

Chapter Five

WAS HE THE SON?

All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

[Romans 8:14]

Jesus was the son. But whose son? He has been called the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Son of Mary, and the Son of David. Whose son was he? And what does that mean for us?

SON OF MAN

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus almost always calls himself the ‘Son of Man.’ It is the most frequently used title for him. In all cases but one it is used by Jesus to describe himself. Since he was born of a virgin, without any contribution from a man, this name which he used for himself, stresses his human nature. It stresses the fact that he was of human descent, not a descendant of God. If this were not true, the term ‘Son of Woman’ would have been much more appropriate.

Vincent Taylor points out that in Jewish scripture and tradition the term ‘son of man’ was used as a synonym for ‘man’ (*THE NAMES OF JESUS*, St. Martin’s Press, 1953, pp. 325, 330). The Psalms illustrate this:

What is man, that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him?

[Psalm 8:5]

May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

[Psalm 80:18]

But what about all the references Jesus makes to God as his ‘Father’? Do they not indicate that he was God’s son? Yes, but not in the way most Christians understand. Remember, since God gave us life, we are all His children in that sense. This fact is clearly stated in the Old Testament.

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO GOD’S ‘FATHERHOOD’

About five centuries before Jesus was born, the writer of the Old Testament book of Malachi spoke of God's 'Fatherhood' to mankind:

Have we not all the one Father? Has not the one God created us? Why then do we break faith with each other, violating the covenant of our fathers?

[Malachi 2:10]

Jesus' reference to God as his father was part of the idiom of his day, as it had been for those who came before him. An earlier Jesus wrote the Old Testament book of Sirach. The book of Sirach is not accepted by Protestants, but the Catholic Church has always accepted it as an inspired part of the canon. This earlier Jesus, son of Eleazar, also addressed God as 'Father':

Who will set a guard over my mouth, and upon my lips an effective seal, That I may not fail through them, that my tongue may not destroy me? Lord, Father and Master of my life, permit me not to fall by them!

[Sirach 22:27-23:1]

I called out: O Lord, you are my father, you are my champion and my savior....

[Sirach 51:10]

This practice of calling God 'Father' is also shown by the way that Jesus taught his disciples to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name...

[Matthew 6:9]

[Luke 11:2]

JESUS NOT THE ONLY ONE CALLED 'SON'

This allegorical expression is used often in the Bible. Many are called sons of God—individuals as well as groups of people, like the Children of Israel:

“So you shall say to the Pharaoh: Thus says the Lord: Israel is my son, my first born. Hence I tell you: Let my son go, that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, I warn you, I will kill your son, your first-born.”

[Exodus 4:22-23]

These verses demonstrate for us what being God's son means. Obviously God was not saying that the Children of Israel were literally his first born son. Rather, the phrase indicates that God loved the nation of Israel as if they were a first born son.

The Psalms refer to the expected Messiah as the son of God. They also call the angels the sons of God:

“He shall say of me, ‘You are my father, my God, the rock, my savior.’ And I will make him the first-born, highest of the kings of the earth.”

[Psalm 89:27-28]

For who in the skies can rank with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the sons of God?

[Psalm 89:7]

So far we have seen verses which refer to the Children of Israel, the expected Messiah and the angels as God’s sons. This in itself makes it clear that sonship in the Bible has a different meaning from what we normally understand.

All of the examples we have looked at so far come from the Old Testament. What about in the New Testament? In the New Testament, Adam is called God’s son.

Luke’s genealogy of Jesus ends with Adam, whom Luke says is the “*son of God*.”

When Jesus began his work he was about thirty years of age, being-so it was supposed-the son of Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi ...son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

[Luke 3:23-38]

Clearly, if Adam was the son of God, then Jesus could not have been His only son.

Luke was Paul’s companion, so it is not surprising that Paul also makes the point that Jesus was not God’s only son:

All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, “Abba!” (that is, “Father”). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God. But if we are children, we are heirs as well: heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him. I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us. Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but by him who once subjected it; yet not without hope, because the world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

[Romans 8:14-21]

Jesus was not the only son of God. The phrase itself means something other than what we understand in ordinary usage. What does it mean?

MEANING OF SONSHIP

Jesus and his followers obviously had a very different concept of what the title ‘Son of God’ meant from the understanding which the Greeks had. In *THE NAMES OF JESUS* (Ibid, p. 54), Taylor gives us a good idea of what those opposing concepts were:

The significance of the phrase in Jewish thought is reasonably clear; it does not describe a divine being, but characterizes groups of individuals who stand in a particularly close religious relationship with God...

Strange to Jewish thought, with its strong emphasis on monotheism, the idea of ‘divine men’...or ‘sons of god’...was congenial to the Greek mind. It is therefore possible to argue that, while primitive Christianity confessed Jesus as ‘the son of God’ the content of the idea was determined by Hellenistic usage.

