

APPENDIX A

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THE TERM “SON OF GOD” IN THE LIGHT OF OLD TESTAMENT IDIOM

by S. Herbert Bess

The Second Person of the Trinity is frequently referred to in the New Testament as the Son of God (Luke 1:35; John 1:34; 3:18; Acts 9:20; Romans 1:4; et passim). In developing a statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, the early church encountered a problem arising from the use of the word “son.” Early church fathers stressed the word *logos*, but when attention shifted more to the term “son,” the problem became more acute. The difficulty stems from a too-literal interpretation of the word “son,” and from assuming that the expression refers to origin or to generation, rather than to relationship; from understanding the word too much on the analogy of human experience and therefore supposing the existence of a Father who existed prior to the Son.

Church leaders of the third and fourth centuries composed a doctrine of the Trinity and a statement on the nature of Christ which took account of the problem and

sought to deal with the word “son” in such a way as to do justice to the deity of Christ as well as to his human nature. This was not done without many conferences and councils, nor without many restatements of doctrine so as to correct heretical views or distortions occasioned by too great a stress on one factor to the neglect of some other. A satisfactory formulation was arrived at finally at the Council of Nicea in 325 A. D., after a long history of discussion and controversy.

The Alexandrian scholar, Origen, had in the preceding century contributed to the formulation of the doctrine when he discussed what he termed the *eternal generation* of the Son. He did not mean by the term, however, exactly what the Nicene theologians later meant by it. For while Origen used the term *eternal generation*, he nonetheless taught that Christ was less than God the Father in respect to *essence*. He maintained that the Son did not participate in the self-subsistent substance of the deity, and he should not be thought of as consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father.¹ Origen’s inadequate and unfortunate definition of the Sonship of Christ laid the groundwork for the heretical views of Arius and his followers on the nature of Christ. Their heresy is being perpetuated today by the so-called Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The Nicene Council in clarifying the doctrine of eternal generation adopted the statement that “the Son is begotten out of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not created, consubstantial with the Father (*homoousion tōi patri*).”² Exposition of this position and controversy over it proceeded for years following, but the statement stood as the orthodox view on the nature of Christ.

It is not my intention to try to improve on the statement. Rather, I intend to show that the idiomatic usage of the word “son” in the Old Testament supports the above statement and sheds light on it. I believe that such a study

will show how Jesus is properly called the Son of God, the term not implying anything about his origin, or that he had an origin. For we must admit that such an expression as “the eternal generation of the Son” is a highly sophisticated concept quite difficult for some professed theologians, to say nothing of the laity. I suggest that an inductive study of the idiomatic use of “son” will make it easier to explain how Jesus is the Son of God, while avoiding the heretical idea that he ever had a beginning.

The word “son” is used in the Old Testament so frequently as to discourage the effort to count the occurrences. In the overwhelming majority of cases it is used in the literal sense of offspring or descendant. In a significant number of cases, however, the word “son” is used in the non-literal sense, indicating a person’s profession, his status or circumstance, or his character. Following are some examples of this usage, the number of them being more than sufficient to demonstrate the point, but employed to show how common was this usage among the Israelites.

I. Showing membership in a profession or a guild

1. Sons of the prophets (*b^enē-hann^ebī’îm*, 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3 ff.) refer to men belonging to a prophetic band. Likewise, Amos’ assertion (Amos 7:14) that he had not been a prophet or the son of a prophet meant that he had not been a member of such a professional group, but God called him to the prophetic office while he was pursuing another line of work.
2. Sons of oil (*b^enē hayyīṣhār*, Zech. 4:14) are ones anointed with oil, in this case members holding the priestly office.
3. Son of the perfumers (*ben-haraqqaḥîm*, Neh. 3:8), a member of the perfumers’ trade.
4. Son of the goldsmiths (*ben-haṣṣōreṣî*, Neh. 3:31), a goldsmith.

5. Sons of the gate-keepers (Ezra 2:42) are simply gate-keepers.
6. Sons of the troop (2 Chron. 25:13) are men of the army.

Non-biblical texts from ancient times make use of the word in the same idiomatic way. The Code of Hammurabi, para. 188, uses the expression “son of an artisan” to refer to a member of the artisan class.³

II. Showing participation in a state or condition

1. Sons of the exile (*b^enēhaggôlah*, Ezra 4:1; 6:19; etc.) were Jews who had lived in exile but were now returned to the homeland. The expression is equivalent to exiles.
2. Son of a foreign country (*ben-nēkār*, Gen. 17:12,27; Exod. 12:43) is a foreigner. The term is translated “stranger” in the KJV.
3. Sons of pledges (2 Kings 14:14) are hostages, and the term is so translated in KJV.
4. Sons of affliction (Prov. 31:5) are afflicted ones.
5. Sons of passing away (*b^ene h^alop*, Prov. 31:8), are orphans. The KJV failed to catch the sense of this construction.
6. Son, or sons, of death (1 Sam. 20:31, Psa. 79:11) refer to those who are condemned to die.

