

The Meaning of "Son of God"

If Jesus is completely and totally God, in every sense of the word, without beginning and without end, why is He called the *Son of God*? Doesn't a son have to have a father and be born at some time? Is Jesus God's Son in the sense of a human father and a son? How are we to make sense of this title?

In John 20:31 John sums up the whole point of his Gospel: that his readers would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

John 20:31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, **the Son of God**; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

Satan when tempting Christ in the wilderness alludes to Jesus as being the Son of God.

Matthew 4:3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be **the Son of God**, command that these stones be made bread.

The demons that Jesus cast out of the Gadarene Demoniacs recognized Him as the Son of God.

Matthew 8:29 And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou **Son of God**? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?

When Jesus asked His disciples who they believed that He was, Peter replied emphatically, you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Matthew 16:15,16 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, **the Son of the living God**.

At Jesus' crucifixion the people gathered around the cross confessed that truly He was the Son of God.

Matthew 27:54 Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was **the Son of God**.

How did those who used this title in these examples and others understand its meaning?

To the western mind, the concept of sonship is limited primarily to the idea of biological origins. A son is a male offspring, a boy or a man in relation to his parents. But the term "son" in the Bible has a much wider meaning than in modern usage. To the Hebrew mind the term son often had to do with possession of a quality, such as "sons of Zion" (Lamentations 4:2), "sons of Belial" (1 Samuel 2:12), "sons of God" (Genesis 6:4), "sons of men" (Ecclesiastes 2:8), "sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 2:3), "son of peace" (Luke 10:6), "sons of light" (John 12:36), "son of perdition" (John 17:12), "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), and the "sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2; 5:6)

The sonship motif in the Bible is a rich theme, and when we trace the topic of sonship across the Bible we see how it leads to Jesus Christ. And importantly, we see how Jesus's sonship is both related to his preeminent humanity and his eternal divinity.

There are three significant meanings of the title Son of God as applied to Jesus in the Bible:

1. Eternal Son of God

Jesus is called God's Son even before He came to this earth as a man, for example in John 3:16 or here in Galatians 4:4:

Galatians 4:4,5 But when the fulness of the time was come, **God sent forth his Son**, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

In what sense is Jesus the Son of God prior to His incarnation?

During Jesus trial, the high priest questioning Him demanded to know whether He was the Christ, the Son of God:

Matthew 26:63,64 But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, **I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.** Jesus saith unto him, **Thou hast said:** nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

The Jewish leaders responded by accusing Jesus of blasphemy:

Matthew 26:65,66 Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, **He hath spoken blasphemy;** what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his **blasphemy.** What think ye? They answered and said, **He is guilty of death.**

Later, before Pontius Pilate they further pressed their charges of blasphemy:

John 19:7 The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law **he ought to die,** because **he made himself the Son of God.**

How did the Jewish leaders understand this title, and why did they consider it blasphemy? Was it because they understood this title as meaning that Jesus was literally begotten of God the Father in ages past? Here is another instance in which the Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy and attempted to kill Him:

John 10:30-33 **I and my Father are one.** Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me? The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for **blasphemy;** and because that **thou, being a man, makest thyself God.**

Stoning was the punishment of a blasphemer according to Leviticus 24:14-16. The Jews considered Jesus guilty of blasphemy because He made Himself equal with God.

John 10:36 Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou **blasphemest**; because I said, I **am the Son of God**?

To the Jews, the name Son of God, implied equality with God. The Jews were the best interpreters of their own language, and as Jesus did not deny the correctness of their interpretations, it follows that He meant it for them to understand it this way.

An expression that had the same meaning as Son of God was Jesus' referral to God as His Father, which the Jews also interpreted as meaning equality with God.

John 5:17,18 But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that **God was his Father, making himself equal with God**.

The Jews understood equality with the Father as pertaining to His very nature, His eternal pre-existence, and His power. If the Jews had misunderstood Jesus on this point, it would have been a perfect opportunity for Jesus to clear up the misapprehension. This is precisely what Jesus did not do.

"The Word existed as a divine being, even as the **eternal Son of God**, in union and oneness with his Father. From everlasting he was the Mediator of the covenant, the one in whom all nations of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles, if they accepted him, were to be blessed. The world was made by him, "and without him was not anything made that was made." If Christ made all things, he existed before all things. The words spoken in regard to this are so decisive that no one need be left in doubt. **Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense**. He was **with God from all eternity**, God over all, blessed forevermore." - E.G. White, Review & Herald, April 15, 1906

Jesus is here called the eternal Son of God. That means that Christ has always been the Son of God. And note that He is also called God in the highest sense, with God from all eternity.