Here Taylor, himself a Christian, gives us some very important information. It was the influence of Greek and Roman thought which distorted the original scriptural meaning of sonship to God. The Old Testament makes it clear that all of God’s true adherents are sons of God. Those who love God, and whom He loves in return, are His children. For example, we see that in the Book of Job the angels are referred to as the sons of God:

One day, when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came among them.

[Job 1:6]

Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its size; do you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid the cornerstone, While the morning stars sang in chorus and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

[Job 38:4-7]

We have already seen that in Exodus the nation of Israel is called God’s son. This idea is repeated in the Book of Hosea where the children of Israel are called “*children of God*”:

The number of the Israelites shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor counted. Whereas they were called, “Lo-ammi (not my people),” They shall be called, “Children of the living God.”

[Hosea 2:1]

In the New Testament, Jesus often indicated that the righteous are children of God. The Lord’s prayer shows this. So does the fact that Jesus referred to God as “*my father and your father*”:

Jesus then said, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Rather, go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.’ ”

[John 20:17]

Those who followed Jesus are called “*sons of God*” in the King James version and “*children of God*” in THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE:

Any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God. These are they who believe in his name—who were begotten not by blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by man’s willing it, but by God.

[John 1:12-13]

In fact, Jesus taught that there is only one father for us all, God:

“Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven.”

[Matthew 23:9]

This again indicates that we should devote ourselves wholeheartedly to God alone—with “all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls and all our strength.” No human relationship can stand in the way of that devotion.

We learn from Jesus’ teachings that God is called ‘*Father*,’ because He is the Creator, the Sustainer and the Provider for all of us:

It is not for you to be in search of what you are to eat or drink. Stop worrying. The unbelievers of this world are always running after these things. Your Father knows that you need such things. Seek out instead his kingship over you, and the rest will follow in turn. Do not live in fear, little flock. It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.

[Luke 12:29-32]

If you devote yourself to God, He will make all things work for your good, as only a divine Father can:

We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his decree. Those whom he foreknew he predestined to share the image of his son that the son might be the first-born of many brothers.

[Romans 8:28-29]

CHILDREN BY CHOICE

Paul's epistle to the Philippians clearly shows that we are children of God as a result of our free choice. We choose to be children of God by doing His will:

In everything you do, act without grumbling or arguing; prove yourselves innocent and straightforward, children of God beyond reproach in the midst of a twisted and depraved generation- among whom you shine like the stars of the sky.

[Philippians 2:14-15]

Jesus taught that we become children of God by being born spiritually. Such spiritual birth, or being "begotten from above," is attained by keeping God's commandments. Such spiritual birth is attainable by anyone:

A certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, came to him at night. "Rabbi," he said, "we know you are a teacher come from God, for no man can perform signs and wonders such as you perform unless God is with him." Jesus gave him this answer: "I solemnly assure you, no one can see the reign of God unless he is begotten from above." "How can a man be born again once he is old?" retorted Nicodemus. "Can he return to his mother's womb and be born over again?" Jesus replied, "I solemnly assure you, no one can enter into God's kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit. Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit. Do not be surprised that I tell you you must all be begotten from above."

[John 3:1-7]

VERSES INDICATING EXCLUSIVE SONSHIP

What about those Biblical references to Jesus as the 'only' son of God, or even 'the only begotten son'?

The most prominent verse concerning Jesus' sonship to God, and the most frequently quoted, is John 3:16:

Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.

[John 3:16]

There are only three other verses, significantly also in the Gospel of John, that refer to Jesus as the only son. They are John 1:14 and 18, and John 3:18:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory: the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love.

[John 1:14]

No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, ever at the Father's side, who has revealed him.

[John 1:18]

Whoever believes in him avoids condemnation, but whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of God's only Son.

[John 3:18]

It is extremely important to realize that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke **never** state that Jesus was God's only son. This is even more significant when we realize that the Gospel of John was the last Gospel written.

According to the translators of *THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE*, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were written shortly after the year 70 A.D., and the Gospel of Luke is dated to "approximately 75 A.D." The Gospel of John was the last, written between 90 and 100 A.D., at a time when we know the doctrine of Jesus' divinity was already well established. This fact is demonstrated by Bishop Ignatius' quote at the beginning of Chapter Four.

GOSPEL OF JOHN

In Chapter Two we discussed who actually wrote the Gospel of John. Because of its importance in the present discussion, let me recap: In their *Introduction to the Books of the New Testament* the translators of *THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* present the almost universally accepted theory that the Gospel of John was written by someone other than John, probably a disciple, and then edited later by another disciple (*Ibid.*, p. xxxvii).