Again, the Code of Hammurabi gives us an example of the non-biblical usage of this idiom. Paragraph 196 refers to the son of a free man and the son of a slave. The expressions may be translated properly as a member of the aristocracy and a member of the slave class.⁴

III. Showing a certain character

1. Son of valor (*ben-ḥayil*, 1 Sam. 14:52) is simply a brave man. KJV translates the expression “valiant man.”
2. Son of wise ones (Isa. 19:11) refers to one of the wise men.

3. Sons of rebellion (Num. 17:25; 17:10 in English Bible) is properly translated in KJV as “rebels.”
4. Son, or sons, of wickedness (Psa. 89:23; 2 Sam. 3:34; 7:10) are wicked people.
5. Son of murder (2 Kings 6:32) denotes a murderer.
6. Sons of foolishness (Job 30:8) refer to senseless people.
7. Sons of no name (Job 30:8), translated in KJV as “children of base men,” means a disreputable brood.
8. Son of smiting (Deut. 25:2) signifies a person who deserves to be beaten.
9. Son, or sons, of worthlessness (1 Sam. 25:17; Deut. 13:14, English Bible, v. 13) may be translated “worthless fellow,” or “base fellow.” The KJV has virtually left the term untranslated when rendering it “son of Belial.”
10. Sons of tumult (Jer. 48:45) are tumultuous people.

IV. Possessing a certain nature

The expression “son of man” clearly exhibits the use of the word “son” to show the possession of a certain nature. Numbers 23:19 reads: “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent. . . .” This part of the verse might be paraphrased as follows: “God is not like a man, who frequently lies; nor does he possess the nature of man, who by reason of his own limitations must often change his mind.” In Psa. 8:4 (Hebrew, 5) man and son of man are put in parallel to each other and obviously are used as synonyms. The same is true of Psa. 80:17 (18), and in Job 25:6 and 35:8. In Job 16:21 the phrase “son of man” is translated simply as “man” in the KJV. The term “son of man” is used frequently in Ezekiel as addressed to the prophet (Ezek. 2:1,3; 3:1,3,4,10; 4:16; etc.) and means something like “O man,” or “mortal man.” The term puts the emphasis on the nature of man.

All the examples in the above categories show that we are being consistent with a well established usage of an Old Testament idiom when we maintain that the expression “Son of God,” when applied to Jesus Christ, means possessing the nature of, displaying the qualities of, God. By comparison with Old Testament usage, the term need not refer to his origin.

Some may object that the New Testament was not written in the language of the Old Testament, and that therefore the above examples do not really apply. The obvious answer is that Old Testament thought patterns and Old Testament idioms abound in the New Testament, in spite of the difference in language. This is certainly true of the idiom in question. Below is a table of some of the New Testament examples of the non-literal use of the word “son.”

Barnabas (Acts 4:36) was so named because the word literally means “son of consolation.” He was called that because he was a consoling person.

Sons of thunder was the appellative applied by Jesus to James and John (Mark 3:17) because it signified something outstanding about their character.

Son of peace (Luke 10:6) refers to a peaceful person.

Sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7) are those like him in the exercise of faith.

Sons of disobedience (Eph. 2:2) are those characterized by disobedience.

Son of perdition (John 17:12; 2 Thess. 2:3) is the lost one.

It is clear from the above that the New Testament uses the idiom in the same way as the Old Testament, especially

when indicating nature or character. We are not misguided then, in applying this connotation to “son” in the term “Son of God.”

Since we are dealing then with a Semitic idiom, we can test ourselves for accuracy in the understanding of it as applied to Christ, by observing how the Jews responded or reacted when Jesus taught concerning his relation as Son to the Father. They understood that when Jesus said God was his Father he was making himself equal with God and sought to kill him for it (John 5:18). At another time when Jesus spoke concerning the Father and Son relationship they accused him of blasphemy and would have stoned him, because with such terminology Jesus made himself God (John 10:28-36). Now the enemies of Jesus did not respond this way because they misunderstood his terminology, but because they understood him perfectly well. They knew that when Jesus said he was the Son of God he was claiming to be of the nature of God and equal with God. It was on this basis that they demanded his death in the trial before his crucifixion (John 19:7; Luke 22:70; Mark 14:61-64). We are to understand the expression “Son of God” when applied to Jesus just as his enemies did.

