

Jesus Christ - Son of God?

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[إنجليزي - English]

www.islamreligion.com website

موقع دين الإسلام

2013 - 1434

IslamHouse.com

“One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie is that a cat has only nine lives.”

—Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*



Son of God, son of David, or son of Man? Jesus is identified as “son of David” fourteen times in the New Testament, starting with the very first verse (Matthew 1:1). The Gospel of Luke documents forty-one generations between Jesus and David, while Matthew lists twenty-six. Jesus, a distant descendant, can only wear the “son of David” title metaphorically. But how then should we understand the title, “son of God?”

The “Trilemma,” a common proposal of Christian missionaries, states that “Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or the Son of God, as he claimed to be.” For the sake of argument, let’s agree that Jesus was neither a lunatic nor a liar. Let’s also agree he was *precisely* what he claimed to be. But what, exactly, was that?

Jesus called himself “Son of Man” frequently, consistently, perhaps even emphatically, but where did he call himself “Son of God?”

Let’s back up. What does “Son of God” mean in the first place? No legitimate Christian sect suggests that God took a wife and had a child, and most certainly none conceive that God fathered a child through a human mother *outside* of marriage. Furthermore, to suggest that God physically mated with an element of His creation is so far beyond the limits of religious tolerance as to plummet down the sheer cliff of blasphemy, chasing the mythology of the Greeks.

With no rational explanation available within the tenets of Christian doctrine, the only avenue for closure is to claim yet one more doctrinal mystery. Here is where the Muslim recalls the question posed in the Quran:

“...How can He have a son when He has no consort?...” (Quran 6:101)

...while others shout, “But God can do anything!” The Islamic position, however, is that God doesn’t do inappropriate things, only *Godly* things. In the Islamic viewpoint, God’s character is integral with His being and consistent with His majesty.

So again, what does “Son of God” mean? And if Jesus Christ has exclusive rights to the term, why does the Bible record, “...for I (God) am a father to Israel, and Ephraim (i.e. Israel) is my firstborn” (Jeremiah 31:9) and, “...Israel is My son, even my firstborn” (Exodus 4:22)? Taken in the context of Romans 8:14, which reads, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” many scholars conclude that “Son of God” is metaphorical and, as with *christos*, doesn’t imply exclusivity. After all, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* confirms that in Jewish idiom “Son of God” is clearly metaphorical. To quote, “Son of God, term occasionally found in Jewish literature,

biblical and post-biblical, but nowhere implying physical descent from the Godhead.”¹ *Hasting’s Bible Dictionary* comments:

In Semitic usage “sonship” is a conception somewhat loosely employed to denote moral rather than physical or metaphysical relationship. Thus “sons of Belial” (Jg 19:22 etc.) are wicked men, not descendants of Belial; and in the NT the “children of the bridechamber” are wedding guests. So a “son of God” is a man, or even a people, who reflect the character of God. There is little evidence that the title was used in Jewish circles of the Messiah, and a sonship which implied more than a moral relationship would be contrary to Jewish monotheism.²

And in any case, the list of candidates for “son of God” begins with Adam, as per Luke 3:38: “...Adam, which was the son of God.”

Those who rebut by quoting Matthew 3:17 (“And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased’”) have overlooked the point that the Bible describes many people, Israel and Adam included, as “sons of God.” Both II Samuel 7:13-14 and I Chronicles 22:10 read, “He (Solomon) shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son.”

Entire nations are referred to as sons, or children of God. Examples include:

Genesis 6:2, “That the *sons of God* saw the daughters of men...”

Genesis 6:4, “There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the *sons of God* came in to the daughters of men...”

1 Werblowsky, R. J. Zwi and Geoffrey Wigoder. p. 653.

2 Hastings, James. *Dictionary of The Bible*. p. 143.

Deuteronomy 14:1, “Ye are the *children* of the Lord your God.”

Job 1:6, “Now there was a day when the *sons of God* came to present themselves before the LORD...”

Job 2:1, “Again there was a day when the *sons of God* came to present themselves before the LORD...”

Job 38:7, “When the morning stars sang together, and all the *sons of God* shouted for joy?”

Philippians 2:15, “that you may become blameless and harmless, *children of God* without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation...”

1 John 3:1-2, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called *children of God*! ... Beloved, now we are *children of God*...”

In Matthew 5:9 Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Later in Matthew 5:45, Jesus prescribed to his followers the attainment of noble attributes, “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” Not exclusively *his* Father, but *their* Father ...



Christian clergy openly acknowledge that Jesus never called himself “son of God,” however they claim that others did. This too has an answer.

