

## JESUS - 'God the Son' or 'The Son of God'?

No doubt many will be surprised, even shocked perhaps, that the heading of this article could even hint that the titles “God the Son” and “The Son of God” are not one and the same. For them it is not one *or* the other. Both designations are equivalent and therefore equally true. For most believers calling Jesus “the Son of God”, really means Jesus is “God the Son”. Is this so and does it really matter anyway?

Some years ago I had the very great privilege of meeting and spending some time with a Professor Colin Brown. Colin Brown was the distinguished Professor of Systematic theology at Fuller Seminary and was also the general editor of the prestigious *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Speaking about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, Dr Brown surprisingly admits,

“The crux of the matter is how we understand the term ‘Son of God’... The title Son of God is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed, to be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God’s Son.” (1).

It will come as a shock to many sincere believers to learn that many of their brightest and most ‘orthodox’ scholars align with this sentiment of Dr Colin Brown’s, that “Indeed, to be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God!”

One of the foremost Anglican scholars of this generation, Bishop N.T. Wright, cautions against reading our post Nicene

creeds back into the Biblical revelation of Jesus ...

“At a popular level ... the phrase ‘son of god’ is read as if the disciples, and indeed Caiaphas at the trial, understood it in the fully Nicene sense ... We must stress that in the first century the regular Jewish meaning of this title [‘son of god’] had nothing to do with an incipient trinitarianism; it referred to the king as *Israel’s representative*. Israel was the son of YHWH: the king who would come to take her destiny on himself would share this title.” (2)

We will shortly demonstrate the truth of Wright’s claim that in the Bible the description ‘the Son of God’ “had nothing to do with an incipient trinitarianism”, but rather “referred to the king as *Israel’s representative*.” In other words, the title is ***not*** a description of one who is God Himself! Ah la Dr Brown.

James D.G. Dunn has been a NT scholar in the vanguard of Christological studies. In his landmark book *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* Dunn writes that in our understanding of the identity of Jesus we must start with the title 'the Son of God', since such language was always prominent in early Christian talk of Jesus, and indeed was the central and decisive Christological title. He asks, "So what did the first Christians (and Jesus himself?) mean when they spoke of Jesus as God's Son, or Son of God, or Son of the Father?"

Dunn in company with Brown and Wright then advises us to shut out the voices of the early church Fathers, the Councils and the dogmaticians down the centuries in case they drown out, and indeed say something different to, the NT witness itself. (3)

Dunn goes on to write this amazing conclusion that,

“Perhaps the most striking of all is the surprising absence within the range of materials surveyed (he means both Biblical and intertestamental sources such as the Apochrypha and Dead Sea scrolls) of the idea of a son of God or divine individual who [literally] descends from heaven to earth to redeem men ...” (p. 18).

Karl-Josef Kuschel has produced a classic study on the question of whether the Son of God literally existed in heaven before his appearance on earth. His conclusion also is,

“The title ‘Son of God’ used for Jesus has its origin in the Israelite royal ideology”... [then he quotes the Tubingen OT scholar Herbert Haag with approval] saying, ‘In the Old Testament and early Judaism ‘son of God’ signifies creatureliness, election

and intimacy' and is not intended to signify divinity. (4)

Again, shades of Dr Colin Brown, Wright, and Dunn where to be a Son of God one has to be a being who is *not* God!

Another expresses his concerns this way,

“How can Jesus be the Son of God and also be called ‘God’ at the same time? I was troubled by the word Son. It suggests he was born and had a beginning. Since God is eternal and does not have a beginning or end, how could Jesus be God?”(5)

This sample of serious scholarship is not a roster of light-weights and could be multiplied many times over. They are not theological cowboys, lone rangers or quacks. They are from the fold of evangelical and respected “orthodoxy”. To ignore such scholarly advice is to rush

down a road to possible deception in our understanding of Jesus, the Son of God.

## **Jewish Background to ‘Son of God’.**

The *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* outlines the Jewish background for the term, ‘Son of God’.

Within Jewish culture the term was applied to Israel itself (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1); to leading individuals in the nation (Deut. 14:1; Is. 1:2; 43:6; Jer. 3:22; 31:9); to angels and other heavenly beings (Gen. 6: 2-4; Deut. 32:8; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6); to the king (2 Sam. 7:14; I Chron. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6); and to the Messiah (the latter from intertestamental literature) ...