If the term “Son of God” when applied to Jesus is to be taken in the sense not strictly literal, that is to say, if the term when applied to him does not allow for any thought of his having been brought into existence, of his beginning, then certain terms will have to be dealt with which might imply the contrary. I refer to “firstborn,” “only begotten,” and “begotten.”

The Term “Firstborn”

The word “firstborn” is employed in reference to Christ in five places in the New Testament (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15,18; Rev. 1:5; Heb. 1:6). Most theologians rightly understand that the word refers to *rank* rather than origin. He is first rank in the whole creation, first rank in the inhabited

world, first rank among the resurrected, and first rank among the glorified. None is comparable to him.

This meaning can be illustrated from the Old Testament. In the economy of ancient Israel the eldest son was given preferential treatment. He assumed more responsibility than the others, and was rewarded with honor and given two shares in the family inheritance instead of the single share that each of his younger brothers received. Occasionally, however, the eldest son fell out of favor with his father and was replaced in the favored position by a younger brother. Some examples of this are:

Joseph, who replaced Reuben (Gen. 4:3, cf. 1 Chron. 5:1,2)

Ephraim, who replaced Manasseh (Gen. 48:13-20)

Jacob, who replaced Esau (Gen. 27)

Solomon, who replaced Adonijah (1 Kings 1:5-53)

Examples can also be adduced from the cuneiform documents from Mesopotamia, particularly from Nuzi.⁵

In such cases as the above the younger became the firstborn, i.e., he attained to first rank. The term will not confuse us if we remember that in the Old Testament it was not always the one born first who became the firstborn. The word is used in this sense of the nation of Israel. Although among the nations of the ancient Near East Israel arrived upon the scene much later than others, God elevated the new nation to the place of the most favored. Therefore He said: "Israel is my son, even my firstborn" (Exod. 4:22). Therefore, in the light of Old Testament usage, when the term "firstborn" is applied to Christ it means that he rightly deserves the preferential share in honor and inheritance; it does not refer to his origin.

The Term “Only Begotten”

The word translated “only begotten” (*monogenēs*) is used nine times in the New Testament. It is used in reference to a certain widow’s son (Luke 7:2), to Jairus’ only daughter (Luke 8:42), and to another only child (Luke 9:38). It is used five times in reference to Christ (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9), and once in referring back to an Old Testament character (Heb. 11:17).

The Greek translations of the Old Testament (Septuagint, Aquila, Symmachus) also employ the word nine times, each time translating a form of the Hebrew word *yāhîd*. Each one of these occurrences refers to an only child, seven of them to an only child in the ordinary sense. But twice the term is used of Isaac the son of Abraham (Gen. 22:2, Aquila; 22:12, Symmachus), and these occurrences are particularly instructive.

Isaac was called Abraham’s only son (*yāhîd. monogenēs*), although Abraham had fathered another male child who was still living. However, the other male offspring, Ishmael, never at any time enjoyed the status of son, as Isaac did. The Code of Hammurabi illuminates this point. Paragraphs 170, 171 show that a man’s offspring by a slave woman were not ordinarily given the rights which belonged to the sons borne of his wife. Only if the father in the course of his lifetime had said to the male offspring of his slave woman (in a public and official manner), “Thou art my son,” was the slave woman’s offspring treated as a real son of the father. If the father had made such a declaration, then the slave woman’s offspring was counted among the sons and given an equal share in the inheritance of the father’s estate. If no such declaration was made, the offspring of the slave woman were given gifts and separated from the household before the inheritance was divided.

Abraham was evidently at one time eager to legitimize the child of his slave woman and count him as a son and

heir. At the incredible announcement that his own wife Sarah would bare a son, he said: "O that Ishmael might live before thee" (Gen. 17:18). But God did not look with favor upon this, and in due course of time, after Sarah gave birth to Isaac, Ishmael was expelled from the household. "Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10; Gal. 4:30).

Isaac remained Abraham's only son in the legal sense. Though Abraham had several other offspring (Gen. 25:1-4), he had only one son in the unique sense, and to him he gave his entire inheritance (Gen. 25:5,6). Isaac was his unique son, and when the New Testament refers to Isaac (Heb. 11:17), it calls him his only begotten (*monogenēs*).

It is clear from the above that the expression "only begotten" refers to status. It is certainly used this way of Christ. He has status as the *unique* Son of the Father. The term does not signify that He had a beginning, and the consistent testimony of Scripture is to the contrary; He was and is eternally God's unique Son.

