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Like Father, Like Son?

What does it mean for Jesus to be the “Son of God?”

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1. Introduction

“Son of God” is an important title of Jesus for Christians. Throughout the history of Christianity, it has greatly influenced our theology and confessions. With this title comes many implications, the foremost of which are that Jesus was a preexistent, eternal, divine being who came to Earth to save humanity from its sin. He was the ultimate sacrifice, given because “God so loved the world” (*New Revised Standard Version*; John 3:16). “Son of God” denotes Jesus’ place as the second member of the Trinity, working alongside his Father and the Holy Spirit. In fact, confessing that Jesus is the Son of God is part of what makes a Christian a Christian. To say that Jesus was not the Son of God in the above sense would be heretical because after thousands of years of tradition Christian beliefs and practices have developed to the point that when Christians confess these beliefs about Jesus’ role as the “Son of God,” many assume that what is being claimed is the one and only biblical view available. Holding these assumptions indicates a failure to recognize that these views have evolved over many years and been handed down to modern Christians over time.

Because of these notions regarding the importance of the title “Son of God,” it can be difficult to take a closer look at the title and its meaning in the biblical text. This topic is a large one that calls into question many other ideas that could not possibly be expounded upon in one paper.¹ Therefore, to narrow down the scope of this project examining “Son of God,” we will focus on three major questions related to the field:

1. From where did the phrase “Son of God” originate, and how did it become a title with divine implications?

2. How did the gospel writers and Paul use the phrase “Son of God” to advance their christological portraits?

¹ This does not mean, however, that many scholars have not tried to provide comprehensive looks at Jesus and Christology in relation to the “Son of God” title. Please see the works consulted page for suggested titles.
3. How and when did Jesus become the “Son of God?”

Exploring these questions will help us understand the connection between Jesus’ roles of “Messiah” and “Son of God” and how early Christian writers utilize seemingly contradictory ideas to explain what it means for Jesus to be the “Son of God.”

2. Origins of the Term “Son of God”

A study of “Son of God” in the Old Testament, ironically, leads us to the term “Messiah.” Early on, followers of Jesus claimed he was the Messiah, but they had a problem. A Messiah who died at the hands of Rome instead of vanquishing his Roman enemies and establishing a new age for the Jews was not the Savior many were expecting. Therefore, early Christian writers repeatedly tried to show how Jesus was the Messiah and in doing so incorporated Old Testament verses involving Israelite kings who were “sons of God.” When they were first in use, the title “Son of God” and “Messiah” were synonymous and did not necessarily imply the divinity of the title bearer.

Instead, the divinity associated with this title came from potentially three other sources: ancient Judaism, other Ancient Near Eastern religions, or the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Regardless of how precisely “Son of God” became a divine title, it is clear in the New Testament writings that it quickly did and eventually surpassed “Messiah” as the highest christological title because of its divine implications.

2.1 “Son of God” in the Old Testament

Looking at how “Son of God” is utilized in the Old Testament will illustrate how the title does not carry with it implicit divinity. In the Old Testament, there are three different ways the phrase “Son of God” is used. First, “son(s) of God” sometimes refers to heavenly or angelic beings (Hengel 22). These beings are direct creations of God, and their purpose is to serve and
act in his stead (Brady 44). Examples of this usage can be seen in Genesis 6.2-4, where “sons of God” come to earth, mate with humans, and produce giants. They are also prevalent in Psalms (29.1, 89.7) and are seen in Job as part of the heavenly council.

The second way “sons of God” appears in the Old Testament is in reference to the Israelites. For example in Exodus 4.22-23, God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel is “My son” and “My firstborn.” Another example is Hosea 11.1, where God refers to Israel as his “child” and says, “Out of Egypt, I called my Son.” Again, this term indicates that these people were to represent God to others and act in his image (Brady 48-49; Hengel 22).

The third way “son of God” and related phrases are used in the Old Testament is to refer to the king of Israel. For example Psalm 2.7 says, “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” Many of the verses that fall under this category, including 2 Samuel 7.12-14, Psalm 89.4, and Isaiah 9.5, are used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus, which indicate that the phrase “Son of God” came from the idea that Jesus is part of the Davidic kingly tradition and is the Messiah. “Messiah” and “Son of God” terminology are connected in these Davidic lineage and messianic passages. Passages, such as 2 Samuel 7.12-14, which reads, “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me . . . ,” began these connections between the Davidic Messiah and the title “Son of God” before Jesus lived (emphasis mine; Peppard 419). When the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages that include phrases like “son of God” and invoked father-son imagery, they are doing so in relation to Jesus’ role as Messiah.

2.2 Divinity and “Son of God”
The connection between “Messiah” and “Son of God” is clear in their close usage in the Gospels and Paul. The writers used Old Testament allusions to the Messiah and Davidic kings to show how Jesus was the Messiah and in doing so incorporated “Son of God” terminology. Divinity eventually became an integral part of the phrase “Son of God.” This divinity, however, did not stem from these Old Testament uses of “Son of God” because the verses the writers use did not describe the angels, which was the only usage of “son of God” in the Old Testament that referred to heavenly beings. They instead specifically used verses that did not ascribe divinity to the bearer of the title. Therefore, the divinity of the phrase “Son of God” probably came into the language of the early Christians from elsewhere. Scholars offer three possibilities for the origins of the term’s divine connotations: Ancient Judaism, Ancient Near Eastern Religions, and Greco-Roman emperors.

2.2.1 Ancient Judaism

As we can see from ancient Jewish texts external to the Old Testament and mainly from the Second Temple period, different Jewish groups had various ideas of what the Messiah would look like (Hengel 33). Within these different portrayals, there are some conceptions of the Messiah that drew upon divine imagery and attributes. For example in 4 Ezra 7.28-29, there is the idea of a preexistent Davidic Messiah (Collins and Collins 97). Also in 4 Ezra, the Messiah can control nature by rising from the sea and flying with the clouds, which is something no mere human without supernatural abilities can do (Hengel 35).

First Enoch, dated around the writing of the gospels, gives another picture of Messiahship that contains divine overtones. In 1 Enoch 37-71, there is a Son of Man figure who is described as “the Anointed One,” meaning Messiah, who is also consider “heavenly” (Dunn 78). Also, in the Sybilline Oracles, there is the Messiah who comes from heaven to be a savior (Hengel 35).