But what does it mean to be the eternal Son of God? The answer is given in the same quote:

"From everlasting he was the Mediator of the covenant..."

Jesus has been the Mediator of the covenant from everlasting. How are we to understand Jesus as having the title of Mediator before the fall of man, or even before man or angels existed? Notice the following verses:

Romans 16:25 (RV) Now to him that is able to stablish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which hath been kept in silence **through times eternal**,

1 Corinthians 2:7 (ESV) But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed **before the ages** for our glory.

Ephesians 3:9,11 (RSV) and to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which **from all ages** hath been hid in God who created all things; ... according to the **eternal purpose** which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:

Colossians 1:26 (RV) even the mystery which hath been hid **from all ages** and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints,

Titus 1:2,3 (RV) in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised **before times eternal**; but in his own seasons manifested his word in the message, wherewith I was intrusted according to the commandment of God our Saviour;

2 Timothy 1:9 (RV) who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus **before times eternal**,

1 Peter 1:19,20 (RV) But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained **before the foundation of the world**, but was manifest in these last times for you.

What is this mystery hidden from all ages, before times eternal, but now is made manifest? The plan of salvation. This plan has always been in the minds of the members of the Godhead, as an "eternal purpose." Just as surely as God has always existed, the plan of salvation has always existed. Before there was sin, there was a solution. In fact there always has been a solution, should sin arise. That solution was Christ becoming a man and dying for our sins.

Just as Christ was called Mediator from all eternity, He is also called the Son, pointing to when He would become man's Substitute and Saviour.

"The purpose and plan of grace **existed from all eternity**. Before the foundation of the world it was according to the determinate counsel of God that man should be created and endowed with power to do the divine will. The fall of man, with all its consequences, was not hidden from the Omnipotent. Redemption was not an after-thought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam, but an **eternal purpose**, suffered to be wrought out for the blessing, not only of this atom of a world, but for the good of all the worlds that God had created." - E.G. White, Signs of the Times February 13, 1893, par. 3

"The salvation of the human race has **ever been** the object of the councils of heaven. The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has **existed from all eternity**, and is called the **everlasting covenant**. **So surely as there never was a time when God was not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity.**" - E.G. White, Signs of the Times, June 12, 1901

"No one of the angels could become a substitute and surety for the human race, for their life is God's; they could not surrender it. On Christ alone the human family depended for their existence. **He is the eternal, self-existent Son**, on whom no yoke had come. When God asked, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Christ alone of the angelic host could

reply, 'Here am I; send Me.' [Isaiah 6:8.] **He alone had covenanted before the foundation of the world to become a surety for man.** He could say that which not the highest angel could say—"I have power over my own life. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." [John 10:18.] - E.G. White, Letters and Manuscripts, Vol 12, MS101, 1897, pg. 28

Can there be an eternal plan of redemption, one that has always existed, without an eternal Saviour? Suppose that God the Father in eternity past formed the plan of redemption without the Son and then at some point birthed Him into existence to fulfill this plan. What would that say about God's motives? If God, knowing that there would eventually be a rebellion in the universe, generated another being to bear the cost for this rebellion, what would that say about God's character?

If the plan of redemption is eternal, then Christ, who is the very center of it, must also be eternal.

"Christ was appointed to the office of Mediator from the creation of God, set up **from everlasting** to be our substitute and surety." - E.G. White, Review and Herald, April 5, 1906

This helps us understand why Christ is called "the eternal Son of God". In the same way that Christ has always been "the Saviour" and has always been "the Mediator", even before sin existed, He is also the eternal "Son of God" by the same token.

How much greater does the sacrifice of Christ appear if an eternal bond, far greater than the closest earthly father-son relationship, was broken for you and me. The Godhead was torn apart at the cross. As Ellen White puts it "there was a sundering of the divine powers."

Christ has always been the Son of God. That is, Christ has always related to created beings as the Son, at our level. As a member of the Godhead, Christ possesses and exercises the full complement of the divine attributes. But in relating to us, Jesus specializes in communicating with His creatures in relational and intimate ways. Christ reveals the relational, gracious, loving dimensions that characterize all three members of the Godhead.

