

Is Jesus God Because He Is the Son of God?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The New Testament (NT) repeatedly identifies Jesus as the Son of God. Mark writes, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1.1). At Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, the heavenly voice announced, “This is My beloved Son” (Matthew 3.17; 17.5). The devil prefaced two of his three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness by saying, “If You are the Son of God” (Matthew 4.3, 6). When Jesus later asked his apostles, “who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matthew 16.15-16). And the author of the Gospel of John concludes, “these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20.31). The central theme of all four NT gospels is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

But what does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? Most Christians have thought it means he is God. Indeed, that is what the institutional church has always taught.

Post-apostolic church fathers were somewhat influenced by Greek religio-philosophy in the formation of their theology. Polytheistic Greeks and Romans believed in the many gods of their mythologies. They reasoned that these gods metaphysically generated gods similar to human beings physically procreating their descendants.

Likewise, church fathers believed that the God of the Bible generated a son and that he became the man Jesus. They reasoned that just as a man has a son, who is human like his father, so God generated a son who was like himself, so that his son also is God. They even called Jesus “God the Son.” Irenaeus, a 2nd century church father, explained, “the Father is God and the Son is God; for that which is begotten of God is God.”

Thus, church fathers obliterated the Jews’ distinction between “God” and “the Son of God” by using them synonymously. And this practice continues today among Christians and their scholars. Yet the Bible never uses “Son of God” interchangeably with “God.”

When the New Testament (NT) describes Jesus as “the Son (of God),” it should be understood metaphorically, not metaphysically, indicating no more than relationship. And capitalizing “Son” is insignificant because early Greek NT manuscripts have all capitals, called “uncials.” Nels Ferre well contends, “Jesus is not God but the Son of God.”

Christians should not understand Jesus’ status as the Son of God according to Greek metaphysics but by how it was used in his religious culture and in the Old Testament (OT). The OT applies the appellation “son(s) (of God)” to pious individuals, the nation of Israel, and its kings. Sometimes, it designates the promised Messiah-King (2 Samuel 7.14; Psalm 2.7, 12; cf. Acts 13.33). In fact, the Qumran Community, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, could use the titles Messiah and Son of God interchangeably.

Jews believed, as they did of other kings of Israel, that the Messiah would be God’s “son” and vice-regent on earth. They reckoned he would be a son of God extraordinaire. They did not think this unique sonship would be due to some metaphysical generation as the surrounding polytheistic nations were apt to ascribe to their gods and human kings. Rather, Jews believed that their Messiah would be God’s son in the sense that God would specially favor him as his representative.

Consequently, Trinitarian N.T. Wright cautions Christians to avoid misunderstanding this messianic “son (of God)” title in the OT. He explains that “in the first century the

regular Jewish meaning of this title had nothing to do with an incipient Trinitarianism; it referred to the king as *Israel's representative*. Israel was the son of YHWH; the [Messiah] king who would come to take her destiny on himself would share this title.” But G.W.H. Lampe goes further by alleging, “‘Son,’ however, suggests a being who is not God himself but who coexists beside God and acts as God’s agent.”

The NT says Jesus is “the Son of God,” which is *tou huiou tou theou* in the Greek text. This inclusion of the article indicates Jesus is a special Son of God, even superior to God’s angels and other people who are designated “sons of God” (Genesis 6.2; Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7; Matthew 5.9; Luke 6.35; 20.36; Romans 8.4, 19; Galatians 3.26).

Greek manuscripts vary for John 1.18. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) reads, “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1.18). Other translations have “only (begotten) Son” or “only begotten.” The NASB reading identifies Jesus as God while other versions do not. Though manuscript evidence favors the NASB reading, Jesus as “begotten God” is nonsensical and contradicts that no man has seen God, since men saw Jesus.

Church fathers were wrong to translate *tou monogenous huiou tou theou* in the Greek NT to mean “only begotten Son of God” (John 3.18; cf. v. 16; 1.14, 18; 1 John 4.9). They did it to oppose the Arians and support their doctrine of eternal generation, an oxymoron. Rather, *monogenes* means literally one-of-a-kind, usually translated “only.”

Post-apostolic church fathers taught that Jesus eternally preexisted as the Logos-Son of God who came down from heaven to become the man—Jesus. Yet the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that her “holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Lk 1.35), as if this title refers solely to Jesus as a human being.

Perhaps the best explanation of Jesus’ Sonship is what the voice from above declared at both his baptism and transfiguration. The following is a conflation of all three synoptic quotations of both sayings, “This is My beloved Son, in/with whom I am well-pleased.” In the transfiguration saying, Luke omits “beloved” and adds “My Chosen One.”

In sum, Jesus being designated “the Son (of God)” in the NT signifies (1) his extraordinary relationship with God, (2) God choosing and sending Jesus as his agent par excellence, and (3) Jesus’ yet future role as the Messiah-King of Israel. Finally, the NT never indicates that Jesus is God on the basis that he is the Son of God.