

## Can God Have a Son?

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There are ideas which some people oppose so strongly that they are outraged when these subjects are even raised. All it takes to set off the powder keg is to use certain phrases—they explode with anger and refuse to listen to another word. We see this kind of reaction among Jews in the first century. For example, in the book of Acts, in the New Testament, a disciple of Jesus named Stephen was preaching to a Jewish crowd. In his speech, he reminded these Jews that their fathers had often opposed the messengers sent to them by God, going so far as to commit murder in order to silence the prophets. When Steven pursued that idea by pointing out to his hearers that they had done the same thing in regard to Jesus, the Messiah, the Bible says that “they began gnashing their teeth at him.” When he continued speaking to them about the glory of Jesus, “they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him” (Acts 7:54-58).

Later on, in the same city of Jerusalem, the apostle Paul preached to a different Jewish crowd. His audience listened with attention while he told them of his conversion. But when he said that God had sent him to preach the word to the pagan nations, everything changed. The Bible says, “They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!’... They were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air” (Acts 22:22,23). Such hostility toward the idea that God was concerned, not just for the Jews, but for all other people groups, as well! In reality, Paul could have shown them by their own Scriptures that God had always been interested in all of his creatures and had even announced ahead of time that the other nations would be blessed by Him. By their exaggerated reaction, the people in that crowd deprived themselves of the truth. They did not even have the opportunity to hear the arguments that Paul would have set forth to help them see whether or not they were wrong.

I ask you, my readers, to prove more noble and more reasonable than were those Jews so long ago. Do not get angry as soon as you read the expression that we want to explain, the words, “Son of God.” Follow carefully in order to be able to correctly evaluate what I am going to say.

### THE WORD “SON”

The Qur’an says in Surah 2 – *Al-Baqarah*, Aya 116, “And they say: Allah has begotten a son. Glory be to Him! Nay!” The word for son in this passage is the word “*walad*,” which is almost always used in the physical sense. The fact that the Qur’an, in denying that Jesus is the Son of God, usually specifies that this would be impossible since God does not have a wife, shows that it is speaking of physically being a son. Christians would never say that Jesus was physically the Son of God; we have already clearly stated that the conception of Jesus, though miraculous, was not at all the result of sexual relations between God and Mary. The very thought is atrocious, and we reject it in the strongest terms. But as it happens, there is another Arabic word for “son,” the word “*ib-na*,” and this word is sometimes used figuratively. For example, in Surah 2 – *Al-Baqarah*, aya 177, we find the term *ibn-al-sabeel*, literally, “son of the road,” generally translated as “traveler.” Of course, no one thinks that the road literally had a child! It did not have sexual relations with anyone; it did not give birth. This is nothing more than a way of suggesting the close relationship between a person who travels a lot and the road that he travels on. In the same way, Egyptians are referred to as “the sons of the Nile,” without anyone drawing the conclusion that the river literally gave birth to human beings.

The Bible, also, uses the word “son” in a figurative or spiritual sense. It speaks, for example, of “Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement)” (Acts 4:36). This man apparently had the habit of encouraging or exhorting others; it was part of his character. The Bible calls people who disobey God “sons of disobedience” (Ephesians

5:6); those who live righteously are called “children of light” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). In John 8:44, Jesus was speaking to unbelieving and hypocritical Jews. He told them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” The devil did not physically “beget” these wicked Jews, nor is he physically “the father of lies”. To call someone the son or child of a person or thing is to attribute a character trait, an activity or a nature to one being described. It is not necessarily referring to his or her biological origin.

### “SON OF MAN”

When Jesus spoke of himself, the expression he used the most was “the Son of Man.” According to what we have just seen, Jesus was indicating in this way that he had taken on himself something of the nature of a man. Like every man, he lived in a physical body—which means that he could become tired, hungry or thirsty, he could be seen and touched physically by people, and yes, he could die. He was truly a man.

But this expression (Son of Man), meant something more than that for a Jew. Take for example the vision that the prophet Daniel saw more than five hundred years before Christ:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13,14)

In identifying himself as the Son of Man, Jesus was announcing that he was a very special person, someone of whom the prophets of God had spoken and for whom the people had been waiting a very long time. In addition, he was identifying himself as the one who, according to the prophecy, would be clothed with universal authority. In spite of his

humble appearance, unbelievable glory lay ahead of him.

### “SON OF GOD”

Jesus, however, also accepted another title, still more surprising, not to say shocking. Whether we like it or not, this prophet of the Almighty God allowed himself to be called “Son of God.” For example, Jesus asked his disciples one day what they believed about him. “Simon Peter answered: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’” Instead of rebuking him for having said something wrong, Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17,18). Right after that, however, we read that he “warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.” Another time, after Jesus had healed a man born blind, he asked him: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, ‘Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.’ And he said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshiped Him” (John 9:35-38).

In calling himself Son of Man, Jesus recognized, of course, that he possessed the traits of a man. When Jesus called himself the Son of God, he was indicating that he also possessed traits of God. He was, for example, without sin. The Qur’an says in Surah 19 – *Maryam*, aya 19 that Jesus was pure. According to Hebrews 4:15, he “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” According to Mark 2:10 he also had the authority to forgive men’s sins. John 2:25 says, “He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.” To determine in what other ways and to what extent Jesus had both the nature of God and the nature of man, one must read everything that God says about him in the Gospel. Please understand before you begin, however, that the Bible does not use the expression “Son of God” in a literal, that is, a physical sense. Jesus was not the Son of God in the same way that I am the son of my human father.

### WHAT THIS MEANT ACCORDING TO THE JEWS

Jesus allowed himself to be called Son of God; yet, in general, he did not publicly say that he was the Son of God. As is the case today, some people reacted violently. In John 5:17,18 we read, "He answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.' For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." (Notice that they did not think that Jesus was claiming that God had had sexual relations with his mother and had thus begotten him biologically. No, they were angry because they thought Jesus was claiming to have the same nature as God and to be equal with Him.)

When the Jewish leaders formally condemned Jesus to death, it was for the same reason. "The high priest said to Him, 'I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power,

and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his robes and said, 'He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?' They answered, 'He deserves death!'" (Matthew 26:63-66). They made no effort to determine by the prophecies if Jesus was right to say that he was the Christ. They had decided in advance that he could not be.

When Jesus had been hung on the cross, passersby mocked him, saying "He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:43). We see here another meaning of the expression "Son of God": Jesus was claiming to enjoy a special relationship with the heavenly Father. In John 8:29 he said, "He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." The night before his death, he prayed, "You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). Jesus had a relationship with God which was superior to that of anyone else in the world, like that of an only son, an obedient and beloved son, with his father.