2. Incarnate Son of God

We have seen that Christ is the Eternal Mediator, the Eternal Saviour, and the Eternal Son - terms that are really synonymous.

This leads us to the second application of the term "Son of God".

Luke 1:31,32 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and **shall be called the Son of the Highest:** and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

Luke 1:35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee **shall be called the Son of God.**

The angel Gabriel declared to Mary that by virtue of the overshadowing power of the Holy Ghost her Son was to be "called the Son of God". Here the angel plainly attributes the title "Son of God" to the unique union of Deity with humanity at the incarnation of our Lord.

As we saw in the previous section, Jesus did not begin to be the Son of God at the incarnation. He was so even from all eternity. But now Jesus in a new sense is the Son of God, being manifested in human nature.

"In His incarnation He gained **in a new sense the title of the Son of God**. Said the angel to Mary, 'The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God' (Luke 1:35). While the Son of a human being, He became the Son of God in a new sense. Thus He stood in our world--the Son of God, yet allied by birth to the human race." - E.G. White, Selected Messages, Vol. 1, pg. 226

It was in a "new sense" that Christ became the "Son of God" at His incarnation. Not because there was a time in eons past when He emerged from the Father. But because He had been the Son of God prior to His incarnation in terms of how He related to intelligent created beings. But at His incarnation He actually became one of us - having been literally begotten of God in the womb of Mary.

3. Covenant Son of God

We now come to the final part of this study: considering Jesus as the covenant Son of God.

Romans 1:3,4 Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And **declared to be the Son of God** with power, according to the spirit of holiness, **by the resurrection from the dead**.

What does this text mean by "declared to be the Son of God", and what does Christ's Sonship have to do with His resurrection?

Adam, Israel, David, Solomon, God's covenant people, those adopted by God in Christ, followers of God, and believers who will receive the kingdom of God are all called "sons of God". In each of these cases the meaning of sonship has nothing to do with ontology or genetic relationships.

By understanding how Adam, Israel, David, and Solomon were all "sons of God," we will better understand what it means that Jesus is the Son of God in a covenant sense.

God created Adam and Eve in God's "own image". And when Adam had a son, he was begotten after Adam's own likeness, after his own image.

Adam is identified as "the son of God" in the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3. Adam was the head of the human race, from whom all humanity would receive their likeness. Thus the image of God was to be passed on from generation to generation. This was God's plan for the human race.

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 5:3 And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth:

Luke 3:38 Adam, which was the son of God.

An interruption was imposed on this plan. Lucifer, the fallen angel, deceived humanity into believing that God is arbitrary, restrictive, untrustworthy, and self-serving (Genesis 3:1-5). This interruption in God's plan nearly effaced the "image" of God from the "son of God", Adam. This interruption disrupted the capacity of God's son Adam to transmit God's image from generation to generation. Now humanity would naturally reflect the image of Satan, who claimed to be the ruler of this world.

An intervention was needed that would offer a new way forward in God's original plan. This intervention would have to happen from the inside of the human situation. It would involve a new starting point to reestablish God's "image" in humanity. This intervention would come in the form of a new "Son of God" to replace Adam as the head of the human race.

Genesis 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Whereas Adam, the original "son of God" yielded to Satan, a new Son would be born to the fallen race and would crush the serpent rather than yield to him. This second "Adam", the new "Son of God", would take the stage of human history and succeed where the first Adam failed.

And so God established a genealogical line through which the new Son of God would be born.

Abraham and Sarah called out of Ur to establish a great nation within their genetic line. Abraham and Sarah give birth to Isaac and he is identified as the "son" of promise. Isaac is the second-born son of Abraham, after Ishmael, but Isaac is the firstborn son of promise. Jacob is the second-born son, after Esau, yet he occupies the covenant position of the firstborn son.

The goal God is pursuing is the transmission of the covenant promise in which a line is established through which the new "Son of God" may enter the human situation and conquer the serpent from the inside, from the strategic position of human nature, thus reversing Adam's fall in the course of the victory.

In Jacob's twelve sons and all their children God now has a corporate people, a nation. The nation of Israel is designated as God's "firstborn son".

Exodus 4:22 And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn:

In what sense is Israel God's firstborn son? The "birthing" of Israel occurred when God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage. Israel is God's chosen people, called out from among the nations to be God's only begotten son, the spiritual channel through which God intends to incorporate all nations into the Sonship status that was lost by Adam.

