

“SON OF GOD” IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ***A CONTRAST TO DAVID ABERNATHY’S ARTICLES***

By Bradford Greer, PhD¹

I am disappointed with David Abernathy’s article in the February 2010 edition of the St. Francis Magazine (6:1). In his article, David refutes Rick Brown’s thesis that the term “Son of God” indicated Jesus was the chosen, Davidic, messianic king in the early church rather than explicitly denoting Jesus’ divine nature. David Abernathy sought to demonstrate through his extensive research that the term “Son of God” has always denoted Jesus’ divine nature throughout all of church history. In addition, David also asserted that contemporary scholars overwhelmingly agree that this is the case. David’s article appears to be an emotional reaction to Brown’s thesis rather than as a well-developed refutation.

I am, however, sympathetic with David’s feelings. This is a highly charged topic because it taps into deeply embedded worldview assumptions. As we all know, when a worldview assumption or value is contradicted then it is natural to respond emotionally and disregard supporting data because “everyone knows it is wrong”. Since this topic is a worldview issue, we all have a responsibility to step back from our natural reaction of rejecting Brown’s thesis and seriously consider the rationale for it.

David reacted so strongly to Brown’s thesis that he wrote a subsequent article for the St. Francis Magazine 6:2 (April 2010 edition). The length of his two articles may cause my fellow Interserve workers without a solid biblical background to think he actually has a strong case. David’s case is not as strong as he makes it appear. His

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extensive quoting, along with his numerous polemical statements, is a rhetorical strategy geared to make his position appear strong. David's analysis ignores the biblical data. In this paper I will identify key aspects of the biblical data. In doing so, I am not saying that I agree with all of Rick Brown's points. I do not. However, Rick Brown has raised an important issue that with careful reflection can positively impact the way we speak about Jesus in our contexts.

Before we proceed further, let me clarify: This discussion does not question the divinity of Jesus. The New Testament documents clearly teach that Jesus is divine. The acceptance of the divinity of Jesus by the strict Jewish monotheists is one of the remarkable aspects of the Church (see Hurtado 2005). The issue in question is: How did the primitive church (from 33CE to 45CE) conceptualize and speak of the divinity of Jesus? Did the primitive church use the term "Son of God" to do this, or did this title gradually take on this meaning as time passed? By primitive church I refer to the church from the time of Pentecost (30CE) to about 45CE. After 45CE I refer to the church as the early church.

If this is the case, the Gospels and the Epistles were all written in the early church era. How then do we know what the primitive church was like and how it thought? The clearest data we have of the primitive church is what Luke has given us in the Book of Acts. With Acts and the Old Testament as a guide, we can make inferences from the Synoptic Gospels about the religious and cultural understandings of Jewish people around the time of Pentecost.

As we look into the data of the primitive church from the Book of Acts we find that the term "Son of God" is remarkably absent. It is striking that neither Peter nor Paul ever refers to Jesus as the Son of God in any of their speeches. In fact, the term appears only once in the whole book. If the term is as essential as we assert that it is in denoting Jesus' divinity, why is the term completely absent in the Apostles' speeches?

In the entire book of Acts the term “Son of God” appears only in Acts 9 where Paul called Jesus the “Son of God” as he worked in the synagogues in Damascus after his conversion. Even in this passage the term does not appear to refer to Jesus’ divinity because “Son of God” is paralleled with Jesus’ other title, “Christ”:

And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:20-22).

Due to this parallel in usage, and though this may come as somewhat of a shock for those of us who are not biblical theologians, the term “Son of God” in Acts 9:20 is most likely another way of saying that Jesus is the Messiah.

Making this parallel seems important to Luke. We also find this parallel in Luke 4:41: ‘And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God.” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.’ These biblical texts, written by the same author, Luke, appear to place different parameters on the meaning of the term Son of God than we traditionally have placed. Divine sonship in Luke-Acts appears to denote Jesus’ unique standing as God’s chosen, anointed, Davidic, messianic king. It does not appear to refer to Jesus’ divinity. This parameter in meaning is reinforced by the discourses during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus in Luke 22:66-23:43.

Once we begin to look for the parallel between Christ and Son of God, we see it elsewhere in the Gospels. We see this same parallel in Peter’s confession in Mat 16:16: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” We also see it in Martha’s confession in John 11:27: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

Due to our western Christian heritage we view these terms as independent of each other. We view one as denoting Jesus' divinity and the other denoting his messianic role. Thus, we automatically read divine nature into divine sonship. However, the biblical texts appear to suggest that we not do this. In Luke's Gospel we also see that Adam is called the son of God in Luke 3:38. We know that this does not suggest that Adam was divine in nature. It refers to the unique relationship he had with God. However, Adam is not alone in being referred to as a son of God. In Luke 20:36 we read: "For they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, sons of the resurrection." Divine sonship is given to those who attain to the resurrection from the dead. From these verses we see that divine sonship did not denote divinity. From Luke 20:36 we discover that the term denoted being in a special, covenantal relationship with God. This harmonizes with the meaning in Luke 3:38.

