The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 58–What Does 'Son of God' Mean in Luke? (Part 1)

The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus

Donations can be sent here: https://www.paypal.me/10mintruthtalks

Introduction

We are continuing our studies on how the four Gospel writers understand the title 'Son of God', moving on now to the Gospel of Luke. Luke used Mark as a literary source and therefore adopts much of Mark's understanding on this important title. Mark, as we saw in our previous two episodes, depicts Jesus as the royal Son of God, whose role is expanded to be a suffering and rejected figure. There was no hint within Mark's Gospel that Son of God was a preexistent figure alongside God in heaven, or even that Son of God was Yahweh himself. Rather, the Son of God was the messianic human king in and through God's ruling purposes were to find their climax.

How does Luke, who probably wrote his Gospel fifteen years after the Gospel of Mark, contribute to our ongoing understanding of the title 'Son of God'? This will be the topic of our study in this episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast. Luke is a massive Gospel, the largest of the four canonical biographies of Jesus by both word count and verse count, so our survey of what it means with Jesus' title 'Son of God' will cover multiple episodes. Does Luke offer an interpretation of Son of God that is consistent with Mark's representation of Jesus or does Luke offer a high Christology of the preexisting God who becomes a man? Let's begin our study!

1. 'Son of God' announced for the first time in Luke

> *"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."* (Luke 1:31-33)

-The angel Gabriel announces to Mary the identity and the vocation of her soon to be born child.
-The first thing that jumps off the page is the utterly clear declaration that Jesus, the Son of the Most High, will fulfill the promises made to David. One can actually see a point by point fulfillment of the promises covenanted to David in 2 Sam. 7:12-16.

-God promises to raise up David seed (2 Sam 7:12) and Luke says that David is Jesus ancestor/father.

-God promises that David's throne would endure forever (2 Sam 7:13) and Luke says that Jesus will receive the throne of David.

-God promises David an enduring kingdom (2 Sam 7:16) and Luke says that Jesus' kingdom will have no end, reigning forever.

-As the ‘Son of the Most High’, Jesus is distinct from the Most High God, acting as a Son. These are distinct figures, but it is clear that the son is a special person in and through the Most High is enacting his rule and reign. The passage also differentiates the Lord God from Jesus (“the Lord God will give him the throne”), never confusing the two figures.
-Luke also equates Son of God with Son of David in this passage (his father David). ‘Son of David’ was a title referring to the expected messianic king that was a human descendant from David. So ‘Son of God’ continues to maintain its royal overtones in addition to its Davidic roles. As a descendant from David, the Son of David clearly is a human being. Neither Yahweh nor any angel could fit this description of a descendant from the human being David.

2. ‘Son of God’ as miraculously born

> *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.* (Luke 1:34-35)

-This announcement from Gabriel is absolutely critical and contains within it a significant amount of crucial data.
-The manner in which Jesus was to be born is described here. The holy spirit functions as a creative agent in this process, and Luke carefully parallels the holy spirit with “the power of the Most High”:

- -holy spirit will come upon you
- -the power of the Most High will overshadow you

-It should also be noted that these verbs “come upon” and “overshadow” are not sexual terms in any way. There is no sexual activity described here between God (or the holy spirit) and Mary. Interpreters would be wise to stop saying that God had sex with Mary.
-There is a direct link between the creative activity of the spirit’s overshadowing Mary and the title ‘Son of God’ given to Jesus. In other words, Jesus will be called the Son of God, according to Luke 1:35, specifically because of the miraculous creative activity of the spirit. There is no hint or suggestion that the son is a preexistent figure in heaven who descends into Mary’s womb. Rather, Jesus is begotten, as the Greek text says in 1:35, and the word “begotten” in genealogies refers to one who is brought into existence. If Jesus is brought into existence at his birth, then he categorically could not have previously existed in any literal way.
-God here is identified as the actual father of Jesus, namely the one who brought Jesus into existence with the creative act of the holy spirit. So while the Davidic covenant of 2 Sam 7:14 says that God will be the father of David’s descendants, there is a different sense in the way that God is the Father of Jesus than God being the Father of Solomon. Solomon was Son of God as the Davidic king, ‘Son of God’ being a royal title. Jesus is Son of God both in that he bears the