2 Here, Ancient Judaism refers to Jewish texts outside of the Old Testament.
The Essenes in the Qumran Desert composed one Jewish group that explicitly connected “Messiah” and “Son of God.” There are three places in their writings where “Son of God” and “Messiah” are connected. The Rule of the Congregation declares, “When (God) will have begotten the Messiah among them?” (2.11f; Dunn 15). The Florilegium talks about a hope for a Messiah using divine sonship language reminiscent of 2 Samuel 7.11-14 (1.10; Dunn 15). Finally, the Aramaic Apocalypse tells of a king, possibly the Messiah who “. . . shall be hailed (as) the Son of God, and they shall call him Son of the Most High” (9; Dunn 16). These examples are the only ones in ancient Jewish texts that create a direct literary link between “Son of God” and “Messiah.”

These portrayals indicate that the attributes ascribed to “Son of God” are not unique to that title but could have come from the Second Temple Judaic expectations of the Messiah. Since Christianity began in Jewish circles, it is plausible that these divine attributes of the expected Messiah turned the originally messianic title “son of God” into a title that indicated divinity.

2.2.2 Ancient Near Eastern Religions

Most monarchs in Ancient Near Eastern societies were seen as “sons” of their deities, but whether this meant that the people actually believed them to be literally divine depended on the different societies (Brady 50;52). The only example in the Ancient Near East that is closest to the Christian idea of a divine human comes courtesy of the Egyptians (Collins and Collins 6). Even the Egyptians, however, did not subscribe divinity to the human. Instead, they saw their Pharaohs as humans who were in a divine position of authority (Collins and Collins 6). As James Dunn says, “There is little or no good evidence from the periods prior to Christianity’s
beginnings that the Ancient Near East seriously entertained the idea of a god or son of god
descending from heaven to become a human being in order to bring salvation” (22).

This unique Christian idea has no direct parallel in the Ancient Near East, but this does
not mean that different aspects of the Messianic hope or the attributes of the “Son of God” were
not borrowed or influenced by other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. For example, John Collins
believes that the enthronement ritual detailed in Psalm 2 came from the Egyptians (15). In this
psalm, God makes promises to the king he has chosen as his “son.” Synoptic Gospel writers use
this psalm in the baptism and transfiguration scenes that depict God calling Jesus his “Son.”

2.2.3 Greco-Roman Emperors

Another possible place where the title “Son of God” could have gained its divine
significance is the Roman Empire. The term “Son of God” was used to refer to the emperor in
the Roman world (Peppard 28). Emperors became “sons of God” by multiple means including
adoption by emperors who were already considered deified and the creation of birth narratives
where a god was a parent. For example, Caesar was considered to be a god, and when Octavian
was adopted by Caesar, Octavian was then seen as a “son of God” (Peppard 48). To strengthen
his claims to divinity, stories circulated that Octavian’s mother, Atia, had intercourse with, and
subsequently was impregnated by, the god Apollo (Peppard 46). Other examples are Titus and
Domitian who were called “sons of god” after their father Vespasian was posthumously deified
(Levin 420).

While some scholars maintain that no one actually believed that the emperors were
divine, Peppard argues that when looking at Roman practices, it could lead one to conclude that
they truly recognized their emperors as divine. For example, coins were constructed in 31 BCE
that made Augustus look like the gods Neptune and Sol (Levin 420). There were also
sanctuaries and temples around the empire dedicated to emperors (Josephus, Ant. 15.296-98; Levin 420). The evidence indicates that belief in the divinity of the emperor was not forced upon laypeople but something to which they ascribed.

Greco-Roman culture, working with the metaphors and terms already in place in the Jewish traditions, may have influenced early Christians to see Jesus as “Son of God” in some divine sense (Bultmann qtd. in Brady 22). Jesus, in this light, would replace the emperor as “Son of God” and be the rightful ruler of the world.

2.3 Conclusion

Early Christians recognized Jesus to be the Messiah for whom they were looking even though he had died and failed to vanquish his enemies or become a political leader. They consistently used Messiah language to emphasize Jesus’ place in this eschatological role. This language included Old Testament passages that initially referred to Davidic kings and eventually were commandeered as Messianic passages. In the New Testament, the idea of “Son of God” came to be applied to Jesus. Though the terms “Messiah” and “Son of God” initially implied the same role, “Son of God” quickly took on a life of its own and somehow became synonymous with divinity, whether through a development in the Jewish tradition, the Greco-Roman emperor language, other Ancient Near Eastern religions, or a mingling of all three ideas.

3. Meaning and Purpose of “Son of God”

A survey of the “Son of God” title and related terms, phrases, and imagery in the gospels and Paul’s letter will strengthen the connection between “Messiah” and “Son of God,” showing how the two terms were connected in the minds of early Christians. This survey will also demonstrate how “Son of God” is defined differently in the New Testament than how modern Christians conceptualize the title. The meaning of the title “Son of God” seems very clear to
Christians today. With little explanation or investigation, it is identified as portraying Jesus as the second member of the Trinity, placing him at God’s right hand, and elucidating his role in the heavenly realm. These ideas, however, illustrate centuries of developing church theology that did not exist to this extent during the writing of Paul’s letters and the four gospels. Therefore, to determine how these writers saw the title “Son of God” and what is meant for Jesus to be bestowed with it, a little more analysis is required. In the end, we shall discover that though the biblical writers use the term “Son of God” in subtly different ways, they all connect it with Jesus’ messiahship and how through his death and resurrection he is uniquely able to reconcile other humans to God and save them.

3.1 Mark

For Mark, “Son of God” is critical to understanding the importance of Jesus’ role as Messiah and the meaning of his death. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is referred to as the Son of God five times.\(^3\) The first occurrence is in Mark 1.1 and comes from the narrator telling us that the following story is about “Jesus Christ, Son of God.” In choosing to include this title, one not often used in Mark, as the opening line of the Gospel, Mark shows how it is important to Jesus’ identity.

The title “Son of God” and its variations only show up six other times in Mark besides this opening line. Twice it is on the lips of God, at the baptism and resurrection (1.11; 9.7). Twice, demons use the term (3.11, 5.7). The other two times humans, the high priest, and a centurion, say the title, and these instances are crucial to Mark’s understanding of Jesus as Son of God because of their proximity to Jesus’ death (14.61; 15.39).

