

Pela Gandong and *νιοθεσία* A Vernacular Reading of Paul

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Abstrak

Artikel ini adalah sebuah usaha untuk mendialogkan teks Alkitab dengan budaya lokal di Indonesia. Perhatian khusus diberikan kepada konsep *νιοθεσία* (keanakan) dalam surat Roma dan *pela gandong* dalam konteks budaya Maluku, Indonesia. Tulisan ini dimaksudkan untuk menunjukkan bahwa *νιοθεσία* sebagai hasil dari janji Allah kepada umat Yahudi yang kemudian diteruskan kepada kaum non-Yahudi secara konseptual paralel dengan tradisi *pela* di Maluku. Sekalipun ada perbedaan keagamaan di Maluku, *pela* telah menjadi mekanisme budaya untuk mengikat orang-orang dalam sebuah hubungan kasih horizontal. Konsep *νιοθεσία* dalam Paulus juga bekerja dengan cara yang sama sebagai mekanisme teologis untuk mengikat orang-orang bersama sekalipun mereka berbeda secara keagamaan.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Roma, Paulus, *pela*, Maluku, Indonesia, pascakolonial, hermeneutika.

Abstract

This article is an attempt to put biblical texts and Indonesian culture in dialogue. A special attention is given to the concepts of *νιοθεσία* (childhood) in the book of Romans and *pela gandong* in the cultural context of Moluccas, Indonesia. It aims to demonstrate that *νιοθεσία* as a result of the promise of God to the Jews, and further expanded to the Gentiles through the work of the Spirit is conceptually parallel to the Moluccan tradition of *pela*. In spite of people's religious differences in Moluccas, *pela* has become a cultural mechanism to tie people together in a horizontal loving relationship. Paul's *νιοθεσία* works in a similar way as a theological mechanism to tie people together in spite of their religious differences.

Keywords: Romans, Paul, *pela*, Moluccas, Indonesia, postcolonial, hermeneutics.

I

Biblical scholarship, since the European Age of Enlightenment, has been undeniably dominated by a historical-critical methodology, consisting of methods such as form criticism, redactional criticism, and source criticism, coupled with a strong emphasis on philological analysis in order to uncover the meaning in/behind the text.¹ This European

positivistic reading seeks primarily to free the readers from their biases so that they can be as objective and disinterested as possible in their interpretation. Hence, the term "exegesis" as a way of discovering and pulling out meaning

¹ For further discussion on the impact of Enlightenment on biblical interpretation, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship,*

Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), Ch. 5; Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006); John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), Ch. 5.

from the text is often seen as an opposition to “eisegesis”, in which a reader brings his/her own biases and questions to the text, which is deemed inappropriate and invalid. The historical-critical methodology, however, has faced significant challenges in the past three decades. Walter Brueggemann, for example, poses his opposition against the modern ideological dream of objectivity when he writes,

It is . . . increasingly clear that historical criticism is no objective, disinterested tool of interpretation, but it has become a way to trim texts down to the ideology of Enlightenment reason and autonomy and to explain away from the text all the hurts and hopes that do not conform to the ideology of objectivity.²

Although Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out that biblical scholarship “has remained in the captivity of empiricist-positivist science for too long,”³ she also demonstrates that there has been a fundamental shift in the last few decades. The shift is marked by a serious inquiry into the political and ethical aspects of biblical interpretation. Interpreters are not disinterested actors whose main task is to discover meaning, but “flesh-and-blood”⁴ readers who are thoroughly “grounded in and informed by their social location.”⁵

Postcolonial biblical criticism is one of the most significant marks of this shift in biblical scholarship.⁶ It is deeply rooted in the strug-

gles of former colonies of European empires (especially British, Spanish, and France) in dealing with the legacies of cultural and intellectual hegemony of the colonialism in recent centuries. It is by no means a monolithic methodological system, but rather an interdisciplinary and hybrid intellectual enterprise. It deals with the complexity of history, culture, social, economic, religious, and political struggle(s). When it comes to biblical scholarship, it seeks to bring to the surface the struggle of people in the peripheries against the oppression of imperial (e.g., Babylonian, Persian, Roman, etc.) dominations.⁷ However, it does not stop at analyzing the power struggle in the distant past; it also questions the domination of the contemporary European interpretation that has often been deemed as the normative standard of reading. Postcolonial criticism is an attempt to subvert any form of hegemony and supremacy that has historically silenced the voices of the subaltern.

