

# What is the Meaning of the Expression “Son of God”?<sup>1</sup>

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The Gospel text in traditional Arabic translations frequently uses the term “Son of God,” and this has led to much puzzlement and unfortunate misunderstanding between Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters. Therefore it is very important that we seek to clarify what this term means in the Gospel, and also what it does not mean.

God, blessed and exalted is he, does not take a wife and does not sire children by a wife. He is highly exalted above that. This idea is totally rejected by Christians and Muslims alike. In this sense, the Gospel agrees that God does not beget, nor is he begotten, nor is there anyone like unto him (*Allāh lam yalid wa-lam yūlad wa-lam yakun lahū kufwan ahad*).

If this is the case, if the Gospel does not indicate any carnal relationship or sexual begetting, then what *is* the intended meaning of the term “Son of God” when it appears in the Gospel?

First, let us note that the words used in the sacred Scriptures can have different senses, according to the context of the verses and the occasions of their revelation. For example, in *al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* the word *amr* sometimes indicates a command and sometimes means a matter. In the context of “*al-amr bi-l-mārūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*” (cf. Sūrat al-Tawba 67), the word *amr* clearly refers to a command. But in other contexts (e.g. Sūrat al-Anām 58) it clearly refers to a matter: “*law anna indī mā tastājilūna bihī, la-qudiya al-amr baynī wa-baynakum.*” Thus we see that one term can have more than one sense, depending on its context and the occasion of its revelation.

The word “son” (*ibn*) also has more than one sense. It can be used in a literal sense, as a child is born from the union of a father and a mother. But it can

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also be used in a symbolic or spiritual sense. For example, the Arabs say that a certain person is *ibn al-watan* or *ibn al-balad*, or even *ibn al-Nīl* [son of the nation or son of the country or even son of the Nile]. This does not mean that *al-watan* or *al-balad* or even *al-Nīl* took a wife and sired a child by her. It would be ridiculous to try to interpret these expressions in a literal way. In these expressions, the word *ibn* simply indicates a deep connection of a person's identity with a place.

The Arabic language also uses the word "father" in a symbolic sense. For example, Abū 'Ammār is not called by that nickname because he literally has a son named 'Ammār. Rather, this nickname refers symbolically to the fact that he is an engineer and that he has devoted much of his life to building up his people. The famous philosopher and physician Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 470 A.H. / 1077 A.D.) was probably so-called because he was a source of blessings in others' lives.

The Arabic language also uses the word "brother" in a symbolic sense. When one person says to another person, "*yā akhī*," this does not imply they both genealogically belong to a single father. It means only an acknowledgment of their common humanity, and may or may not imply shared religious beliefs.

One very interesting expression in the Arabic language is the term "daughter of the lips" (*bint al-shafa*), which refers to the word which a person speaks. The expression "He did not say *bint al-shafa*," means, "He did not say a word." This does not mean that a person or his lips have taken a wife or sired a daughter, which is his word! Rather, a person's word can be referred to symbolically as his "daughter" because a person's word flows from his being and reveals who he is.

Everyone knows the term "son of the road" (*ibn al-sabīl*) (cf. Sūrat al-Baqara 177, 215; al-Nisā' 36; al-Anfāl 41; al-Tawba 60; al-Isrā' 26; al-Rūm 38; al-Hashr 7). Of course the expression "*ibn al-sabīl*" does not mean literally that the road took a wife and sired a son by her! Rather, it means that this person is constantly travelling on the road, so that there is an intimate connection between him and the road, so that when you see him, you immediately think of the road. This is the symbolic meaning of "son of the road."

The word *ibn* is also used symbolically or spiritually in *al-hadīth al-sahīh*. For example the Prophet of Islam said, "Of all people I am the closest to Jesus. The prophets are sons of one father by different mothers [literally: sons of concubines], and there is no prophet between Jesus and me." (*Anā*

*awlā al-nās bi-Īsā. Al-anbiyā' abnā' allāt wa-laysa baynī wa-bayna Īsā nabī.)*<sup>2</sup>

Of course this *hadīth* does not mean that the mothers of the prophets were literally concubines! God forbid! The Arabic expression *abnā' al-allāt* means sons of one father by different mothers. But of course this *hadīth* does not mean either that the prophets were literally begotten carnally by one father with different mothers! This is also absurd! Rather, this *hadīth* means that there exists a deep spiritual link and common spiritual bond among the prophets because they all serve One God. Thus we see that the word *ibn* can be used to allude to a deep spiritual bond, without implying any literal, carnal begetting.

In Sūfī thought it is very common to use such symbolic language to describe the intimate relationship between a human being and his Lord. Sūfīs speak of their love for God as the attraction of a moth to a flame, but they do not imply thereby that they are literally moths or that God is literally a flame. They also speak of their relationship with God as of the love between the lover and the beloved. But they do not intend these terms in the sense they would imply when speaking of human lovers. Similarly we can understand the term “son of God” as implying a deep, spiritual relationship, without implying the carnal begetting that takes place between human beings.