During the baptism of Jesus, Mark utilizes messianic verses to show Jesus becoming the “Son of God.” He inserts an echo of Psalm 2 to evoke these images of the Davidic kingship and

\(^3\) Mark 1.1; 1.11; 3.11; 5.7; 15:39
therefore establish Jesus as part of this lineage (Bateman 541). In addition, the act of baptism brings to mind the anointing of Old Testament Israelite kings (Brady 66). The coming of the Spirit, also seen in the baptism, was associated with the gift of prophecy and leadership of the ideal king (Judges 3.10; 1 Samuel 16.13; Micah 3.8; Collins and Collins 127).

In the transfiguration, Mark also establishes Jesus’ identity as Messiah. Again he references Psalm 2 with his words from God, “This is my Beloved, listen to him!” (Mark 9.7; Bateman 541). This phrase “listen to him” with the combination of the appearance of Moses may have brought to the original readers’ minds Deuteronomy 8.15, which is a messianic passage about a prophet that God will raise (Collins and Collins 131). Finally, the appearance of Elijah was expected prior to the Messiah’s coming, so Elijah’s presence in the transfiguration may signal Jesus’ identity as Messiah (Marcus 84). Therefore, in the transfiguration and baptism, Mark establishes Jesus’ role as Messiah and uses terminology from the Old Testament that establishes Jesus as the Son of God simultaneously.

The baptism and transfiguration scenes are two of the three “crucial” times Mark portrays Jesus as the Son of God. The third is in 15.39, where the centurion proclaims, “Truly, this man was God’s Son!” All three of these instances of Son of God imagery occur very close to mentions of the kingdom of God, something the Messiah was supposed to bring in the new age (Marcus 67). These subtle connections between Messiah and Son of God show how Mark saw the two as connected and related.

“Messiah” and “Son of God” associations are also made during Jesus’ trial before the council in Mark 14, where Jesus responds to their inquiries as to whether or not he is the Son of the Blessed One (God) by saying “I am” and then continuing to quote from Psalm 110.1 and Daniel 7.13 (v. 62). Psalm 110.1 is a psalm for David. Daniel 7 is a famous passage relating to
the title “Son of Man.” While some scholars point out that Daniel 7 was not a passage originally referring to the Messiah, as it can be seen as either a symbol for all of Israel or the archangel Michael, it was a messianic passage by the time of the early Gospel writers (Collins and Collins 78; Dunn 75). By having Jesus reply affirmatively, “I am,” Mark connects Jesus to God since “I am” is the name of God in the Moses stories (Bateman 555). Then continuing with Messianic passages from the Old Testament, Mark connects the ideas of Messiah and Son of God again.

This passage is important to understanding “Son of God” in Mark for more than its messianic implications. During this trial scene, Jesus is asked by the high priest if he is the “Son of the Blessed One” (14.61), and this is the first time that Jesus allows anyone to use that title in reference to him. Before this moment, Jesus is very adamant that no one recognize that he is the Son of God. For example, he tells the demons not to share with anyone his identity (3.12). At the baptism, only Jesus can hear God’s proclamation, and at the transfiguration, Jesus orders the three witnesses to tell no one what happened (1.10; 9.9; Hurtado 289). It is only during the trial scene, right before his death, that Jesus allows the title “Son of the Blessed One” (God) to be proclaimed in public without denying it or stopping the priest (Bateman 555). Instead, Jesus claims the title by saying, “I am.” So close to his death, it is now the appropriate time for humanity to recognize Jesus as the Son of God (14.62).

The second time a human declares Jesus to be “Son of God” is after his death. In 15.39, a centurion recognizes that “Truly this man was God’s Son!” It is only after Jesus’ death and in response to it that a human being in Mark truly realizes that Jesus is the Son of God. These two key moments, the first time Jesus allows the title to be known in the context of the trial and the first genuine human confession of Jesus as “Son of God,” show how Mark uses the title “Son of
God” in his gospel (Dunn 48). It is only in connection with his death that humans can fully appreciate Jesus as God’s Son and Messiah (Dunn 47).

The centurion’s confession also indicates how Mark may have meant this title to be understood. A centurion, probably a non-Jew, would have seen the curtain temple torn and would possibly have thoughts of the miraculous things that occurred during the deaths of Roman emperors, considered to be deified upon death (Collins 94). In addition, the wording used by the centurion, “God’s son” is unique to this use of “Son of God” in Mark, as it is the only time the phrase could be translated as “Son of a god.” It would hearken to imperial cults’ use of the phrase “God’s son” or “Son of a god” (Collins 95). In saying that Jesus was “God’s son,” the centurion was recognizing Jesus, the Messiah and “Son of God,” and not the emperor, as the true ruler of the world (Collins 97).

3.2 Matthew

Matthew uses the title “Son of God” to emphasize Jesus’ role in the eschaton as the Messiah and to demonstrate the importance of Jesus’ death (Dunn 29). Jesus being the Son of God is referred to over twenty times in Matthew and is crucial to understanding Matthew’s portrayal of the life of Jesus (Hurtado 339). While the death of Jesus is important to Matthew’s understanding of “Son of God,” he does not keep the identity a secret until Jesus’ death like Mark does (Dreyer 61).

“Son of God” imagery starts very early in Matthew with a birth narrative that shows Jesus being the Son of God via conception through the Holy Spirit. This birth narrative is intimately connected to the previous statements in the gospel regarding Jesus being the Messiah and “son of Abraham” (Kingsbury 40). Matthew begins with a genealogy that shows Jesus being the “son of David” and “son of Abraham” but then quickly continues to show Jesus also being
the “Son of God.” He ends the divine birth narrative, however, with confirmation that Joseph “legitimizes” Jesus as his own son, cementing Jesus’ status as “son of David” (Veresput 533). To fully understand what it means to be the Messiah, therefore, requires understanding that Jesus is the “Son of God” (Kingsbury 40).

There are additional places where Matthew makes a clearer connection than the other two synoptic gospels between being the Messiah and being the Son of God. The first occurs when Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” (16.15). Peter, in Matthew, responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In both Mark and Luke, Peter simply calls Jesus the Messiah, but Matthew uses Peter’s confession to connect Jesus’ role as Messiah with his role as the Son of God (Hurtado 339). For Peter, and Jesus, these two titles are synonymous as shown in verse 20 where it says, “Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” He does not need to specify “Son of God” in addition to “Messiah” because the title is incorporated in his messiahship. “The Son of the living God” is an extension of Messiah, not a separate title in addition to it.