In this context of the postcolonial insistence for decolonizing a western reading of the Bible, R. S. Sugirtharajah, a Sri Lankan born biblical scholar, proposes the so-called “vernacular hermeneutics”⁸ through which “biblical scholars have turned their attention

² Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 64–65.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 86.

⁴ Fernando F. Segovia, “Towards a Hermeneutics of Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement,” in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* vol. 1, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 57ff.

⁵ Sze-kar Wan, “Does Diaspora Identity Imply Some Sort of Universality?,” in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 112.

⁶ Postcolonial studies began to gain serious attention among biblical scholars especially since the founding of the “New Testament Studies and Postcolonial Studies” group in

the Society of Biblical Literature in 2000 pioneered by Stephen D. Moore of Drew University and Fernando F. Segovia of Vanderbilt University. See Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Beginnings, Trajectories, Intersections,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Stephen D. Moore (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2007), 1–22.

⁷ For example, Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 57ff; Jon L. Berquist, “Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 78–95; Neil Elliott, “The Apostle Paul and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 97–116; Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter, *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175. Emphasis is his.

to the indigenization of biblical interpretation.”⁹ He argues:

Central to the task is recovery, reoccupation, and reinscription of one's culture which has been degraded and effaced from the colonial narratives and from mainstream biblical scholarship. Vernacular hermeneutics tries to erase the painful memory of this degradation and effacement, and to make a fresh start by returning to one's root . . . it is an attempt to go “home”.¹⁰

It is, in other words, an attempt to bring the voice of colonized readers of the Bible to a larger biblical scholarship. One of the ways¹¹ to embark on the journey of vernacular interpretation is through “conceptual correspondence.”¹² This model of interpretation, according to Sugirtharajah,

seeks textual and conceptual parallels between biblical texts and the textual or conceptual traditions in one's own culture. Such an attempt, unlike historical criticism, looks beyond the Judaic or Greco-Roman contexts of the biblical narratives and seeks corresponding conceptual analogies in the reader's own textual tradition.¹³

In light of this proposed methodology, this article could be viewed as an effort to put biblical text and my Indonesian culture in conversation. What I am attempting to show is that Paul's concept of υιοθεσία as a result of the promise of God, and further expanded to the Gentiles through the work of the Spirit, at the conceptual level, is parallel to the Moluccan tradition of *pela*. While *pela gandong*

is a Moluccan cultural mechanism to tie people together in a loving relationship, υιοθεσία functions in a similar way as a Pauline theological mechanism to tie people together. The promise of God through the work of the Spirit leads to an inclusive relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles. *Nunusaku* that leads to *pela gandong* also produces the inclusivity of the social relationship among the Moluccans.

II

A brief description of the *pela gandong* tradition is imperative in order to put into perspective the social location from which I read Paul. One of the most important cultural characteristics of Moluccan people is the long-standing tradition of the so-called *Pela*. The etymology of this word is unknown because it is only used in the context of the Moluccan cultural tradition, and never appears in other contexts elsewhere in Indonesia.¹⁴ The maintenance of *pela* takes place mainly through oral tradition. *Pela* is “a system of relationships tying together two or more villages, often apart and frequently on different islands.”¹⁵ This “inter-village alliance system”¹⁶ has been “keystone”¹⁷ of Moluccan society that, culturally and socially, has brought in-

¹⁴ Anthropologist Bartels tried in his 1977 dissertation to draw the etymological root the word *pela* to three different etymological possibilities: 1) *pela* as friend, 2) *pela* as tattoo, and 3) *pela* as off limit. In spite of his effort, it seems clear from his explanation that it is quite difficult to develop a solid connection between these three things to brotherhood/sisterhood. For further discussion see Dieter Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1977), 56ff.