The Gospel never uses the expression “son of God” in a literal or carnal sense. But it does use this expression in at least three different symbolic senses:

**First:** In one sense all human beings are children of God. Acts 17:28-29 says: “We are all the offspring of God.” We know that this does not mean that we are God’s children literally, as though God had sired us. God forbid! Rather, it means symbolically that God loves us as a good father loves his children. God cares for us, provides for us, disciplines us, teaches us, feeds us, etc. This is one sense in which the Gospel uses the expression “son of God,” but is not the sense which we see in the Gospel text which we are considering in this book.

**Second:** There is special sense in which the Gospel says that all who believe in the Lord Christ (his peace be upon us) become children of God. This sense appears in the Gospel text which we are considering in this book. It says about the Lord Christ: “To all who received him, to those who believed

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<sup>2</sup> Sahīh Muslim, *Kitāb al-Fadā'il*, 144. Cf. also *Ibid.*, 143; Bukhārī, *Anbiyā'*, 48; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunna*, 13; Ibn Hanbal, 3, 463.

in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13)

This verse explicitly rejects any literal meaning to the term “children of God.” These are children, not in any fleshly sense, but in the sense of having been spiritually adopted by God. God loves them and cares for them just as a good father loves and cares for his children.

**Third:** The Gospel uses the expression “son of God” in a special sense to refer to the King of Israel whom the Sons of Israel awaited, according to the prophecies in the Tōrah.

In the Tōrah we read that King David, peace be upon him, wanted to build a house of worship to God, but God would not allow him that. Instead God said:

When your days are fulfilled to go to be with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son; I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom for ever and his throne shall be established for ever.

(1Chronicles 17:11-14)

In one sense this prophecy was speaking of David’s son Solomon, who became king after him, and who built the holy Temple of God. But in another sense the words about establishing him and his throne forever cannot refer to Solomon, since he died and was replaced by another king. They must refer to another descendant of David who would come in the future and who would reign forever.

Because of this prophecy, during times of oppression, the Sons of Israel waited for God to send them a righteous king who would reign forever, just as many Muslims today await the Mahdī. They called this awaited king the Messiah, which in Hebrew means “the one whom God has anointed with the authority to rule.” They also called him “the Son of God” because God had said to David, “I will be his father and he will be my son; I will not take my steadfast love from him.”

It is clear from these words that the words “son” and “father” in this verse do not indicate any literal sonship to God. The awaited Messiah was to be

literally a descendant of the prophet David. Rather, this verse speaks of the awaited Messiah as God's Son only in the symbolic sense that there is a special love between God and the awaited Messiah.

The Gospel asserts that our Lord Jesus Christ, his peace be upon us, fulfilled this prophecy, that is, that he was the awaited Messiah King. To say that he was the Awaited Messiah and to say that he was the Son of God are synonyms and have the same meaning in many places in the Gospel text which we are considering in this book, for example:

John 1:49 — Nathanael, one of the first of the apostles said to our Lord Jesus, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

John 11:27 — Martha, one of his disciples said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world."

John 20:31 — "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

In these Gospel verses we can see that the term "Son of God" means simply "the awaited Messiah, the King of Israel". It certainly does not indicate any kind of literal sonship, God forbid.

It says in the Noble Gospel that God loves his servants with the love of a father for his family, since it describes God as the head of the household of the believers, and it describes believers as being the people of his household. What this means is that God loves the believers and cares for them more than a good human father cares for his children, and they in turn love him and strive to obey him and honor him. As for the Lord Christ (his peace be upon us), his position before God according to the original text of the Gospel is like the firstborn who cares for the members of the family and for the servants in the household. Sometimes the word "only" is added to describe him. This title indicates the close relationship between God and Christ, and on this basis Christ grants his followers the right to become the people of God's household. This title also means that he is the awaited Messiah king who reigns over the eternal kingdom that God promised to his righteous servants.

But there is another important dimension of the identity of the Lord Christ that must be brought up. In some verses you see an indication of the Lord Christ's nature (his peace be upon us), because he is the Word of God whom he sent down to the virgin Mary and who became a human being by the

power of God's Spirit. According to the Gospel, the Word of God is a reality subsisting in the essence of God. From this we can see how our Lord Jesus Christ (his peace be upon us) can have authority over the household of God like the authority of a firstborn son among people.

When any prophet speaks the words of God, he can say, "Whoever has heard me has heard God." The Gospel asserts that in the person of the Lord Christ God's *kalām* has become visible to humankind. This took place in the Lord Christ who affirmed, "Whoever has seen me has seen the manifestation of God the Merciful Father in human form."