References to inconsistencies within the Gospel of John are made by the same translators:

However, more and more students of this gospel are coming to believe that ... inconsistencies were probably produced by subsequent editing in which homogeneous materials were added to a shorter original. Other difficulties for the theory of eyewitness authorship are presented by the gospel's highly developed theology, and by certain elements of its literary style. For instance, some of the miracles of Jesus have been worked into highly dramatic scenes (ch 9); there has been a careful attempt to have the miracles followed by discourses which explain them (chs 5 and 6); the sayings of Jesus have been woven into long discourses of a quasi-poetic form resembling the speeches of personified Wisdom in the Old Testament.

(*THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE*, p. xxxvii)

In other words, the Gospel of John was written not so much to present the historical facts about the life of Jesus Christ, but to present and explain already established dogma. Translators also note special problems in translating the Gospel of John:

The Gospel according to John comprises a special case. Absolute fidelity to his technique of reiterated phrasing would result in an assault on the English ear that would be almost

unendurable. Yet the softening of the vocal effect by substitution of other words and phrases would destroy the effectiveness of his poetry. Again, resort is had to compromise.

(THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, p. xxxvii)

In John 1:14 and 18 and John 3:16 and 18, the word 'only' directly contradicts the numerous assertions that all righteous people are sons of God, and the Biblical references to others, like Israel, as God's first-born son.

Paul himself did not believe Jesus to be God's begotten son. In Romans he explains that Jesus was "*descended from David according to the flesh*" and then "*made son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness...*" (Romans 1:3-4). The *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* has a footnote saying that the later phrase could also be translated as "*was declared*" or "*was proclaimed the powerful son of God.*"

Whether Jesus was made, declared or proclaimed the son, this is clearly a different kind of sonship, one we can all strive for.

Only two verses before the description of Jesus as God's only son in John 3:16, the gospel's author calls Jesus Son of Man.

In fact this whole section of verses needs to be examined together:

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all who believe may have eternal life in him. Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him avoids condemnation, but whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of God's only Son.

[John 3:14-18]

If these are the actual words of Jesus, as the translators would have us believe, why would he not say "*that the world might be saved through me*" and "*Whoever believes in me avoids condemnation*"?

The second of the three verses which refer to Jesus as the only son, John 1:18, also shows the human tendency to lean toward distortions which fit our preconceived understanding. The rendition shown of this verse is essentially the King James version because in the *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* they translate it:

"...It is God the only Son, ever at the Father's side, who has revealed him." However, the footnote for this verse reads:

Many commentators regard these verses as explanation rather than part of the pre-Prologue hymn. *God the only Son*: other MSS read "the Son, the only one" or "the only Son".

Given the fact that other manuscripts do not indicate that Jesus is God, the *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* translation of this verse is clearly incorrect. This error makes the

whole verse suspect, and indeed we see in the footnote that many scholars do not accept it as part of the pre-Prologue hymn. It may well have been a note in the margin which got incorporated into the text in the process of copying, as discussed in Chapter Two.

QURANIC VIEW

A large segment of the monotheistic world considers the idea of Jesus' exclusive 'begotten' sonship of God to be a gross blasphemy. After reflecting on the greatness of God as revealed recently by scientific facts, and discussed in a later chapter, one can understand this point of view. The Quran, for example, states that "*the mountains are about to crumble*" at the thought that the great and Almighty God has begotten a son:

They said, "God most gracious has begotten a son!" You have committed a gross blasphemy. The heavens are about to explode from such a blasphemy, the earth is about to tear asunder, and the mountains are about to crumble, because they claim that the Most High has begotten a son. Everyone in the heavens and the earth, before the Most High, is no more than a servant. He has numbered each and every one of them. Each and every one of them will come before Him on the Day of Resurrection as a single (helpless) individual. As for those who believe and lead a righteous life the Most High will shower them with love.

[Quran 19:88-96]

CONCLUSION

As God shows us in Matthew 23:9, John 20:17 and Romans 8:14, those who use their free will to abide by God's commandments continue to enjoy the privilege of sonship to God, while those who disregard the commandments are children of the devil. Only the most recent gospel, the Gospel of John, written after sufficient time for religious innovations to begin to form, states that Jesus was God's only son.

Note also that the alteration of the biblical concept of "Son of God" into the idea of a divine son, and then into the trinitarian doctrine "God the Son" is consistent with the human tendency to idolize that which is most important to us. This tendency may be very natural, but it hampers us from totally devoting ourselves to God the Father, and thus becoming children of God ourselves.

The heavens proclaim your wonders, O Lord, and your faithfulness, in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies can rank with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the sons of God?

[Psalm 89:6-7]