¹⁵ Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain,” 28–29. Sylvia Huwae writes, “The *pela* alliance is an important social institution in Central Maluku . . . The alliance is based on rules, customs, and prohibitions that must be observed by the members. The stricter the rules, the stronger the *pela*. In popular language, the *pela* rules and customs are called *adat pela*.” See Sylvia Huwae, “Divided Opinions about Adat Pela: A Study of Pela Tamilou, Siri-Sori, Hutumuri,” *Cakalele* 6 (1995): 77.

¹⁶ Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain,” 28.

¹⁷ Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain,” 28.

⁹ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, 177. Jeremy Punt also points out that “Postcolonial criticism is aligned with ideological criticism . . . in its concern for the importance of social location in biblical interpretation.” See Jeremy Punt, *Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: Reframing Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 75.

¹⁰ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, 177.

¹¹ Sugirtharajah suggests three different modes of interpretation: 1) Conceptual correspondences, 2) narrative enrichments, and 3) performantial parallels. See Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, 182ff.

¹² Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, 182.

¹³ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters*, 182.

tegration to the complex network of relations and interactions among the Moluccans, especially between Christians and Muslims. To borrow the words of Izak Lattu, *pela* is “a cultural mechanism to bring people together regardless their religious background.”¹⁸ *Pela* transcends Moluccan religious particularity.

There are three different types of *pela*.¹⁹ The first type is *pela karas*, which refers to a pact made between warring villages to cease their bloody conflict. Based on this pact, they see each other as brothers and sisters. The second type is *pela tempat siri* (betel box), which is a covenant made by two or more villages. This is a peace agreement that they will cease the conflict and live in peace. The third type, which is the most important one, is *pela gandong*. The word *gandong* in the Moluccan language literally means “mother’s womb.” Thus, these people who have *pela* relationship believe that they come from the same line of ancestors.²⁰ This genealogical connection of *pela gandong* can be traced back as far as *nunusaku*, a sacred mountain in the island of Seram.²¹ The most common narrative is that two or three brothers decided to leave *nunusaku*, and they ended up staying in two or more different places. The message about *nunusaku* is echoed often in their folk songs, stories, etc.

¹⁸ Izak Lattu, “Culture and Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Moluccas, Indonesia,” *Interreligious Insight: Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* 10, no. 1 (July 2012): 49.

¹⁹ Lattu categorizes these three in two different categories: genealogical and un-genealogical. See Lattu, “Culture and Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Moluccas, Indonesia,” 46ff.

²⁰ Muhammad Umar Kelibia, “Tinjauan Hukum Islam Terhadap Larangan Perkawinan Karena Asa Pela Gandong (Studi Kasus Antara Negeri Ihamahu dan Amahai Di Maluku Tengah)” (B.A. Thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2009).

²¹ See Jozef M. N. Hehanussa, “Understanding Relationships between Moluccans,” in *Images of Enmity and Hope: Texts, Beliefs, Practices*, ed. Lucien van Liere and Klaas Spronk (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), 85. Bartels calls it “a metaphor” for common ethnic origin. Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas,” 171.

Occasionally, the villages that have a *pela gandong* relationship will conduct a series of weeklong ritual, called *panas pela* (warming up *pela*). In this ritual performance, traditional songs are sung, local musical instruments are played, people dance, and they wrap people from both villages with long linen, and then they exchange and mix the bloods from the members of both villages as a sign of a renewed vow that they are brothers/sisters from the same womb. Bartels writes concerning the ritual of blood exchange at the peak of *panas pela* celebration:

Through the exchange and mixing blood at the conclusion of a *pela*, two or more groups became brothers and had from then on to treat each other exactly the same way as real brothers. *Pela* partners mutually guarantee one another’s safety, coming to help each other on short notice just like brothers, with the added advantage that the ties are not restricted to immediate family or clan but include everyone in the allied villages.²²