David is the next son of God in Scripture's Sonship saga. He becomes the chosen king of Israel and in him Israel's corporate identity is now represented. With David God reaffirms the covenant

promise He made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Israel. David becomes an expanded prototype of the coming Messiah.

In Psalm 2:1-7 David is spoken of as being "begotten" as God's "son", while prophetically pointing to the coming Messiah, in whom all God has promised to the world through Israel will be fulfilled.

Psalm 2:6,7 Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

In Psalm 89:19-29 David is portrayed as God's "firstborn" son through whom His "covenant shall stand firm" while again foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

Psalm 89:26-29 He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven.

David has a son, Solomon, to whom God transfers the unique position of Sonship. Solomon is conscripted into the Sonship position for the continuation of the covenant plan.

1 Chronicles 22:10 He shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever.

The seamless narrative of Scripture builds clarity as it progresses, beginning with the creation of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, all moving to one grand end. Adam, the son of God, fails in his Sonship role. God promises to initiate a lineage through which a new Son of God will come to rectify Adam's fall. God establishes a people through whom the promise will be fulfilled, and a succession unfolds:

Abraham, the son of God, gives way to...Isaac, the son of God, gives way to...Jacob, the son of God, gives way to...Israel, the corporate son of God, gives way to...David, the son of God, who gives way to...Solomon, the son of God, and finally the birth of the promised offspring, an Adamic replacement who will redeem the Fall. God Himself would become a human being who would be "the Son of God" with covenantal faithfulness and thus re-establish humanity in right relation to God.

And so when we look again at the verses in Romans 1, we see that Jesus was declared to be or appointed to be the "Son of God" because (1) He was born in the lineage of David and (2) because He was victorious over death. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus proved that in His life as a human being He was faithful to the covenant and perfectly fulfilled God's original plan for the human race in demonstrating others-centered, self-sacrificing agape love.

Romans 1:3,4 (NIV) Regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was **appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead**: Jesus Christ our Lord.

This shows that the New Testament is not addressing the ancient ontology of Christ when calling Him God's Son. New Testament writers understood Jesus to be God's Son in the sense that Adam was God's son - reflecting God's image. The covenant Son of God is the role that Jesus took up for

the purpose of identifying Himself with the human race as the second Adam, the faithful Son of God. God Himself became the Son of God in order to reestablish humanity in its rightful Sonship position.

In Romans 6 Paul invites us to identify with the new man through the symbolic act of baptism.

Romans 6:3,4 (NIV) Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may **live a new life**.

When we are baptized, we are essentially saying we have disavowed our first birth in the lineage of the first Adam and relocated our identity in the second Adam, Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus taught in John 3: "You must be born again."

To summarize everything that we've been saying about Jesus as the Covenant Son of God: Adam was the original man, the son of God created in the image of God and given the capacity to procreate in his own image. But Adam sinned and thereby brought death upon the entire human race.

Christ came as the new man, the second Adam, the new Son of God, through whom the first Adam's failure is rectified. When the eternal divine Son took on humanity He came to fulfill the role marked out for Him by Adam, Israel, David, and Solomon. These earlier sons of God were types and shadows of the true Son. As the Son of promise, Christ lived out the terms of the covenant, gave His life as the covenant sacrifice, rose from the dead victorious over sin and death, and ascended to the throne of the universe bearing within Himself the humanity He came to redeem. Christ now represents all men in the sense that in Him we now have a new beginning from which to start, free from sin and guilt.

As the Covenant Son of God, everything that Christ has accomplished for us is so that we would be reincorporated into the Sonship position in which we were originally created - a sonship position which was lost, but that Jesus has restored to the human race.

Conclusion

The Bible is not a speculative philosophy about the ancient origins of Jesus. The Bible is an unfolding narrative that reveals God entering into covenant relationship with human beings and then following through to keep that covenant at any and all cost to Himself, with the covenant reaching its climactic fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

From this study it can be clearly seen that Scripture does not support the doctrine that Jesus was literally begotten or made or generated or created by God the Father at some point in ages past. This is not the meaning of "Son of God" as applied to Jesus. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the eternal Mediator; He is "God with us" who became one with the human race; and He is the Covenant Son of God, the second Adam who came to restore the human race back into covenant Sonship with God.