The Term "Begotten"

Psalm 2:7, in a passage that traditionally has been treated as Messianic, reads: "... Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." The verse is quoted and applied to Christ three times in the New Testament (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5, 5:5), thus introducing the word "begotten" into the doctrine of Christ.

The verb translated "begotten" is used a great number of times in the Old Testament both in the simple (qal) and in the causative (hiphil) conjugations in the ordinary sense of to generate, or to beget, just as anyone familiar with the content of the Old Testament would expect. It appears twenty-eight times in the fifth chapter of Genesis alone in this ordinary sense.

As the verb appears in Psa. 2:7, it is pointed by the

Massorettes as from the simple (qal) conjugation, and is so understood by Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley,⁶ by Brown, Driver and Briggs, by Franz Delitzsch, and others.

There is no compelling reason, however, why one may not take this verb to be in the causative (hiphil) conjugation. No consonantal changes would be required to so understand it. The causative conjugation is more natural in this context moreover, since its function is not only causative, but declarative. I will show below the necessity of seeing the force of this verb to be declarative. That the causative (hiphil) conjugation sometimes functions as declarative is demonstrated from the following examples:

- hiṣḏîq*, which means to declare righteous or justify, as in Exod. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; and elsewhere.
- hiršîa'*, which means to declare guilty, or condemn, as in Deut. 25:1; Exod. 22:8 (English, v. 9); Job 9:20; and elsewhere.
- he'eqîš*, which in Job 9:20 means to declare perverse.

Taking the verb in Psa. 2:7 to be declarative, i.e., hiphil, that verse may be translated as follows: “. . . Thou art my Son; *this day have I declared thy sonship.*” To understand the verb as declarative removes from it, of course, any necessary reference to beginnings.

Whether one takes the verb translated “begotten” in Psa. 2:7 as hiphil or as some other grammatical form, its meaning in that verse must have to do with the *declaration* of sonship. This assertion is supported by four arguments from Scripture:

(1) *The argument from parallelism.* It is of the nature of Hebrew poetry to phrase itself in parallels. The parallel exhibited in Psa. 2:7 is of the type called synonymous parallelism. In such the idea expressed in the first clause is repeated in the second clause with different vocabulary. In Psa. 2:7 the clause “Thou art my Son” is matched by the

clause “this day have I declared thy sonship,” which repeats the same idea.

(2) *The presence of the phrase “this day” (hayyôm).* The day referred to is the day of the declaration of the decree, —the decree which announces the coronation of the king (cf. v. 6). The coronation day could certainly not be the day of the king’s generation, but it certainly would be a day in which the proclamation of his sonship would be in order!

(3) *The fact that the New Testament quotes this verse as a prediction of the resurrection.* Acts 13:33,34 refers the words in question, “this day have I begotten thee,” not to the incarnation, but to the resurrection of Christ. That being so, the action of that clause must be declarative, for it is the resurrection which declares to all the world that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. As it is stated in Rom. 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.*”

(4) *The content of the following verse (Psa. 2:8) requires such an interpretation.* Verse 8 has to do with the inheritance rights of the Son, who is to have the nations for his inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession. Now it has been shown above that formal recognition of sonship was a prerequisite of heirship. The Son of God, whose sonship has been publicly declared by means of the resurrection, is constituted the proper heir to the nations of this world.

The fifth chapter of the Revelation depicts in a vision the Son’s acceptance of his heirship, offered to him in Psa. 2:8. There one beholds the Lamb that was slain (and thereafter resurrected) step forward and receive that seven-sealed book, the inheritance document of the nations, and thus assume heirship of the world. When this vision shall have become a reality, then shall it be said, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of

his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

The above arguments show that the verb translated “begotten” in Psa. 2:7 does not refer to generation. The terms “firstborn,” “only begotten,” and “begotten,” as used in the Old and New Testaments concerning Jesus Christ, do not contradict, but are in harmony with, what has been written concerning the meaning of the word “son” as applied to him. The terms “son,” “firstborn,” “only begotten,” and “begotten,” as defined by the Bible’s own use of them, all declare that Jesus is the uncreated, ungenerated, co-eternal, co-equal Son of God the Father.

DOCUMENTATION

1. William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1871), I, 294.
2. *Ibid.* Cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 6th ed., 1931), I, 29.
3. Conveniently consulted in English translation in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. by James B. Pritchard, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1955), p. 174.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
5. Collected in the author’s unpublished (except by microfilm) doctoral dissertation, *Systems of Land Tenure in Ancient Israel* (University of Michigan, 1963), pp. 26- 35.
6. *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. by E. Kautzsch (28th German ed.), trans. by A. E. Cowley, 2nd English ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 120.