Pela, in short, plays a central role in uniting Moluccan people who come from different socio-cultural, economic, and religious backgrounds. At the heart of *pela gandong* is the belief that human beings are not independent. They are part of one another. This interrelatedness of human beings extends beyond one’s particularity. It

not only ties Christians and Moslems together economically through sets of reciprocal relationships, but that the alliance system is also the ritual center and vehicle of Ambonese ethnic religion which transcends both Islam and Christianity and operates as the basis of a common Ambonese identity.²³

This value indeed transcends their socio-economic and religious particularity.

Another important note about Moluccan context is worth noting. *Pela* as long-maintained cultural tradition in Moluccas began to gain more attention nowadays because from January 1999 until 2002, Ambon, the capital city of the Moluccan

²² Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain,” 37.

²³ Bartels, “Guarding the Invisible Mountain,” 31.

province, was torn apart by a horrifying religious conflict between Muslims and Christians.²⁴ “It is very hard to give exact figures on the number of casualties caused by the conflict, yet it is generally estimated that the 1999-2002 Christian-Muslim conflict caused the death of some 5,000 to 10,000 people in both of Mollucan’s provinces with a particularly large number of these on the island and city of Ambon.”²⁵ Universities were burnt down including Pattimura State University and UKIM.

The government, Indonesian Military (TNI), National Police (POLRI), and upholders of the Law are not about to function properly and this has resulted in the escalation of the riots.²⁶

Similarly, Gerry van Klinken has also pointed out:

The legacy was a deeply segregated society, but not one in which either side ‘controlled’ more territory than could be expected, based on the religious distribution of the population. Ambon’s economy lay in ruins. Displaced persons had no visible prospect of returning to their homes if they belonged to a local minority religion.²⁷

This conflict was in a close proximity to me, personally, because my parents lived right

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the religious riot in Indonesia, especially in Ambon, see Birgit Bräuchler, “Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (December 2004): 267–85.; Patricia Spyer, “Blind Faith: Painting Christianity in Postconflict Ambon.,” *Social Text* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 11–37; John Thayer Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

²⁵ Jeroen Adam et al., “In the Name of the Father? Christian Militantism in Tripura, Northern Uganda, and Ambon,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 11 (2007): 975.

²⁶ H. L. Sapulete, “Some Thoughts on the Riots in the Moluccas,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (April 2002): 18.

²⁷ Gerry van Klinken, “The Maluku Wars: ‘Communal Contenders’ in a Failing State,” in *Violent Conflicts in Indonesia*, ed. Charles A. Coppel, Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series (London: Routledge, 2006), 132. Cf. Sherly Turnip and Edvard Hauff, “Household Roles, Poverty and Psychological Distress in Internally Displaced Persons Affected by Violent Conflicts in Indonesia,” *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 42, no. 12 (December 2007): 997–1004.

in the midst of this riot. As a matter of fact, some of my friends died during the conflict. Many of my neighbors and relatives lost their homes and stayed for years in refugee camps.

In the aftermath of the conflict, *pela gandong* became one of the cultural heritages that provide a reason to the Moluccan people to come to reconciliation. It reminds them that they do not live only for the cause of their own religious particularity, but they also exist in a larger *pela gandong* relationship that transcends their religious interests and belief system. It is, therefore, more urgent to put this cultural value into action as a foundation for rebuilding social peace and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians. *Pela* is “a cultural mechanism to support reconciliation.”²⁸ With this in mind, let us examine Pauline usage of υιοθεσία.

III

The uniquely Pauline term υιοθεσία, sonship, appears three times in the book of Romans, two other times in Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5. It does not appear in either LXX or other Hellenistic Christian or Jewish literature. The feminine noun υιοθεσία is likely a compound word of υιός (son) and θέσις (position, situation).²⁹ The exact meaning of this word is debated among New Testament scholars. Is it referring to the status/position of a son, or is it a process of positioning to be a son (adoption)? Some, like Eldon

²⁸ Lattu, “Culture and Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Moluccas, Indonesia,” 46.