Later in Matthew, Jesus asks the question, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” (22.42). The Pharisees answer, “The son of David,” a response Jesus then calls into question by analyzing how the Messiah can be both Lord over David but also his son (22.42-43). Veresput says that with his questioning, Jesus is opening up the possibility that there is more to the answer than what the Pharisees supply. Matthew creates this exchange in such a way as to connect Jesus’ statuses as Messiah, son of David, and Son of God (546).

The other prominent scene that includes “Son of God” terminology unique to Matthew is the crucifixion. Mark uses the phrase “Son of God” once during the crucifixion (15.39), and Luke does not use it at all (Angel 302). Matthew, in contrast, uses the phrase three times during
the crucifixion, showing how critical Jesus’ identity as Son of God is to the crucifixion (27.39; 27.43; 27.54; Angel 302). The crucifixion scene is key to the Matthean ideology for “Son of God” because the crucifixion is also a scene where Matthew portrays Jesus as the Messiah. It is only in Matthew where Jesus is mocked as both the Messiah and Son of God (Veresput 547). This mocking of Jesus matches Satan’s mocking of him during the temptation (Davies and Allison 619). Matthew utilizes this parallel to illustrate that obedience to the very end, all the way to death, is critical to what is means to be Messiah and “Son of God” (Davies and Allison 619). Jesus has the power to save himself, as shown in 26.53, but willfully does not because he would not be fulfilling his role as Messiah and Son of God. Additionally during the death, Matthew writes about earthquakes and tombs splitting as some of the dead rise from their graves (27.52-53), imagery that was connected to the expected Messiah since a general resurrection was anticipated by some when the Messiah came (Levine 58). It is directly because of these natural phenomena that the centurion and “those with him” declare Jesus to be “God’s Son” (27.45-56; Veresput 548).

Finally, during Jesus’ reappearance on earth, he makes his connection between Father, Son, and Messiah one last time. During the Great Commission, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28.19). In this post-resurrection scene, Jesus cements his relationship with the Father and demonstrates how this connection with the Father gives him power over heaven and earth (Hurtado 339). As Kingsbury says, “[H]e is the resurrected Son of God, whose eschatological glory God revealed. . .” (57). Throughout his gospel, Matthew prominently portrays Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God to show Jesus’ power and abilities and the importance of his death to his identity (Kingsbury 42).
3.3 Luke

Like Matthew and Mark, Luke also utilizes the connection between “Messiah” and “Son of God” to further his Christology. He advances the idea of Jesus as Messiah, however, by making his role relevant to all humanity, not just the Jewish people. For Luke, Jesus represents the true Son of God who was able to fulfill the promise that the first son of God, Adam, could not. Jesus is faithful to the mission and purpose given to him by God while Adam betrayed God’s wishes for him (Scaer 71). To complete this universal portrayal, Luke uses “Son of God” to show Jesus’ identification with humanity.

From the very beginning of his life, Luke makes connections between Jesus being the Messiah and Son of God. He writes, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1.32-33). Luke puts the words of 1 Kings 1:48 into the words of Gabriel to connect the Messiah with Jesus being the begotten Son of God (Nolland 52). Part of this birth scene involves Jesus being presented at the Temple, where his family is met by Simeon, a man who was told by God that he would not experience death until he witnessed the birth of the Messiah (2.25-35). As part of his praise towards God for this child he says, “[F]or my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2.30-31). The story of Simeon is unique to Luke and shows how Jesus’ work, as Messiah and Son of God, is not limited to Jews but was for Jews and Gentiles alike.

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4 It is important to note that the idea of the Messiah coming to save the entire world is not unique to Luke. Luke, in fact, quotes Old Testament passages frequently when discussing universal salvation. For example, compare Luke 2.32 to Isaiah 42.6 (Strauss 479). For additional Jewish references to salvation for those outside of Judaism, see Zechariah 8.22-23 and Isaiah 49.6 (Levine 66; Tannehill 329).
Shortly following his birth narrative, Luke provides the reader with a genealogy connecting Jesus to Adam, the “son of God” (3.28). While genealogies in the Old Testament sometimes connect all the way back to Adam, none ever includes God (Nolland 174). In adding God to the end of Jesus’ human genealogy, Luke shows how Jesus as Messiah comes to participate fully in the human experience while also demonstrating the complete obedience to which Adam could not adhere because Jesus is the true “Son of God” (Nolland 173). This genealogy, while very different from the one found in Matthew, still traces Jesus’ ancestors through Israel, maintaining Jesus as the Messiah while concurrently showing the universality of this role.5

The intended comparison between Adam and Jesus is further emphasized by the temptation scene of Luke, another area of rich “Son of God” imagery and language. In the temptation scene, Jesus proves how he is the “new Adam” by continually not giving in to the temptation as Adam did when he ate from the forbidden tree (Scaer 72).

During the crucifixion, Luke deviates from Matthew and Mark again. While Mark and Matthew show Jesus crying, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” Luke’s Jesus accepts his fate with obedience by simply saying, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Matthew 27.46, Mark 15.34, Luke 23.46). Calling God “Father” evokes the Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus. Luke is making the point that Jesus is the obedient son, never giving in to the temptation to revoke his mission, to the very end of his life (Scaer 72).

The last important “Son of God” moment in Luke is one where Luke leaves out a “Son of God” reference that is crucial to the other two Synoptic gospels’ portrayals of Jesus as “Son of God.” In Matthew 27.54 and Mark 15.39, the centurion confesses that Jesus is the “Son of God.”

5 Luke, however, makes the connection with Israel through Nathan and not the line of Solomon, presumably because of the finality of Jeremiah’s words in Jeremiah 22.24-30 that end the continuation of the line of Solomon (Nolland 170). The house of Nathan, however, has a place in the future of Israel (cf. Zechariah 12.12; Nolland 170).
Luke, however, has the centurion say, “Certainly this man was innocent [righteous]” (Luke 23.47). Redaction critics point out that Luke manipulates the Markan material to skip the “merely messianic overtones that Luke wants to avoid” (Byrne 94). Instead, Luke is showing how Jesus’ death and his role as Son of God, something already highlighted by the prayer to his Father, is intimately linked with his innocence and righteousness (Scaer 71). In identifying with all of humanity by becoming the obedient “Son of God,” Jesus universalized the messianic role in the Gospel of Luke.

3.4 John

More than any of the other evangelists, John uses the terms “Messiah” and “Son of God” interchangeably and to illustrate the unique, close relationship Jesus has with God. The equivalent nature of the two titles can be seen in John 1.49, where Nathaniel says to Jesus, “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” The story of John the Baptist, as told in John, also shows this phenomenon. In John 3.28, John is talking about the Messiah while referring to Jesus, but then in 3.35-36, he starts to refer to Jesus as the Son of God. This exchange of the two titles implies that in some way Son of God and Messiah are “equivalent” (Collins and Collins 179).