“It did not, however, denote a divine figure descending from heaven as the bearer of salvation, except insofar as angels were messengers or agents of God ... On the contrary, when the status “son of God” was conferred on someone it was a recognition of a particular achievement. We therefore need to

allow the literature itself to define the nature and scope of the term's meaning for early Christians.” (6)

What? Do our current pastors and ministers not read their own scholars and consider? They are fortunate their congregations sit there without investigating this large body of evidence to see if these things are so. Evidently the good example of those “noble-minded” Bereans who daily “examined” what Paul was saying to see if he was preaching to them in accordance with the Scriptures, means little to modern believers (Acts 17:11). Here is serious cause for reflection.

### **Non-Bible Descriptions.**

If to be called ‘Son of God’ means one is *not* God, we are immediately in conflict with official trinitarianism. Trinitarianism stands or falls on whether Jesus is ‘God the Son’, in eternal union with God the Father, and ‘God the Spirit’. The Nicene

doctrine of “the eternal generation” of the Son is its cornerstone.

So, how does trinitarianism circumnavigate its way around the solid rock that in the Bible, Jesus is only spoken of as being ‘the Son of God’, and not once called ‘God the Son’? Easy really. Just invent new non-Bible descriptions and expressions! It’s the old smoke-and-mirrors trick. Just say Jesus is the “eternally begotten Son” and put it in a creed to recite. Just say Jesus is “God the Son” often enough and folk will swallow it.

The persistent practice of needing to invent non-Bible phrases to justify a belief ought to sound alarm bells in any honest Bible reader’s mind. After all, God has chosen to speak to us in a book of inspired words. Our responsibility is to accept His authority and listen intelligently. We are not at liberty to pick and choose or change His revelation, which Jesus said will not pass away until its all been fulfilled.

The stubborn fact is, in the Bible there is no such person as an “eternally begotten Son”. In the Bible the Son of God was begotten in time, not in eternity, as I will now prove. Sufficient for the time being to say, if there is no such person as the “eternally begotten Son” the doctrine of the Trinity is a dead duck in the water!

### **The Son of God Begotten “Today”.**

In the Bible the ‘Son of God’ does not have a beginning way back in a timeless eternity. The Son is “begotten” in time, at a certain point in history, which is called “today”. In one Messianic Psalm God prophetically decrees to his [still future!] Son,

“You are My Son; Today I have begotten you” (Ps. 2:7).

My dictionary defines the word “beget” as, 1. To procreate or generate (used chiefly of the male parent). 2. To cause, produce as an effect. (7) Thus, to be begotten is to

have an origin, a beginning, to be brought into being, to be generated, to come into existence. This is the Bible definition also, as I will show. In both the English language and in Bible definition, to “beget” denotes a before and after, a beginning point.

Psalm 2 says the Son is begotten “today”, and a day is not a timeless eternity!

“Today” is a moment in time, a point in history. What non-sense then to speak of someone who is eternally coming into being! What quackery to describe someone as being “eternally generated”, that is, having a beginning-less beginning! This is to invent our own private meanings to words so as to justify a philosophical speculation.

When the Church declares Jesus to be the “eternally generated Son” it produces the oxymoron of a continual existence that never comes into existence! Let’s see what baloney this is.

## **Gabriel Explains Who the Son of God is.**

Listen to how Gabriel describes the begetting of the Son of God,

“And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy thing (child) begotten shall be called the Son of God’” (Lk. 1:35 NASB margin and literal Greek translation.)

We do well to align our confession of who the Son of God is with that of Gabriel’s. After all, Gabriel “was sent from God” (Lk. 1: 26) and declared he “stands in the Presence of God” (Lk. 1:19). Not to listen to Gabriel caused one man to become mute on the spot (Lk. 1:20)! So, listen up, good people! Gabriel should know who the Son of God is. Let’s ask him shall we? So Gabriel, who is the Son of God?

Answer: First, he is the son of Mary, but he has no human father, yet he is a human

being. Second, he is “begotten” by God’s direct and miraculous Presence coming upon Mary. Here Gabriel is precise --- “for that reason” --- the holy child will be the Son of God. Jesus’ Sonship derives because he is miraculously begotten by God’s holy Spirit in Mary. Gabriel thus declares the Son of God is begotten, begins to exist, is procreated, is generated, is caused to exist, is brought into being, (as per the prophetic word), “**today**” in Mary! Which is to say, Jesus’ sonship begins in real “today” time and not ethereal eternity.