²⁹ With regards to the male biased language of υιοθεσία, Sheila McGinn’s critique is worth noting that “Paul use of υιοθεσία marginalizes woman’s experience. Since it seems never to have been used to indicate a woman’s adoption to insure inheritance rights, the term implies that women must ‘became male’ before they can become heirs to God and joint heirs with Christ.” Sheila McGinn, “Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18-23: Toward a Theology of Creation,” in *Gender, Tradition, and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders*, eds. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte, *Romans Through History and Cultures* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2005), 30.

Epp,³⁰ James Scott,³¹ and Douglas Moo,³² maintain that the idea of “adoption” is behind this noun. Others, like Brendan Byrne,³³ think that this noun is not about the act of adoption, but the status or position of sonship.

The first appearance of this term in Romans is in 8:15.³⁴ This statement is made in the context of the discussion on the role of the Spirit of God in the midst of the tension between living in flesh and in spirit. Paul then declares that “. . . you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (v. 9). If one belongs to the Spirit of Christ, one will be enabled to call God “father.” The establishment of the familial (father-children) relationship between people who are in Christ and God is accomplished through the work of the Spirit. One of the most important roles of the Spirit of God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים) is the spirit of creation. The Spirit was present in the process of creation of the universe. Job, echoing the narrative of creation, confesses: “. . . my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3). The Spirit of God is in every human being as the principle of life. This is likely the idea behind the Pauline statement.

Romans 8:23 clarifies that the concept of *υιοθεσία* goes beyond every particularity. Paul asserts that those who are in Christ are in the

condition of groaning with the entire creation waiting for the *υιοθεσία*. This particular passage is difficult because if the Spirit has enabled believers to call God, “Abba Father,” why then do they have to wait for *υιοθεσία* again? Is the work of the spirit not enough?³⁵ Probably because of theological difficulty, some ancient scribes (P^{46vid} D F G 614 τ; Ambst) understandably decided to just omit this word, and thus it became simply: “We . . . groan while waiting for the redemption of our bodies.” In spite of its difficulty, one can see that *υιοθεσία* in 8:15 and 8:23 is discussed clearly in the context of “those who are in Christ” (see v. 1 – τοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). This sonship status, for Paul, is an eschatological hope that both human beings and the entire creation are eagerly awaiting (Rom. 8:23). At this point, I agree with Sheila McGinn that Romans 8:18-23

reveals an interdependence between nature and humanity in their shared status as creatures of God; it does not claim any superiority of humans over nature.

The sonship status is extended to the entire creation.

In Romans 9, Paul seems to struggle with the question that if the Spirit of God enables those who are in Christ to have a father-children relationship with God, how does it relate to the Jews?³⁶ “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart,” he writes in 9:2. However, Paul writes further with a strong conviction that,

They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship (*υιοθεσία*), the glory, the covenants, the

³⁰ Eldon Jay Epp, “Jewish-Gentile Continuity in Paul: Torah and/or Faith? (Romans 9:1-5),” *The Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1/3 (January 1, 1986): 80-90.

³¹ James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of υιοθεσία in the Pauline Corpus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 48 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

³² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 501.

³³ Brendan Byrne, *Sons of God, Seed of Abraham: A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul against the Jewish Background* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979), 79-82.

³⁴ “οὐ γὰρ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα δουλείας πάλιν εἰς φόβον ἀλλὰ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας ἐν ᾧ κράζομεν ἀββα ὁ πατήρ” (“for we did not receive the spirit of slavery again into fear, but we received the spirit of sonship by which we cry out ‘Abba Father’”).

³⁵ Douglas Moo offers an explanation to this problem through the concept of “already-not yet.” We are now adopted into God’s family, but it is an incomplete process. The completion of the adoption, according to Moo, will take place in the eschatological age. “The final element in our adoption is ‘the redemption of our bodies.’” See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 521.