In John 10, some Jews ask Jesus whether he is the Messiah. Jesus avoids a direct answer and launches into a discussion about how he is God’s son and what his relationship with his Father entails. Again, John relates the Messiahship to “Son of God.”

The connection between “Messiah” and “Son of God” in John shows how the two titles were almost one and also demonstrates how “Son of God” meant much more than just “Messiah.” Larry Hurtado describes John’s use of Messiah and Son of God as almost a “messianic secret” (358). As he says, “...the secret known to readers and unperceived by
characters in the story is who this Messiah *really* is (the preexistent, divine Son), and from *whence* he really comes (God)” (Hurtado 358). John appropriates the “Son of God” terminology prevalent in early Christianity and pushes its meaning beyond simple Davidic kingship and messianic expectations. This expanded definition for “Son of God” in John can be seen in how John uses the term “Son of God” and related phrases to show the close, unique relationship between the Son and Father. John expresses the Father-Son relationship more than any other Gospel. Jesus calls God “Father” more than 100 times and refers to himself as “Son” more than 20 times, which is much more than any other gospel (Dunn 29). In fact, the title “Father” for God appears more often in John’s gospel than all of the titles for Jesus combined (Hengel 369).

An important aspect of Jesus’ sonship in John is the unique nature of this relationship. While John does describe others becoming children of God, the sonship of Jesus is unique because it is only through him that others may become children of God. He is unique because he is the first (Peppard 145). John 3.17 shows this relationship well by saying, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Peppard 102). An additional example of his uniqueness is shown by the fact that only Jesus, next to the Father, is to be “honored” like the Father (5.23; Hurtado 363).

The close and unique nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father can be seen in the willingness of the Father to give everything to the Son and in the willingness of the Son to act in obedience to the Father. John is constantly speaking of what the Father has given the Son, including the Spirit, authority, and his disciples (3.34; 5.22; 17.6; Cowan 123). It is the

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6 It would be a mistake, however, to see uniqueness in the use of Father-Son terminology to explain the relationship between God and Jesus. Jesus was not the only Jew to use terminology like “Abba” and “Father” to talk to God. For example, during the time of Jesus there was a charismatic Jew called Honi who prayed to God like a son (Dunn 15). The generation after Jesus, Hanina ben dosa heard a voice from heaven call him “my son” (Dunn 15). The use of the terms “Abba” and “Father” were not unique to Jesus and are not, within themselves, indicators of the unique relationship Jesus had with God (Levine 42).
love of the Father for the Son that propels him to give him everything (3.35; Cowan 123). They share a mutual love, as shown when Jesus prays, “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17.26). An important passage that delineates the close relationship between the Son and Father in John is John 5.19-30, where it is clear that Jesus is dependent on the Father and works closely with him to fulfill the Father’s wishes (Cowan 123). Jesus demonstrates his obedience by saying, “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (17.4). And Jesus’ last words on the cross, “It is finished,” “signify the completion of his mission which he has carried out in perfect obedience to the Father” (Cowan 126).

Portraying Jesus as the unique Son of God who holds a close relationship with God, the Father, is crucial to John’s overall Christology. The Gospel of John is rich with Father-Son imagery that propels the concept of Jesus as the “Son of God” farther than previous gospels.

3.6 Paul

“Son of God” is not a common phrase for Paul as he only uses it seventeen times in his writings (Dunn 37). For Paul, the designation “Son of God” and related terms and phrases refer to Jesus as a mediator of salvation (Hengel 10). He does this in two main ways: by showing Jesus as the savior from judgment and God’s wrath and also by portraying him as the firstborn of many, much as John did. He also utilizes messianic language to further his message.

Paul connects Jesus as Son of God with Jesus as Messiah many times in his writings. In Romans 8.29 he writes, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.” This verse bring together “Son of God” terminology with imagery from Psalm 89, which was considered a royal messianic psalm because of its descriptions of David and talk of anointed kings (Peppard

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7 Only the 7 undisputed letters will be used in this paper.
101). In addition in Romans 1.1-15, Paul speaks of Jesus being “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (vs. 3), which is a clear reference to the Messiah. He goes on in verse 4 to say that Jesus “was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit . . . .” This language shows how Paul believes that Jesus was the Messiah and in this way became the Son of God. In other letters, Paul also shows how Jesus’ sonship is dependent on him being the Messiah (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15.20-21; Galatians 4.4-5).

Paul’s inclusion of an early Christian hymn in the letter to the Philippians preserves early evidence of this connection between Jesus’ messiahship and his status as Son of God. In Philippians 1.6, 9-10, the terminology of “the day of Christ” shows how Jesus is the Messiah and how God has “exalted” Jesus to the point of being Lord who was “in the form of God” (Collins 114). Here, Paul shows how “Son of God” meant more than being the Messiah; Jesus was now like God.

In this messianic role, Jesus had the power to save others from judgment as seen in a few of Paul’s letters. In Romans, the letter begins with a greeting that includes “declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship” (1.4-5). In this verse, Paul shows how Jesus’ death and resurrection give other humans a “basis for hoping to be acquitted at the judgment and to share in the glorious, eternal existence of God” (Collins and Collins 119). Later on in Romans, Paul makes the same point more clearly by using language of “sin” (Romans 8.3-4). Paul shows how Jesus became in the “likeness of sinful flesh” in order to fulfill the requirements of the law. As the Son of God, then, Jesus became human to save those who could not save themselves (Dunn 45). In Galatians, Paul writes that “the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification comes
through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (2.20-21). Again, Paul writes of Jesus’ death and shows how through this moment, Jesus obtained the power to “justify” and obtain grace for others (Collins and Collins 107; Dunn 37; cf. 1 Thessalonians 1.10, 2 Corinthians 1.19, 1 Corinthians 15.24-28, Romans 5.10, and Romans 8.32).

An important part of Paul’s theology that also shows Jesus as the mediator of salvation is his portrayal of Jesus as the firstborn whose existence allows for the creation of other children of God. Again, Romans is a good place to find Son of God terminology that describes this aspect of sonship. In Romans 8.29, Paul uses Psalm 89 to portray Jesus as the chosen firstborn who opens the doors for “a large family” (Peppard 101).