Putting this in very plain language Gabriel wants us to know that *by definition* the Son of God is a human person supernaturally generated by God in Mary. Negatively, this means the Son of God did not personally pre-exist his own beginning at that point in history. After all, nobody --- not even God Himself --- can pre-exist their own existence! To already be in existence and then begin to exist are mutually exclusive

ideas. As I say, not even God could do this!

As Professor Anthony Buzzard pithily remarks, “A begotten Son is ruled out once the Son is made to predate his begetting.” And Eric Chang asks,

“In Luke the explanation was given that the title ‘Son of God’ [Lk. 1:35] was given him because of his virgin birth. That this title was not meant to convey the idea of divinity or deity seems clear from the fact that Adam is also called ‘son of God’ just two chapters later [Lk. 3:38]. Also in consequence of that birth Jesus can be called ‘the only begotten’ because no one was ever begotten in this way. When Scripture provides perfectly clear and intelligible explanations, why do we read our own ideas into the term?” (8)

Unless of course, we can wave our theological magical wand of make believe and appeal to, “it’s a mystery”! Perhaps if

we just say it long enough and loud enough, the blizzard of mysterious magical gold dust will snow in all plain sense and normal language? (My Aussie mates would not call this gold dust but bull-dust, and that's putting it very mildly on their behalf!)

In order to prop up a man-made theory it won't do to say all that began in the Virgin birth was a new 'phase' of the Son's existence. That is a transformation, not a beginning. That is trans-mutation, not a genesis. That is re-incarnation in reverse!

Nor will it do to say, this was the beginning of his *human nature*. Well, no. Sorry. Gabriel says the miracle of the virginal begetting is when ***the Son of God began his existence!*** Gabriel knew of no personal pre-existence of the Son of God, nobody called 'God the Son', changing his nature or his state. And if the Church continues to insist otherwise her witness will be diluted,

even muted for failure to heed Gabriel who stands in the Presence of the Almighty.

## **The Son of God is the Messianic King.**

Now here is something rarely mentioned. Have you ever noticed the indissoluble connection Gabriel makes between the descriptive titles “king of Israel” and “Son of God”? In other words, before Luke 1:35 Gabriel says some key things to Mary. Gabriel gives the full context as to why Jesus is titled ‘Son of God’.

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and his kingdom will have no end” (Lk. 1: 31-33).

According to Gabriel, Jesus qualifies as the Son of God for *two precise reasons ...1)*

his kingship with a kingdom that will remain forever and 2) his miraculous genesis. (9)

Dunn summarises the Scriptural testimony beautifully,

“*Matthew* thinks of Jesus’ sonship in terms of a mission that fulfilled the destiny of Israel, and dates Jesus’ divine sonship from his conception by the power of the Spirit. *Luke* ... also presents Jesus’ conception by the power of the Spirit as the moment in time when the Son of God came into existence.” (10)

Wow! I couldn’t have said it any clearer. Putting this together we observe that Jesus is the Son of God precisely because God declares him to be the Messianic King who will sit on the throne of his direct ancestor David and precisely because God declares He Himself is his Father Who miraculously “begat”, generated, brought him into being, in Mary, at a certain “today” in history.

## **Jesus Believed He Began in Time.**

When he stood before Pilate, Jesus Himself combined these two qualifiers given by Gabriel as verification of his identity,

“Pilate therefore said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37).

Jesus claims he is the king of a kingdom not of this world and this is why he was “born”. Here the Greek word for born is our word for “begotten”, or “to begin existence” (gegenneemai, perf.pass. ind.1 sg.). On Jesus’ own testimony he was begotten, came into existence, that is, had a beginning, for the very purpose of receiving a kingdom. So we have the combined testimony of Gabriel and Jesus as to why and how Jesus is the Son of God. (11)

J.O. Buswell, Ph.D., former Dean of the Graduate School Covenant College, St. Louis, MO examined the question of the begetting of the Son of God and concluded,

“The notion that the Son was begotten by the Father in eternity past, not as an event, but as an inexplicable relationship, has been accepted and carried along in the Christian theology since the fourth century ... We have examined all the instances in which “begotten” or “born” or related words are applied to Christ, and we can say with confidence that the Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about “begetting” as an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.” (12)

Which is to say, there is no such being in the Bible as the “eternally generated Son” or “God the Son”! Surely the time has come to rescue the Biblical meaning of the term, “Son of God” from the centuries of

ecclesiastical tradition and non-speak?  
When Peter confessed that Jesus was “The Christ, the Son of the Living God” he was commended by Jesus and told that confession would be the foundation of the Church Jesus built (Matt. 16:16). Jesus considered Peter’s confession the cornerstone of true Christian belief, and Peter did *not* confess Jesus is “God the Son”.