³⁶ C. H. Dodd argues that Romans 9-11 could be an insertion because we can still read the book of Romans without these chapters. See C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York, NY: Harper, 1932), 149ff.

giving of the law, the worship, and the promises (9:3-4).

Paul uses the exact same word υιοθεσία here (cf. 8:15, 23). The expression “to them belong . . . (ᾧν)” indicates that Paul recognizes the fact that regardless of their disbelief in Christ, the status of sonship still belongs to them. In other words, the υιοθεσία transcends their religio-cultural particularity.³⁷

Paul then clarifies that their status of sonship is not based on the physical descent or ethnic affiliation, but on the promise of God (9:9). The relationship between the promise of God and υιοθεσία is further explained in 9:6-18. After stating that the Jews have the status of sonship, Paul writes that through the Jews, Christ comes to the earth in physical form (ἐξ ᾧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα). In doing so, he is attempting to make a connection between Christ himself, those who are in Christ (8:1), and the Jewish people.

However, in Romans 9:6-8, Paul makes an intriguing, yet confusing, move by saying that being in Israel does not guarantee that one is Israelite (οὐ γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ, οὗτοι Ἰσραήλ; lit. “not all from Israel are Israelites”)

³⁷ The idea of the sonship of Israel/Jewish people clearly poses a theological problem to Christian interpreters, especially those who are concerned with the soteriological and Christological question. If Jesus is the only savior, and the way to be saved is through believing in Jesus, then why is υιοθεσία used to describe both communities? Douglas Moo, for example, makes an intriguing gymnastic interpretative move in order to solve this theological problem. He argues, “Clearly . . . Israel’s “adoption” here *must mean something different than the adoption of Christians* in chap. 8” (emphasis is mine). Moo asserts further that Christians’ “adoption” involves receiving “all the rights and privileges that are included within new covenant blessings” whereas Israel’s sonship “conveys to that nation all the rights and privileges included within the Old Covenant.” He continues that:

Nevertheless, Paul’s choice of the term “adoption” is a deliberate attempt (after 8:15, 23) to highlight the continuing regard that God has for Israel, despite her widespread unbelief. It may therefore hint at the new and ultimate work of God among the people Israel that Paul predicts in 11:25-28.

Whether this is a right reading of Paul or not, it clearly reflects Moo’s Reformed theological point of view. See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 562ff.

and not all children of Abraham are the seed of Abraham. Some commentators argue that here Paul makes a distinction between the Israelites who believe in Christ and those who do not, and thus leads to a supersessionist theology that the only real people of God is the Church. Colin G. Kruse, for example, maintains that “only believing Israel are chosen for salvation; only believing Israelites are Abraham’s true children, not ethnic Israel as a whole.”³⁸ So, according to this interpretation, only Christians, who consist of Gentiles and Jews, are the true children of God. However, the tone of Paul’s argument here is not about the human act of believing in Christ. The context is about the Jewish status as the children of God.³⁹ The point of this statement is clarified further in Rom. 9:8 by the expression τοῦτ’ ἔστιν (that is). Some English versions have correctly translated it: “This means that . . .” Thus, the status of the children of God does not depend on the physical connection, but the promise of God.⁴⁰ It is not based on ethnic affiliation, which can be traced through a common ancestor and common religious conviction. God’s grace transcends biological and religious particularity. Paul illustrates his point through the stories of Isaac, Jacob, Pharaoh and the clay pots (9:10-23). I agree with E. Elizabeth Johnson’s assertion that these illustrations “are designed to make the same point that God elects on the basis of and for the sake of God’s own mercy, and glory, rather than because of human identity or behavior.”⁴¹ Therefore, it is not their

³⁸ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 376.

³⁹ See Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 576.

⁴⁰ Romans 9:8 reads “οὐ τὰ τέκνα τῆς σαρκὸς ταῦτα τέκνα τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας λογίζεται εἰς σπέρμα” (“it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise is counted as ‘seed’”).