These two ideas, of Jesus redeeming others and of Jesus being the firstborn, are not separate ideas for Paul but are interrelated, as seen in Galatians 4.4-5 where he writes, “But when the Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may receive adoption as children” (Collins and Collins 107). Here Paul explains how Jesus was born first so that others could later become children via adoption. Two verses later, Paul writes, “and if a child then also an heir” to show the certainty believers can have of the power of Jesus to be able to redeem (Peppard 97).

For Paul then, it is Jesus’ death and resurrection that defines how he is the Messiah and “Son of God.” Through his death, Jesus satisfies the requirements of the law and is able to open the gates for others to join the family of God.

3.7 Conclusion

“Son of God” in the gospels and Paul is used in slightly different ways to convey many views of what the term meant in contemplating the Christology of Jesus. All use “Son of God” as an extension of the title “Messiah.” All of these early writers also somehow connect “Son of
God” to Jesus’ death, and some thoughtfully consider how Jesus relates to humanity through his role as “Son of God.” Clearly demonstrating that Jesus as the Messiah is rightfully considered the “Son of God,” the Gospel writers and Paul have a more difficult time explaining when and how Jesus entered this role. How they answer these important questions demonstrates the complexity of the title “Son of God.”

4. How and when did Jesus Become the “Son of God”?

A major debate surrounding this title that church history has mostly silenced is how and when Jesus became the Son of God. Even though begotten, adoptive, and preexistent imagery were used simultaneously for the first four centuries of Christianity, the Council of Nicaea declared adoptionism to be heresy while accepting begotten and preexistent language as acceptable (Peppard 160). This issue took so long to settle because the New Testament, and subsequently early Christianity, recognized all three methods as legitimate possibilities. A review through these categories shows how all three maintain scriptural support.

4.1 Adoption

In the gospels, the scene that most strongly depicts God’s adoption of Jesus is the baptism. At the baptism, God proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1.11). According to Peppard, the words “well pleased” can be better translated as “choose,” “elect,” or “decree”(109). With this different translation, God is adopting Jesus in the moment of baptism by choosing him as his son. In addition, in alluding to the enthronement ritual in Psalm 2, God uses his words to proclaim Jesus as his son (Collins and Collins 127). The most satisfying evidence of adoption during the baptismal scene occurs with Jesus’ later answer to the Jewish leaders who ask, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Mark 11.28). Jesus responds by referring to his baptism and asks, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven,
or was it of human origin?” (11.30). Peppard argues that even though Jesus’ statement is cryptic, Mark is still pointing to Jesus’ baptism as the moment of adoption. For Mark, the baptism is the moment Jesus received his authority (125). Mark uses the question to say that Jesus’ baptism was the moment he got authority from God. The question is simply wondering who/what is the authority’s original source: God or humans. Jesus, having heard God’s voice at the baptism, knows the authority came from God at that moment.8

Luke’s portrayal of this baptism scene makes the concept of adoption more clear. What is interesting in Luke’s portrayal is his lack of describing Jesus “ascending” from the water. Both Matthew and Mark talk about Jesus coming out of the water, but this is absent from Luke (cf. Matthew 3.16; Mark 1.10). This absence makes the focus of this section of the passage not on Jesus ascending but on the Spirit descending (Dennison 17). This focus, then, might mean that the voice from heaven, before shown as borrowing language from Psalm 2.7, might also be taking ideas from Isaiah 42.1, which reads, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Dennison 22). This argument gains more traction when looking at the transfiguration scene in Luke, another important moment for understanding Jesus as the “Son of God.” Unique to Luke’s transfiguration is God referring to Jesus as “his Chosen” (Luke 9.35). Both Matthew and Mark choose to continue the language from the baptism of “Beloved Son,” but Luke switches to “Chosen,” which is the vocabulary used in Isaiah 42.1, connecting again to the idea of Jesus as the servant whose purpose is to bring justice to humanity.

Paul also uses adoption imagery, specifically in Romans and Galatians. Romans begins with a greeting and prayer that explains how Jesus became Son of God through the flesh.

8 Important to Peppard’s interpretation of this passage is the context. Many times, Jesus’ question to the Pharisees is seen as a distraction or as not answering their original question of from where his authority comes. For Peppard, however, he answers their question with his own question that points to the correct answer.
Romans 1.3-4 reads, “The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead. . ..” Collins believes that this can be read as Jesus becoming the Messiah at the time of his resurrection via adoption by God since Paul uses the adoption language commonly used with Old Testament kings (117). Hengel also sees these verses indicating that Jesus became the Son of God at the resurrection (60; cf. Dunn 67). Later on in Romans, Paul writes of Jesus being sent by God (8.3-4). While some may see “sending” language as an indicator of preexistence, many biblical scholars see this language instead as being used in the same way that God sent prophets in the Old Testament (Collins and Collins 121; cf. Dunn 45). Additionally in Galatians 4.4-5, Paul says that God “sent” his son. Paul again uses this word in the same way that it was used in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between the prophets and God (Peppard 138; cf. Collins and Collins 107). Instead of preexistence, both of these passages may show how Jesus became the Son of God through fulfilling his mission on Earth to reconcile humans with God via his death and resurrection (Dunn 45).

4.2 Begotten

A second way Jesus is shown as becoming the “Son of God” in the New Testament is by being begotten by God. Jesus being the begotten Son of God is essential to Christian beliefs even though “begotten” is an antiquated word that many Christians probably cannot define. The term “begotten” refers to one being born, or generated, “typically from a male parent” (“Begotten”). The only evidence for Jesus being the begotten Son of God is seen in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. While many Christians may believe that the Gospel of John
also contains begotten as a method by which Jesus becomes the Son of God, when we actually examine the text, it can be seen that Jesus is never described as “begotten” in that gospel.

Matthew and Luke begin with birth narratives written to establish Jesus’ “divine origins” (Dunn 49). These narratives are unique in the Bible in that Mary is presented as a virgin. In other biblical stories in which the conceptions are done by the power of God, the women are barren but not celibate, let alone a virgin (Hurtado 329). God, in those circumstances, comes to the aid of a couple or a woman who is desperate for a child (Hurtado 329). Instead in Matthew and Luke, God, through the angel, approaches Mary with no prompting from her. This unique birth, therefore, is part of God’s plan as “Jesus’ conception happens entirely by God’s own power, completely at God’s initiative, and solely with reference to God’s redemptive purposes” (Hurtado 329). How this child is begotten is described by the angel Gabriel in this way: “The Holy Spirit will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1.35). This birth is like none other divinely given birth before it.