Here are some strong words to summarise the non-sense of speaking of the “eternal generation” of ‘God the Son’, and what a serious departure this concept is from the “faith once for all delivered to the saints”...

“In unqualified disregard for the Jewish understanding ... and the words of Gabriel himself, the Church ... discarded the time-tested and confirmed definition of ‘son of God’ provided by the Writings and the Jewish prophets. By the year 200 C.E., non-Jews had endowed it with new and butchered implications, and

then proceeded to mutate the term into the bastardized hybrid ‘God the Son,’ a term that later wreaked havoc and division upon the Church, as it forever cut ties with its Jewish root. As a result, the son was given a ‘beginning-less beginning, and a so-called ‘eternal generation.’ The doctrines of the deity of Christ, and the Trinity followed right behind them. Their new concocted religion, into which the Church vested itself, became something the Torah and prophets [O.T. Scriptures] know nothing about. They succeeded in creating something altogether foreign and different from what had been prophesied about the true king and Messiah of Israel.” (13)

Do you think these sentiments are too strident? Well, they come from a Hebrew-speaking Jewish believer in Jesus our Lord Messiah. Is he not entitled to feel aggrieved at how the identity of Jesus the

Son of God has been hijacked by clever Gentile sophistry?

## **Sola Scriptura?**

Furthermore, I cannot understand why my own denomination of Churches of Christ with such a rich heritage of “speaking where the Bible speaks” now almost ubiquitously insist that an “essential” in our confession must include Jesus as “God the Son”. Certainly, Scripture describes Jesus as “the Son of God” dozens and dozens of times, but nowhere does the title “God the Son” occur --- *not once!* So to call Jesus “God the Son” is a departure from the words and revelation of Scripture, which we boldly assert to be our sole authority in matters of belief. Go figure!

## **Final Warning!**

Dr Brown whom I mentioned at the start of this article says,

“To be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation

for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's Son."

Dr Brown is listening to Gabriel! However, if we will not listen to Dr Brown *et al*, and continue to build a doctrine around a fictional person called 'God the Son', and if we will not heed Gabriel and even Jesus' own self-description as to how and why he is the Son of God, we better listen to this warning, that if anyone adds to the words of God's holy Book ... well you know the warning, so may we each one heed it (Rev. 22: 18)!

1. Brown, Colin. "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy", *Ex Auditu*, 1991, p. 87-88 (Italics original).
2. Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2.* Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 1996. pp.10,485-486, (italics original).
3. Dunn, James D. G. *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation.* Second Edition. SCM Press Ltd. London. 1989. p. 7.
4. Kuschel, Karl-Josef. *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin*, Crossroad, NY1992. P.236,237.
5. Hocking, David L. *The Nature of God in Plain Language.* Waco, Word Book Publishers, 1984, p. 76
6. *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments: A*

*Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. Editors: Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids. IVP. Downers Grove Ill, Leicester, Eng. 1997. "Son of God" entry, p. 1112.

7. *Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary: The Signature Edition*. Australia's Heritage Publishing Pty Ltd, Sydney, Australia. 2011.
8. Chang, Eric H.H. *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, Xlibris Corp., 2009. p. 278.
9. It may come as a surprise to many readers of our English Bibles to learn that Matthew says Jesus Christ had a "genesis". Your English Bible speaks of "the book of *the generation* of Jesus Christ" and of "*the birth* of Jesus Christ" but the Greek word is "genesis" on both occasions (Matt. 1: 1,18). Luke also uses the same word but your English Bible again obscures

the fact by translating “genesis” as “birth” (Lk. 1:14).

10. Dunn, James D.G. *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*. Second Edition. SCM Press Ltd. London. 1989, p. 59.
11. For the technically minded, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (edited by Dr Colin Brown), notes, “The verb *gennaoo* is understood as a causal form of *ginomai*.” And *ginomai* is defined as, “to be, come to be, be born, be made, be produced, become, come about, happen.” Some commentators try to say Psalm 2:7 when quoted in the NT refers only to Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation and not his beginning by generation in Mary, but here in John 18 --- before his crucifixion and exaltation --- Jesus states his

agreement with Gabriel that the Son was brought into being by his miraculous conception!

12. Uriel ben-Mordechai. *If? The End of a Messianic Lie*, Above and Beyond Ltd., Jerusalem. 2011. p. 194.
13. *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, p. 110.