

# SON OF DAVID/WISDOM OF GOD

By Ben Witherington III

On the surface of things, the title son of David might be taken to refer merely to one of the many descendants of the Jewish royal line. While it is true that the phrase has that connotation, in fact, it means much more. The phrase, for a start, is not all that common in early Judaism, including in messianic texts, and so the question is why the phrase is so frequently used of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, a Gospel which particularly stresses Jesus' Jewish roots and character (on which see my forthcoming commentary, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Smyth and Helwys, 2006). The proper question to be asked about the phrase was—Who, in Jewish ways of thinking, was "the son of David", the most famous of his offspring. The answer to that question is easy—it was Solomon. Thus it is not a surprise that this phrase, particularly in Matthew but also in Mark's Gospel and elsewhere, refers to Jesus' similarity to Solomon in various ways including in his wisdom.

Jesus was without a doubt viewed as a great Jewish sage. He spoke in public using sapiential modes of discourse (proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, riddles, parables, allegory). This alone would have been enough for some persons to call Him son of David, especially when it was thought that He was also some sort of messianic figure born in Bethlehem. But there is more to it than that. In inter-testamental Judaism, Solomon's wisdom was believed to include the wisdom to cure diseases, and even exorcise demons. Of course in the Old Testament there is no mention of demons and exorcism, but this is not the case in inter-testamental Jewish literature, and in that literature we hear of Solomon as having collected the recipes for cures and for exorcisms. In fact, even Solomon's name as son of David was used as part of exorcism rituals to cure a person (on all this see Witherington *Jesus the Sage*, Fortress 1995). This is where it is important to notice that almost always when Jesus is called son of David, it is in a context where someone is needing healing or exorcism. This is not an accident, but rather a natural development of early Jewish thinking about Solomon and healing. To call Jesus son of David was to suggest He was a royal figure with the wisdom of Solomon in various respects.

Consider for example a text like Mark 10:46-52, the story of blind bar-Timaeus. This story is revealing on several levels. For one thing we are dealing with a blind man, and there are no stories in the Old Testament about prophets, priests, or kings healing blind persons. As John 9:32, (NIV) says "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind." It was thus natural to assume that such a stupendous miracle required that one have the wisdom of Solomon, in particular Solomon's wisdom and knowledge of cures and healing. Jesus, in this story is beseeched as son of David in order that He might "have mercy" on the blind man and of course Jesus does so.

Let us consider a very different sort of text—the genealogy in Matthew 1. The genealogy begins—"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." This is an odd beginning since the genealogy itself starts in Matthew 1:2 with Abraham, not with David. And in fact when we get to David at verse 6 what do we hear—"David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife." This of course stands out not merely because of the reference to Solomon (even though David had many other children as well) but also because the reference to Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, shows that there was an irregular union, indeed an immoral one which produced this heir to the throne. Why is this mentioned at all when elsewhere in this genealogy the author is mostly content with mentioning men (Abraham begat Isaac etc.)? For the very good reason that our author is preparing the audience for what he is about to say about Jesus—that He too, like Solomon was the product of a very unusual, irregular, surprising, and unexpected impregnation, in fact a virginal conception! From the very outset of this Gospel then, our author wants to

portray Jesus as a royal figure of the Davidic line who is like Solomon in many ways, not the least of which is that He is a sage, a healer, a king. But there is still more.

In the Old Testament, texts like Proverbs 3:13-20 and especially all of Proverbs 8 we find a personification of God's wisdom, the giving of human attributes to an abstract concept—the wisdom of God. Here wisdom, personified as a woman (because the Hebrew word *hokmah* like the Greek word *Sophia* is a female noun) is said to be present and to have helped God create the universe. This is of course a way of saying that God's creating involved a divine plan that entailed wisdom. But there is more, for in Proverbs 8 Wisdom is calling God's people back to God, back to God's wise teaching about how to live a good and godly life. This personification of the mind, or wisdom, or saving plan of God was further developed in later Jewish wisdom literature. For example, in Solomon we hear about how God's people were saved by Wisdom, or in Sirach we hear of how Wisdom became tangible and incarnate in Torah, or in 1 En. 42 we hear about how Wisdom came down from heaven and urged God's people to repent, but they rejected Wisdom and so she returned to heaven to be with God. All of this needs to be borne in mind when we look carefully at some of the teachings of Jesus, because in fact, it is especially apparent in both Matthew's and John's Gospel that Jesus is being portrayed as God's wisdom come to earth in the flesh in the form not of a book like Torah, but as a person—Jesus. Jesus is seen as the human embodiment of the mind of God, and God's living revelation come in person.

For example consider Matthew 11:19-20, (NIV). We have here a parallel construction, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is vindicated by her actions." It is quite clear in this case that the one called Wisdom is the Son of Man. Jesus is revealing His divine origins and His divine wisdom by directly calling Himself Wisdom, an allusion knowledgeable Jews would immediately recognize.

Another good example of a place where Jesus portrays Himself as Wisdom come in the flesh is Matthew 11:28-30 where Jesus speaks in deliberately paradoxical terms of "light burdens" and "easy yokes." For our purposes, two things are significant about this. In early Judaism the term "yoke" was used of Torah, and when one came of age one took on oneself the yoke of the commands which was weighty, involving over 600 commandments! Jesus says that by contrast His yoke is light. But even more telling is the fact that in Sirach it is Wisdom who beckons the Jew to take on her yoke and learn of her (see e.g. Sir.24), whereas here Jesus is applying this Wisdom language to Himself. It seems clear that Jesus sees Himself as fulfilling the role of Wisdom as portrayed in earlier Wisdom literature.

Just as Wisdom is portrayed as a woman who would protect and nurture her spiritual offspring in Proverbs 8 and elsewhere, so Jesus portrays Himself as like a mother bird who would gather her chicks, in this case the residents of Jerusalem, under her wings, but they would not come (see Luke 13:34). But it is not only in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus is portrayed and depicts Himself as the Wisdom of God come in the flesh, this is also a prominent theme in the Gospel of John.

Not only does the Fourth Gospel begin with a wisdom hymn where Jesus is identified with the pre-existent Word of God, echoing Genesis 1, a Word which is called and personified as Wisdom in Proverbs 3, but in the great I am sayings that have predicates (I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the vine etc.) wisdom metaphors are applied to Jesus which were previously predicated of personified Wisdom in Proverbs 3 and ,8 Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of all that was promised in those Wisdom passages, for Jesus is Wisdom in person, Wisdom incarnate, Wisdom come in the flesh, which is simply another way of saying that "he who has seen me, has seen the Father," or "before Abraham was, I am," or "I and the Father are one." In this way Jesus portrays Himself as the divine revelation of the divine character and the divine salvation plan come in person to earth. As such He is the divine and only begotten Son of God in whom can be seen God's very glory, His brilliant divine presence. (For more on this see at length Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, Fortress, 1995).