royal title covenanted to David's descendants and in regard to the fact that God is his actual Father.
-Of further interest is the creation theme that is taking place here. When one thinks of the episode in the Hebrew Bible where God uses his spirit to create a royal Son of God, the obvious candidate is the creation of Adam, the primordial human king. Luke seems to be alluding to the Genesis creation story where, according to Gen 1:2, the spirit of God hovered over the waters moments before creation took place. Luke parallels this by saying that the spirit overshadowed Mary prior to the begetting of the Son of God. Luke will later, in his genealogy, call Adam the Son of God in Luke 3:38, so it seems clear that the creation of Jesus by the spirit in Luke 1:35 is echoing the creation of Adam in Genesis. Since Adam is a human king, it is interesting that Jesus is depicted also as a human king. Lastly, the creation of Jesus as Son of God in parallel to the creation of the primordial Son of God (Adam) indicates that the new creation has begun with Jesus.

3. 'Son of God' at age 12

> *Now <u>His parents</u> went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But <u>His parents</u> were unaware of it, but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, <u>Your father and I</u> have been anxiously looking for You." And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in <u>My Father's house</u>?" But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart.* (Luke 2:41-51)

-This passage contains the first occurrence in Luke where Jesus speaks in regard to his role as Son of God. He does so by juxtaposing his sense of sonship between the household of God the Father and the household of Joseph while remaining submissive to both.
-Luke makes it an emphasis to note the different families within this narrative, describing Joseph and Mary twice as "his parents" and even places Joseph's role as the head of the household in emphasis with Mary's rebuke of Jesus ("your father and I"). Jesus, of course, responds that he "had to be in my Father's house". Jesus is not choosing his role as the Son of God to the neglect of his role as the son within Joseph's household since in the narrative continues by noting that

Jesus "continued in subjection to them" in 2:51. Jesus is, however, placing his role within the household of God as the Son of God as more important than his role as son to Mary and Joseph. In fact, the Greek verb *dei* (translated as "I had to") signal the necessity of Jesus' decision, and Luke regularly uses this verb in both the Gospel and Acts to indicate the salvific necessity of the action taking place. In other words, Jesus was duty-bound to be about his Father's business and affairs within the Father's temple.
-At the young age of 12, Jesus demonstrates awareness of his role as the Son of God, and the Son of God within the temple setting indicates a royal figure, albeit a royal Son of God in waiting.
-There is no indication within this passage about Jesus' initial comments about his role as Son of God that his awareness of said role is due to any sort of preexistence or ontological relationship with God. God is still the Father, the Father of Jesus.

In conclusion, we have observed that:

The Gospel of Luke begins with a variety of references to Jesus as the Son of God, even before he is even born. For Luke, Jesus is the royal and messianic Son of God that is to fulfill the role of the Davidic messiah. Jesus is a lineal descendant from David, meaning he is a human being. As the son of David, Jesus is the royal king who clearly comes after David, not before him. Furthermore, as the Davidic Son of God, Jesus will occupy the throne of David and possess a kingdom with no end. Luke goes on to indicate that Jesus' coming into existence is due to the creative act of the holy spirit. In doing so, Luke regards Jesus as a Son of God like Adam, meaning he is a human being designated as God's king and God's Son. As a young child, Jesus acknowledges his role openly as Son of God by speaking of God as his Father while studying in the temple. Thus far in Luke's Gospel, Son of God is a title referring to a figure who is the Son of David and a specially-created king like Adam. Luke gives the readers no indication that Son of God was a title for a preexistent being who became human, nor does Luke suggest that the Son of God is Yahweh himself. Rather, Jesus as Son of God was created by God, is always distinguished from God, and declares that God is "my Father." Luke appears to regard Jesus within what may be appropriately called a 'high human Christology.'

If you enjoy the Biblical Unitarian podcast, please consider supporting us with a small donation. To give by PayPal, use this link: https://www.paypal.me/10mintruthtalks.

You can now access the Biblical Unitarian Podcast online, on iTunes, and on Spotify:
Online - https://biblicalunitarianpodcast.podbean.com/
iTunes - https://itunes.apple.com/…/the-biblical-unita…/id1347983887…
Spotify - https://open.spotify.com/show/7vpFwpN0XmxUh6VzLRkNJy

We also have a Facebook group for discussing podcast episodes. Search "Biblical Unitarian Podcast" on Facebook and send a request to join!