Later in his gospel, Luke reinforces the fact that Jesus does not have an earthly father with his commentary in 3.23 where he says, “He [Jesus] was the son (as was thought) of Joseph.” Luke especially wants to show that Joseph was not the father of Jesus because Jesus is the son of no man but the Son of God (Byrne 84).

Jesus being the begotten Son of God, however, is not part of John’s gospel even though many English translations make it seem like this is the case. For example John 3.16 in the NKJV reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The original Greek text, however, actually never refers to Jesus as being “begotten” and a more accurate translation reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .” (3.16; Peppard 141).
In the opening prologue John 1.1-18, some translations of verse 13 say- “who [children of God] were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God”- as being singular and not plural (Peppard 142). A singular translation would make verse 13, “who [Word] was born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” Instead of verse 13 continuing verse 12 and explaining how humans become children of God, verse 13 would say “he” (the Word) is begotten.9 While there are a few early Latin sources that include the singular (and Tertullian uses it in a defense of his Christology) the plural version is the one that appears in all Greek texts and makes the most sense in context (Peppard 142).

Also in the prologue are verses 14 and 18 that some believe indicate the begottenness of Jesus/the Word. The Greek word used for the phrase translated as “only begotten son” in these two verses is just an adjective that could be translated as “unique” or “only” (Peppard 143). The word “son” does not even appear (Peppard 107).

The phrase “only-begotten” in these passages can be traced all the way back to Justin Martyr in the second century. Later it was solidified in modern Christian consciousness with the KJV translation that worked from Jerome’s Vulgate, which included the addition of the words “begotten” and “son” (Peppard 143). “Begotten” terminology, then, is only seen in the Gospel of John when referring to others, such as John the Baptist and the children of God, but is never used when speaking of Jesus.

4.3 Preexistence

The third way Jesus could be the “Son of God” is by being a preexistent being who was never created but has always existed with God. While the preexistence of Jesus is indicated in Paul and the Gospel of John, a major debate continues in scholarship whether the Synoptic

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9 If, in fact, the word should be in the singular, that would be evidence for the Word being described as begotten in John. However, it would be the only instance of this word referring to the Word/Jesus in the entire Gospel.
Gospels show any evidence of Jesus’ preexistence. Many biblical scholars would argue against the Synoptic Gospels showing any inkling that Jesus was a preexistent being.

One notable exception, however, is Simon Gathercole who in his book *The Preexistent Son* argues that preexistence is more evident in the Synoptic Gospels than most scholars believe. The main thrust of his thesis comes from ten “I have come” sayings (Gathercole 83). These sayings are formulaic with Jesus saying, “I have come” plus a purpose formula (Gathercole 114). Gathercole argues that only heavenly beings use this type of formula and cites examples from many sources including Daniel, Tobit, and 4 Ezra (114). He also says that since Jesus talks of coming for a deliberate purpose he must have come from somewhere, such as heaven (Gathercole 86-87).

Since the publication of this book, some scholars have engaged in a critique of this argument in their own works about the “Son of God.” Collins, in her book *King and Messiah as Son of God*, says that Gathercole’s argument is weak because it is partially based on examples that come much later than the Synoptic gospels (126). Gathercole’s basis for the “I have come” sayings indicating Jesus’ preexistence is the use of this formula by angels, who are beings that come from heaven and use this same “I have come” plus purpose formula. Many of his examples of angels using this terminology come from sources that were written after the gospels. She also notes that he “ignores” God sending human individuals who were not preexistent on tasks to fulfill particular purposes, such as John the Baptist’s mission in Luke 7.33-34 (Collins and Collins 126).

Peppard in his book *The Son of God in the Roman World* also takes issue with Gathercole’s argument but for different reasons. He takes to task Gathercole’s argument that it

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10 For example, Matthew 5.17 reads, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.”
would be “strange” if Jesus were divine and transcendent without being preexistent. (Gathercole qtd. in Peppard 11). Peppard points out that in the New Testament era there were figures who were divine and heavenly but not preexistent (11). Therefore, Gathercole’s argument does not hold up.

Outside of these ten “I have come” sayings, Gathercole includes additional verses in the Synoptic Gospels that could point to the preexistence of Jesus. One such verse is found in Luke 22.31 where Jesus predicts Peter’s betrayal by saying, “Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.” Gathercole believes that this verse shows Jesus as part of the heavenly council that is present in Job where the ha-satan bargains with God to tempt Job into being unfaithful to God (52). This story shows Jesus interceding on Peter’s behalf and knows that his prayers will not fail (Gathercole 52). While some may argue that prophets are occasionally privy to the heavenly council, Gathercole believes that Jesus is a permanent member, unlike the prophets, because of his continual affirmation from other members of the council, such as God and angels (e.g. Luke 1.32; Mark 1.11; 54). This verse is then evidence of Jesus’ preexistence before coming to earth via his immaculate conception, according to Gathercole.

Mark, as stated by Gathercole, also contains hints of preexistence outside of the ten “I have come” sayings. Crucial to his argument is that prior to Jesus’ death only demons and God refer to Jesus as the Son of God. Their recognition of his identity, something not evident to humans, is only possible because he is part of their realm of spiritual beings (Gathercole 54). In addition in Mark 1.2-3, the author references Isaiah 40.3, which originally reads, “A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh . . . .’” In Mark 1.3, before the baptism scene
the narrator uses the Greek “Lord” but still makes this connection between preparing the way of God, which in this case is God on Earth--Jesus (Gathercole 244).

Even though Matthew contains a birth narrative, the question remains whether Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit creates an entirely new being or if it is simply the vehicle by which Jesus leaves his place in the heavenly realms to come to Earth. Some do point to the angel’s pronouncement in 1.23 that “they shall name him Emmanuel” as an indication that Jesus, as God, is coming to Earth. However, “Emmanuel” could just indicate that Jesus is divine but not necessarily the same as God and therefore preexistent (Collins and Collins 139). Additionally, Kingsbury argues that the purpose of the birth narrative was to show Jesus’ role in humanity as part of a “divine commission” but not to establish his divine origins (540). To follow their arguments, it is important to recognize that divinity does not automatically mean that Jesus was preexistent. For example, even though Matthew 11.28-30 puts the words of personified Wisdom from Sirach 51.23-27 in Jesus’ mouth, this does not mean that Jesus is preexistent because this type of language could indicate his presence as a prophet or divine being, but these identities, again, do not necessarily make him God incarnate and therefore preexistent (Collins and Collins 142).