Investigating the manuscripts that make up the New Testament, one finds that the alleged “sonship” of Jesus is based upon the mistranslation of two Greek words—*pais* and *huios*, both of which are translated as “son.” However, this translation appears disingenuous. The Greek word *pais* derives from the Hebrew *ebed*, which bears the primary meaning of servant, or slave. Hence, the primary translation of *pais theou* is “servant of God,” with “child” or “son of God” being an extravagant embellishment. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, “The Hebrew original of *pais* in the phrase *pais theou*, i.e., *ebed*, carries a stress on personal relationship and has first the sense of ‘slave.’”³ This is all the more interesting because it dovetails perfectly with the prophecy of Isaiah 42:1, upheld in Matthew 12:18: “Behold, My servant [i.e., from the Greek *pais*] whom I have chosen, My beloved in whom my soul is well pleased ...” Whether a person reads the King James Version, New King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, or New International

3 Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich. p. 763.

Version, the word is “servant” in all cases. Considering that the purpose of revelation is to make the truth of God clear, one might think this passage an unsightly mole on the face of the doctrine of divine sonship. After all, what better place for God to have declared Jesus His son? What better place to have said, “Behold, My son whom I have begotten ...”? But He *didn't* say that. For that matter, the doctrine lacks biblical support in the recorded words of both Jesus and God, and there is good reason to wonder why. Unless, that is, Jesus was nothing more than the servant of God this passage describes.

Regarding the religious use of the word *ebed*, “The term serves as an expression of humility used by the righteous before God.”⁴ Furthermore, “After 100 B.C. *pais theou* more often means “servant of God,” as when applied to Moses, the prophets, or the three children (Bar. 1:20; 2:20; Dan. 9:35).”⁵ A person can easily get into doctrinal quicksand: “Of eight instances of this phrase, one refers to Israel (Lk. 1:54), two refer to David (Lk 1:69; Acts 4:25), and the other five to Jesus (Mt. 12:18; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30).... In the few instances in which Jesus is called *pais theou* we obviously have early tradition.”⁶ So Jesus did not have exclusive rights to this term, and where it was employed the term “obviously” stemmed from “early tradition.” Furthermore, the translation, if impartial, should identify all individuals to whom the phrase was applied in similar manner. Such, however, has not been the case. Whereas *pais* has been translated “servant” in reference to David (Acts 4:25 and Luke 1:69) and Israel (Luke 1:54), it is translated “Son” or “holy child” in reference to Jesus (Acts 3:13; 3:26; 4:27; 4:30). Such preferential treatment is canonically consistent, but logically flawed.

Lastly an interesting, if not key, religious parallel is uncovered: “Thus the Greek phrase *pais tou theou*, ‘servant of God,’ has

4 Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich. p. 763.

5 Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich. p. 765.

6 Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich. p. 767.

exactly the same connotation as the Muslim name Abdallah—the ‘servant of Allah.’”⁷

The symmetry is all the more shocking, for the Holy Qur’an relates Jesus as having identified himself as just this—Abdallah (*abd* being Arabic for slave or servant, Abd-Allah [also spelled “Abdullah”] meaning slave or servant of Allah). According to the story, when Mary returned to her family with the newborn Jesus, they accused her of being unchaste. Speaking from the cradle in a miracle that gave credence to his claims, baby Jesus defended his mother’s virtue with the words, “*Inni Abdallah ...*” which means, “I am indeed a servant of Allah ...” (TMQ 19:30)

Translation of the New Testament Greek *huios* to “son” (in the literal meaning of the word) is similarly flawed. On page 1210 of Kittel and Friedrich’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the meaning of *huios* journeys from the literal (Jesus the son of Mary), to mildly metaphorical (believers as sons of the king [Matt. 17:25-26]), to politely metaphorical (God’s elect being sons of Abraham [Luke 19:9]), to colloquially metaphorical (believers as God’s sons [Matt. 7:9 and Heb 12:5]), to spiritually metaphorical (students as sons of the Pharisees [Matt. 12:27, Acts 23:6]), to biologically metaphorical (as in John 19:26, where Jesus describes his favorite disciple to Mary as “her son”), to blindingly metaphorical as “sons of the kingdom” (Matt. 8:12), “sons of peace” (Luke. 10:6), “sons of light” (Luke. 16:8), and of everything from “sons of this world” (Luke 16:8) to “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). It is as if this misunderstood word for “son” is waving a big sign on which is painted in bold letters: METAPHOR! Or, as Stanton eloquently puts it, “Most scholars agree that the Aramaic or Hebrew word behind ‘son’ is ‘servant.’ So as the Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism, Jesus is addressed by the voice from heaven in terms of Isaiah 42:1: ‘Behold my servant ... my chosen ... I have put my Spirit upon

7 Carmichael, Joel. pp. 255-6.

him.’ So although Mark 1:11 and 9:7 affirm that Jesus is called by God to a special messianic task, the emphasis is on Jesus’ role as the anointed servant, rather than as Son of God.”⁸

⁸ Stanton, Graham N. p. 225.