In addition, this denotation harmonizes well with what we read in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament Israel was called God's firstborn son (Ex 4:22; see also Deut 14:1; Deut 32:6; Isa 43:6; Jer 3:4; Jer 31:9). This did not mean that Israel enjoyed divine status. Divine sonship indicated that the people enjoyed a unique, covenantal relationship with God. This unique relationship with God as Father was also extended in particular to the Davidic (2 Sam 7:14-15; 1 Chr 17:13-14; Ps 2:7; Ps 89:26-27) and messianic king (Isa 9:6-7).

With this OT background it becomes easier for us to understand how divine sonship would not necessarily denote divine nature to first century Jews, and the first Jewish followers of Jesus. This distinction between divine sonship and divine nature is what David Abernathy failed to recognize when he quoted David Bauer to support his thesis that the term Son of God referred to Jesus' divinity (6:1, 185). Bauer was actually writing about Jesus' divine sonship. In his article Bauer specifically stated that in the Synoptic Gospels 'Jesus did not speak of his divine sonship in terms of pre-existence or focus on ontological realities (such as his divine "nature")'. Rather, Jesus

emphasized the elements of personal relationship and active function' (1997).

Thomas Schreiner, a conservative scholar from Baylor University, recognizes this distinction as well. Schreiner points out that the Old Testament provides the lens for the term "Son of God" in the Synoptic Gospels and in specific places in John's Gospel. The term often refers to Jesus being the true Israel and to being the promised, messianic, Davidic king (2008, 236). This understanding makes sense of Nathanael's comment to Jesus: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel" (John 1:49). In Nathaniel's mind, "Son of God" and "King of Israel" were synonymous. Drawing attention to Jesus as the true Israel is the reason why Matthew quotes Hos 11:1 in Mat 2:15: "Out of Egypt I will call my son" (see also Holwerda 1995, 40). Noting that the Jewish people would have understood this term to denote divine sonship rather than divinity Schreiner adds:

When Jesus calms the storm, the disciples confess that he is God's Son (Mat 14:33). Perhaps the disciples received a glimmer of Jesus' special relation to God, but they likely meant by this acclamation that Jesus was truly the Messiah, the one to whom the covenantal promises given to David pointed. The same conclusion should be drawn from Matt. 16:16, where at a crucial juncture in the Gospel Peter exclaims that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God". It is doubtful that at this stage in his thinking Peter grasped that Jesus was divine. (Schreiner 2008, p. 236)

This background offers an explanation as to why the Apostles did not use the term Son of God in their speeches in the book of Acts. They may not have yet used the term to convey divinity, and the term would probably not have conveyed divinity to their audiences.

It appears that the primitive church developed the notion of the divinity of Jesus in a different way. C. Kevin Rowe has shown that in the Book of Luke Jesus' divinity is developed through the usage of the term "kyrios" (Lord) (2005). Luke restricts the use of the term "kyrios" only for God and for Jesus. By parallel usage of this term

Luke narratively teaches about Jesus' divinity. Jesus the "kyrios" is the only one who does what God the "kyrios" does (contra Brown 2000, 51).

As we move into Acts Luke continues to parallel God and Jesus. In Acts 2:21 we read that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. This is a clear reference to God. In 2:38 this is paralleled with Jesus for everyone is urged to be baptized in the name of Jesus. This parallel also shapes Peter's statement in Acts 4:12: For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." In 2:34 Peter quotes Ps 110:1 making a clear parallel between God and Jesus: "The Lord said to my Lord." In 2:36 we read that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ and God is called Lord in 2:39.

It is interesting to see that the primitive church in Acts did not use the term Son of God to develop the notion of Jesus' divinity. (This same absence is seen in Phil 2:6-11 which is likely a hymn from the primitive church). In saying this, I do not want to suggest that the term "Son" did not denote divinity at all in the Gospels (contra Brown 2000). It is clear that Jesus' usage of the term Son in the baptismal formula in Mat 28:19 speaks of the Son's divinity. It is also clear that in the Gospel of John Jesus through the term "Son" not only highlights his unique relationship to the Father as the chosen, Davidic, messianic king but that he is also divine in nature. Yet, what we need to be careful to avoid as we analyze the Scriptures is reading the Apostles' post-resurrection/post-Pentecost understanding of Jesus as divine in nature, into their pre-resurrection/pre-Pentecost understanding of Jesus as enjoying divine sonship. What this means is that when demons or the disciples referred to Jesus as the Son of God in the Gospels these references likely only referred to Jesus being the chosen, Davidic, messianic king.

In conclusion, even though David Abernathy is reluctant to acknowledge this, in light of the biblical data, when a translator asserts that the term "Son of God" can be translated in a non-literal fashion

in the Gospels because the term did not necessarily refer to the divinity of Jesus, the translator actually has a significant biblical basis upon which to make this assertion. The problem that arises is that the data does not appear to give a carte blanche approval to translate every term “Son” with an alternative as Brown seems to have suggested.

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