

SON OF GOD

By Ben Witherington, III

One of the big mistakes in Christian apologetics is just focusing on what Jesus publicly claimed to be. The truth is that what a person is and what they claim to be can be two very different things. In the case of Jesus, public claims are but a small subset of what Jesus taught His inner circle, and that also was but a small subset of what Jesus believed about Himself, and revealed in various ways, including in some rare cases by public claims. We need to understand as well the nature of the culture in which Jesus lived. Jesus did not live in a late western culture that stressed individualism or striving to be an individual. Rather one's identity was defined by one's key relationships. Notice that almost all the so called titles predicated of Jesus are actually relational terms—Jesus is Son in relationship to God, He is Son in relationship to humankind, He is God's anointed (the meaning of Messiah/Christ), He is Lord in relationship to those He rules, He is Son in relationship to David. One of the crucial reasons that Jesus did not run around Israel making enormous direct claims for Himself to total strangers is because they were bound to be badly misunderstood in a world where standing out from the crowd was seen as abnormal and undesirable. So for example, even with His disciples Jesus asks them "who do people say that I am" (Mark 8:27. NASB). Normally in Jesus' world, people were defined by others and by the tribe they were a part of.

The phrase "Son of God" often connotes divinity in modern Christian discussions, but it seldom did so in Jewish antiquity. It is true that sometimes angels were called sons of God (see Gen. 6:2) but when Jews thought about a Son of God they normally thought of a king anointed by God. For example, it is perfectly clear in Psalm 2 that the discussion is about the Davidic king who has been anointed by the high priest, and thereby coronated as king. "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One...the Lord scoffs at them...I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill." Then the king himself declares "I will proclaim the decree of the Lord... You are My Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance" (Ps. 2:2-8, NIV). These last verses should be familiar since they are quoted in part at Jesus' baptismal event (see Mark 1:11 and par.). In Judaism it was believed that the king had a special relationship with God, and was in fact adopted by God as His own child at the point of coronation. What is especially interesting about Mark 1:11 is that the second phrase "today I have become your Father" is omitted because Mark does not want to suggest that Jesus was merely adopted as God's Son at the point of His baptism. Rather the baptism is the juncture where the Father confirms to the Son the identity He has always had and will now be publicly revealed.

There can be no doubt however, that Jesus did not view His relationship to God as simply identical to the relationship King David had with God. For one thing, it tells us a lot about Jesus that He prayed to God as *Abba* which is the Aramaic term of endearment which means dearest Father (see Mark 14:36, *Abba* is not slang, it does not mean "Daddy.") This is frankly inexplicable if Jesus only saw Himself as a King, or a prophetic figure, because no Jew, not even the king before Jesus' day prayed to God as "my dearest Father." This would have sounded like shocking familiarity. Notice that God is very seldom called Father in the Old Testament, and never prayed to as *Abba*. This is something new, and it reveals something special about how Jesus viewed His relationship to God. He believed He had a distinctively intimate relationship with God the Father. Even more striking is the fact that He taught His own disciples to pray to God as *Abba*, suggesting He could give them an intimate relationship with God unlike any they had had before. This is why we find several places in our chronologically earliest New Testament documents, the letters of Paul, where Paul says that Christians pray to God as *Abba*, indeed the Holy Spirit prompts them to do so, for they have become sons and daughters of God like Jesus though on a lesser scale, through their

relationship with Jesus (see Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15.) And of course the very first word of the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught to His disciples in Aramaic was *Abba* (see Luke 11:2.) One has to ask, What sort of person could Jesus be if He thought He could not only save people, but give people alienated from God a relationship with God unlike any that human beings had had previously? This in itself implies a lot about Jesus' self understanding.

A further insight into Jesus' view of Himself as God's Son comes from a close examination of a text like Matthew 11:27, NIV, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." The first half of this maxim is unexceptional. Anyone could say "no one really knows me except God my maker who knows all." But it is the second half of the saying which reflects Jesus' distinctive self-understanding. He sees Himself as knowing God in a way and to a degree that others do not, and furthermore, He sees Himself as the conduit or unique mediator of that knowledge to other human beings. Not only so, but Jesus is said to get to choose whom He reveals this intimate knowledge to. While this does not in itself prove that Jesus thought of Himself as divine, this saying puts Jesus in a unique and unprecedented position when it comes to the knowledge of God, and also in His role as the dispenser of the knowledge of God. It is not a surprise that Paul some 35 or so years later would stress "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6, NIV). Later Christian theology was right to draw the inference that if Jesus was indeed the mediator of the saving knowledge and power and presence of God, and it was right to see Himself as a mediator then He had to be able to represent God to humankind, and humans to God. In short, He had to partake of both the nature of God and the nature of human beings.

One of the important though indirect ways that Jesus revealed His identity to His disciples and others was through various forms of wisdom or sapiential speech, for example the telling of parables. Mark 12:1-12 immediately comes to mind. In this parable the last and climactic agent and emissary of God to His vineyard is His Son. The vineyard was of course a long time symbol of God's Jewish people (see Isa. 5) and the tenders of the vineyard were of course the religious leaders of Israel, whether prophets, priests, or kings. Notice how the Son is called "the one whom he loved." The Jewish phrase "beloved son" often was a synonym for "only begotten son" and hence especially cherished. Jesus then in this parable sees Himself as a Son of God in some way that is distinctive from other Jews such that He could be called "the beloved Son." Did He understand that he had a unique relationship to the Father because of His distinctive origins (see Matt. 1 on the virginal conception)? This seems a plausible deduction.

The title Son of God, while more frequently conveying royalty than divinity in early Judaism, nonetheless had overtones of divinity for the very good reason that in the wider culture which surrounded Israel, kings were quite readily believed to be God's Son in a divine sense. Certainly, when this title was used by someone like Paul to speak of Jesus in the Greco-Roman world to Gentiles, the title must have sometimes carried this sort of significance. It is important to recognize then that it was Jesus' own use of the term Son of Himself that set this train of thought in motion, even though it was more fully amplified, explained, and expounded on after Jesus' death by Paul and various others as the Jesus movement spread west across the empire and became increasingly a Gentile phenomenon. For more on this subject one should consult Witherington, *The Many Faces of the Christ*, (Continuum, 1995).