

What is the Meaning of the Expression “Son of God”?

The Gospel text which we are considering in this book frequently uses the term “Son of God,” and this has led to much puzzlement and unfortunate misunderstanding between Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters (*athāra al-kathīr min al-tasā’ulāt wa-sū’ al-tafāhum mu’sif bayna al-ikhwa al-masīhiyyīn wa-l-muslimīn*). 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 (*tabāraka wa-ta’ālā*), does not take a wife (*lā yattakhidhu ṣāhibā*) and does not sire children by a wife (*wa-lā yunjibu awlād^{am} min-ṣāhibā*). He is highly exalted above that (*subḥānahū wa-ta’ālā ‘an dhālika*). This idea is totally rejected (*marfūḍ tamām^{am}*) by Christians and Muslims alike (*‘alā sawā’*). 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 kufw^{am} aḥad*).

If this is the case, if the Gospel does not indicate any carnal relationship or sexual begetting (*lā yufīdu ayya ‘alāqa jasadiyya wa-lā ayya wilāda tanāsuliyya*), then what is the intended meaning (*al-maqṣūd*) 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 (*wujūh*), according to the context of the verses and the occasions of their revelation (*asbāb nuzūlihā*). For example, in *al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* the word *amr* sometimes indicates a command [translation: *farīḍa?*] and sometimes means a matter [translation: *mas’ala?*]. In the context of “*al-amr bi-l-ma’rūf 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-An‘ām 58) it clearly refers to a matter: “*law anna ‘indī mā tasta’jilūna bihī, la-quḍīya al-amr baynī wa-baynakum*.” Thus we see that one term can have more than one sense (*wajh*), depending on its context and the occasion of its revelation (*sabab nuzūlihī*).

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 also be used in a symbolic or spiritual sense. For example, the Arabs say that a certain person is *ibn al-waṭan* 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-waṭan* or *al-balad* or even *al-Nīl* took a wife and sired a child by her (*ittakhadha ṣāhibā wa-anjaba minhā walad^{am}*). 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 were both carnally begotten from 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 (*tanbū ‘u*) from his being and reveals who he is.

Perhaps the reader will ask whether the word *ibn* can be used symbolically in a religious context. Certainly it can.

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-Ḥashr 7). Of course the expression “*ibn al-sabīl*” does not mean literally that the road took a wife and sired a son by her! (*anna al-sabīl ittakhadha ṣāhibā wa-anjaba minhā walad^m*)! 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-ḥadīth al-ṣaḥīḥ*. For example the Meccan Prophet 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 walaysa baynī wa-bayna ‘Īsā nabī.*)¹

Of course this *ḥadīth* 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

¹ Sahīḥ Muslim, *Kitāb al-Faḍā’il*, 144. Cf. also *Ibid.*, 143; Bukhārī, *Anbiyā’*, 48; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunna*, 13; Ibn Ḥanbal, 3, 463.

by different mothers. But of course this *ḥadīth* does not mean either that the prophets were literally begotten carnally by one father with different mothers! This is also absurd! Rather, this *ḥadīth* means that there exists a deep spiritual link [perhaps translate: *rabṭ rūḥī waṭīd?*] 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 four 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.” Similarly Luke 3:38 says that Adam, peace be upon him, was “the son of God,” and all who are children of Adam (*banī Ādam*) are thus children of God (*abnā’ Allāh*).

We know that this does not mean that we are God’s children literally, as though God had sired us (*anjabanā*). 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 a special sense in which the Gospel says that all who believe in *al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ* become children of God. This sense appears in the Gospel text which we are considering in this book. It says about *al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ*: “To all who received him, to those who believed 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 children of Israel (*banī Isrā’īl*) 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 *bayt al-maqdis*. 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 children 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 (*masāḥahū Allāh*) 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 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: “I will not take my steadfast love from him.”

The Gospel asserts that our Lord Jesus, to him be glory (*lahū al-majd*), fulfilled this prophecy, that is, that he was the awaited Messiah, the King of Israel. To say that he was the Messiah was to assert that he was the Awaited One, the fulfillment of God’s promise to David. In this context, to say that he was the Son of God was to say exactly the same thing. Thus in many contexts the term “Son of God” is synonymous with “the awaited Messiah the King of Israel,” and it has no other meaning. We can see this in several places in the Gospel text which we are considering in this book, for example:

John 1:49 – Nathanael, one of the first of the *ḥawāriyyīn* said to our Lord Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jn 11:27 – Martha, one of the *ḥawāriyyāt* said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.”

Jn 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,” and nothing more. It certainly does not indicate any kind of literal sonship, God forbid.

Fourth: There is one more important symbolic sense in which the Gospel text we are considering in this book uses the term “Son.” This sense is very close to the meaning of the term “Word of God” (*kalām Allāh*). As we noted above, in the Arabic language the word of a speaker can be called “the daughter of his lips.” In our article in this book on *kalām Allāh*, we saw that both the Qur’an and the Gospel assert that God’s *kalām* is eternal (*azalī*) and uncreated, subsisting in God’s essence (*qā’im bi-dhāt Allāh*), and that God created all things through his *kalām*. We also saw that both the Qur’an and the Gospel assert that *al-Sayyid al-Masīh* can be called *kalimat Allāh*.

In several Gospel verses, the term “Son of God” and similar expressions were used by Jesus himself with a meaning which is close to (*ma’nā yaqrubu min*) “That which springs forth eternally from God” (*dhālika alladhī yanbu’u azaliyy^{an} min Allāh*), just as a word springs forth from the speaker (*mithlamā tanbu’u kalima min al-mutakallim*). Here are a few examples in which *al-Sayyid al-Masīh* is speaking about himself:

John 10:30-38 – He said, “I and the Father are one.” The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them... “Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?... The Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

John 14:9 – “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

John 17:5 – “Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory which I had with you before the creation of the world.”

John 8:58 – “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

John 5:21-23 “As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”

In these verses the symbolism of Son and Father is like the relationship of a word to a speaker, as in the Arabic expression “daughter of the lips” (*bint al-shafa*). God’s word springs forth eternally from God and reveals to us the divine Speaker from whom it springs forth. God’s *kalām* cannot be separated from God, but rather it subsists eternally in God (*yaqūmu azaliyy^{am} bi-Allāh*). Everything God creates, and everything God does in the universe, he does through his word (*kalām*). To honor God’s *kalām* is to honor God himself.

When any prophet speaks the words of God, he can say, “Whoever has heard me has heard my Lord.” The Gospel asserts that in the person of *al-Sayyid al-Masīh* God’s *kalām* has become visible to humankind (*al-bashariyya*). Thus he can say, to him be glory, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”