⁴¹ Elizabeth E. Johnson, “Romans 9-11: The Faithfulness and Impartiality of God,” in *Pauline Theology Volume III*:

biological connection with Abraham or any good behavior that gives them the right to be the children of God. It does not make any sense to say that Paul is trying to deny the sonship of the Jews and replace it with the church (i.e. believing Jews and Gentiles). It is not Paul's attempt to exclude the Jews at all, and create an exclusively elite community called Christianity. What is at stake in this text is that the Jewish possession of *υιοθεσία*, just as it is for Christians, is not by virtue of their physical or biological connection, but by the grace of God.

IV

As I have stated above, I will be attempting to read the Pauline concept of *υιοθεσία* not only as a Christian, but also as an Indonesian. For a person who lives in the aftermath of the horrifying religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, the Christological and soteriological questions are not pressing issues. Peace and reconciliation among religious groups are more significant and urgent. If Christians and the Jewish people are both the children of God, what is the greater implication to the Jewish-Christian relationship? Or, in my context, what is the implication to the Christian engagement with Muslims? This is the question which concerns me when I read Paul.

Pela gandong has provided people in Moluccas with a cultural lens of interpretation through the "conceptual correspondence" that Sugirtharajah suggests above. It is parallel to the Pauline concept of *υιοθεσία* in three ways. First, the mountain of *nunusaku* from which all the *pela gandong* alliances originated functions similarly with the idea of the promise and Spirit of God in Pauline theology. Just as the promise of God through the work of the Holy Spirit gives rise to both Christian and Jewish *υιοθεσία*, it is *nunusaku* in Moluccas that produces all the *pela gandong* relationships.

Second, *pela gandong* and *υιοθεσία* are about the interconnectedness of human beings. Paul works in the context of Christians and Jews and they are connected through the work of God in giving them *υιοθεσία*. *Pela gandong* is a tradition that deeply holds to the idea of the interrelatedness of villages in Moluccas. At the heart of *pela gandong* lies the idea that people are connected regardless of their religious affiliation. Thus, there is no such thing as a complete personal independence. Because one is not completely independent, one's well-being also depends on others and vice versa. Just as *pela gandong* becomes a cultural mechanism to tie people together, *υιοθεσία* is a Pauline theological mechanism that ties people together.

Furthermore, *υιοθεσία* is a work of God's grace that transcends human socio-religious particularity; *pela gandong* also transcends people's socio-religious particularity. In the tradition of *pela gandong* the religious particularity is still maintained. Christians can still be Christians and Muslims can still be Muslims. *Pela gandong* will not violate their religious identities. People are part of one another in spite of their religious differences. Paul also aims to build a theological bridge between those who are in Christ and those who do not put Christ at the center of their religious conviction, namely the Jews. This bridge, which is the work of God's grace, transcends their socio-religious particularity.

Reading *υιοθεσία* through the lens of its conceptual parallel with *pela gandong* means that Christian engagement with people from other religions must take place in the framework of human interrelatedness. As a result, thus, any form of islamophobia and xenophobia should be thrown out the window. Regardless of their religious particularity, Christians and Muslims are not merely fellow citizens of a nation, but fellow human beings created by God. In sum, when Paul's *υιοθεσία* is read from the point of view

Romans, eds. David M. Hay and Elizabeth E. Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 223–24.

of an Indonesian/Moluccan Christian, it rings the bell of *pela gandong*.

Conclusion

C. S. Song once says:

The life of Asian peoples is full of political stories. The task of political theology is to discover them, to penetrate into the woes and joys, despairs and hopes behind those stories, and to encounter and experience the human soul possessed and cherished by God.⁴²

Reflecting on this remark from Song, my story, as a man who grew up in Moluccas, is full of woe and joy, despair and hope. In light of the deep pain and sorrow caused by religious violence, I hope that by digging into both my Moluccan culture and my Christian tradition, I can find another reason to love my neighbors.

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⁴² Choan-Seng Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 92.

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