It is in the Gospel of John where the most explicit evidence for the preexistence of Jesus can be found. The opening prologue, John 1.1-18, draws from the Jewish Wisdom tradition to evoke images of a preexistent Jesus who has been existent since creation (John 1.10; Hengel 73). From this Wisdom tradition, John takes many attributes of Wisdom and puts them on Jesus. For example, Proverbs 8.22-23, Sirach 24.9, and Wisdom 6.22 show Wisdom existing with God since the beginning, as John does in 1.1 (Brown 261). Also, Wisdom descends from heaven to live among humans in Proverbs 8.31, Sirach 24.8, and Baruch 3.37 and John 1.14 says, “And the
Word became flesh and lived among us,” which depicts Jesus coming from somewhere to enter Earth (Brown 261).

Preexistence can be found elsewhere in the Gospel of John. Numerous times, Jesus uses the phrase “I am.” For example in 8.58, Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I am” (Dunn 29). The reaction that follows in the next verse from the crowd- preparing to stone him for blasphemy-shows how significant the use of this phrase is because Jesus is using the divine name to refer to himself. 11 The importance of Jesus using this phrase can also be seen in John 18.5-6, where Jesus surrenders to the soldiers. The soldiers fall down when Jesus uses the phrase to describe himself showing how much power is in this name (Hurtado 371).

The significance of the phrase “I am” comes from the Old Testament where in passages like Isaiah 43.10 God uses the phrase “I am” to refer to himself (Hurtado 371). In referring back to passages in the Old Testament, John makes implicit claims that Jesus is equal to God and by doing so shows Jesus’ preexistence (Dunn 29).

More explicit preexistence motifs can be found in Jesus’ words. In John 3.13 and 6.62, Jesus talks of how he descended from heaven. In John 17 when Jesus is praying for his disciples, he says in verse 5, “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” With little effort, one can see how these verses speak to Jesus existing in the heavenly realms with God prior to his time on earth (Hurtado 368-9).

Paul also contains support for Jesus’ preexistence. First Corinthians 8.6 is the only time in Paul’s undisputed letters where he describes Jesus being present at creation (Hengel 13). It reads, “[Y]et for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we

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11 Blasphemy was a charge only leveled for three reasons. 1. using the divine name of God, 2. arrogant disrespect of God and 3. insulting the chosen leader of Israel (Bateman 556). Here, Jesus could have been charged for either committing reasons one or two. It was probably the second as Jesus was exalting himself to the level of God (Bateman 557).

12 See also 8.4; 8.28;13.19
exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

Collins believes this verses can be interpreted two different ways, one of which involves ascribing preexistence to Jesus. Borrowing from the Wisdom tradition, Paul makes the connection between a preexistent Jesus who was present at Creation in this verse (Collins and Collins 112; cf. Hurtado 325).\(^\text{13}\)

The most explicit reference to Jesus’ preexistence in Paul’s letters comes from an early Christian hymn found in Philippians 2 (Collins and Collins 116). In this hymn, Jesus makes the choice to humble himself and become human even though he was equal to God. Philippians 2.9-11 uses Isaiah 45.23-25 as an indication that Jesus was a second God figure who “accept[ed] a servant role as [an] agent of God” (Hurtado 389).

Other verses that many scholars believe to be indicators of Jesus’ preexistence include 1 Corinthians 15.47 where Jesus is the “man from heaven” contrasted with Adam who is the “man of the earth.” Second Corinthians 8.9 talks about Jesus “becoming poor,” much like the Philippians hymn. By becoming poor, Jesus willingly surrenders his heavenly status to become a human being. In 1 Corinthians 10.4, Jesus is described as being in the wilderness with the Israelites (Hurtado 119). This verse would indicate then that Jesus was a distinct being prior to his birth on earth and therefore was able to be present with the Israelites long before he was ever born in Bethlehem.

4.4 Conclusion

Adopted, begotten, or preexistent? When looking at the many voices in the New Testament, it is evident why this doctrinal question was not settled until long after the death of

\(^\text{13}\) It could also, however, be referencing the idea Paul espouses elsewhere of the new creation that comes through Jesus’ death, which would mean that it is only through his death and resurrection that Jesus was made the same as God’s wisdom (2 Corinthians 5.17; Collins and Collins 112).
Jesus. All three positions have support in the gospels and Paul’s letters, so it is difficult to discern which is the “correct” position.

In looking at these three possibilities, what is most clear is that these views do not need to be held in contention since the early writers felt comfortable mixing metaphors. For example, Luke has no problem including various moments and methods where Jesus becomes the Son of God given that “more sources of legitimacy appeal to various cultures” (Peppard 94). He can include a genealogy that connects Jesus to Adam, the original son of God and thereby copy Roman practice of emperors becoming divine by both adoption and begetting, but he can also use the metaphor of preexistence, such as when he portrays Jesus as part of the divine council (Luke 3.38; Luke 22.31; Peppard 135).

When did Jesus become the Son of God? Again, there are several potential biblical answers to this question, including his birth, baptism, and resurrection. Perhaps then it is preferable to let these answers sit side by side rather than uplifting one as the “correct answer.” Regardless of how Jesus became the Son of God, the early Christian writers made it clear that Jesus was (and is) the Son of God.

5. Final Thoughts

“Son of God” is a phrase Christians sometimes take for granted. It can be easy to ascribe a high Christology to this title if one pays attention to church tradition and views the Bible through that lens. It is clear that there is plenty of evidence in the Bible to support the high Christology that church tradition has maintained. We must keep in mind, however, that there are many traditions that are preserved in the Bible which have been washed away from Christian memory as “heretical” or “blasphemy.” Approaching these passages that seem to contradict tradition with fear or indignation is not the right course of action. Embracing these passages as
many parts of the story of Jesus may be a more helpful way to digest them. Jesus was simply too magnificent and wonderful to fully comprehended or described adequately with one metaphor or explanation. Furthermore one title, even the “Son of God” title, cannot completely describe Jesus.

This study of “Son of God” does not begin to understand Jesus as a human, as Lord, or as God. To holistically approach Jesus, or at least to attempt to do so, one must look to all his titles and descriptors, remembering not to wipe away any contradictions or conflicting view points but accepting all as pieces of a more complete picture of Jesus. With this methodology, perhaps we can begin to grasp the magnificence of the Messiah and Son of God.
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