inclusion or neglect of the affective dimensions of the doctrine of adoption, and (2) to conduct carefully designed clinical trials to test the hypothesis that meditating on biblical texts portraying God as benevolent and firmly attached to believers may mitigate the effects of insecure or ambivalent attachments to God.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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