The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 64–What Does 'Son of God' Mean in John's Gospel? (Part 1)

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

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Introduction

Having taken about a dozen episodes to carefully examine what the title 'Son of God' means in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we now arrive at the Gospel of John. It is the popular opinion of many Bible readers that the highest Christological portrayal of Jesus Christ comes out of the Gospel of John. In fact, there are some listeners to this podcast who would dismiss the evidence demonstrated in regard to Son of God in the three Synoptic Gospels in favor of what they feel the Gospel of John says. Clearly, in order to do justice to the subject of Son of God, we need to fairly and carefully look at the Fourth Gospel. So this will be the first of many episodes of the BUP examining the passages within the Fourth Gospel that describe Christ as Son of God, particularly to observe what the title means. Does Son of God refer to the second person of the Trinity? Does 'Son of God' refer to a divine figure, or to someone who literally preexisted in heaven before becoming human? Could it be that the Gospel of John regards Jesus in the same Christology as Matthew, Mark, and Luke--a high human Christology? I am excited to go through this study and I hope you are too. Let's begin our look at what 'Son of God' means in the Gospel of John, looking this week into the references in the first chapter!

1. The 'Son of God' Who Is in the Bosom of the Father

No one has ever seen God. The One and Only Son-- the One who is at the Father's side-- He has revealed Him. (John 1:18 HCSB)
No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:18 NASB)

-This passage is probably one of the most difficult passages, due to the textual differences in the second of its three parts. For the sake of keeping organized, I'll divide the verse into three parts:

- No one has ever seen God (1:18a)

- The disputed section, one who is at the Father's side/bosom (1:18b)
- He has revealed Him (1:18c)

The middle section is problematic because of the textual differences in the early Greek texts of John's Gospel. Although there are actually a few variants on this point, only two have really been argued as possible candidates for the original reading--either "the unique Son" (or as the HCSB translates it, "the one and only Son"), or "the unique God". The Greek for these variants is *monogeneis uios* & *monogeneis theos*. It used to be favorable to understand the adjective *monogeneis* as "only begotten", on the assumption that the *-gen* within the adjective referred to generating. Scholars today have shifted to seeing the *gen* as reflecting the nuance of 'genus', having to do with a class of persons or things. This is why newer translations will use "one of a kind/unique/only" as their translation, rather than the older "only begotten".

-Before attempting to interpret this passage, a decision has to be made in regard to the textual variant. It does not do the interpreter any good to simply pick the variant that best suits their own theology. Persuasive arguments, based upon the evidence, need to be made, rather than subjectively picking and choosing which data we prefer. Textual critics are correct in pointing out that the early manuscript evidence is fairly divided between the two primary options (unique son and the unique God). However, when one looks closer, the "unique God" variant is all localized in the Alexandrian Greek manuscripts, while the "unique Son" variant appears much wider, in both the east and the west. In other words, the unique God variant is localized while the unique son variant is located in manuscripts discovered all over the place. Furthermore, the Gospel of John regularly describes Jesus as the unique Son (only begotten son), cf John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9, so this makes the variant "unique God" suspect.

-The general rule of thumb when it comes to textual variants is that the more difficult reading is likely correct, and the unique God is certainly the more difficult reading of the two. But Urban von Wahlde, in his Eerdmans Critical Commentary on the Gospel of John, argues that this variant is so difficult as to be impossible. He regards the unique God variant as a textual corruption that sought to heighten the christological understanding of the Son to a more exalted God. This fits well with the fact that the unique God variant is localized, and it makes sense that a change in the Greek text of John would be represented within a limited area of influence, rather than all over the empire. It doesn't make sense that copyists would demote the reference of God down to the Son. All in all, a good argument can be made that the variant "unique God" was an alteration of the original reading, the unique Son.

-Having made this argument, we can return to the text. John 1:18a is clear, no one has seen God. This God is the Father. Surely people saw Jesus in his ministry. That much is very clear. This would make John 1:18b speak of the unique son who is in the bosom of the Father, a description true of the resurrected and exalted Jesus, who is with the Father currently in heaven. John 1:18c indicates that this unique son has revealed him, namely the Father, the unseen God. The verb used here is where we get the interpretive term exegesis, the verb *exigeomai.* In other words, Jesus has exegeted the unseen God the Father. So what does 'Son of God' mean in John 1:18

(assuming that “unique Son” is the original reading)? The Son of God is someone distinct from the unseen God but is the unique one who is able to fully reveal and explain God to the world. The visible Son unpacks and unveils the unseen God. So the Son here is one who, in light of his uniqueness and closeness to the Father, is the climactic interpreter of God and his will. This gives the Son of God a heightened sense of authority as the authoritative revealer of God within John’s Gospel. But the Son of God does so as one who is distinct from God.

2. The ‘Son of God’ According to John the Baptist

John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." *(John 1:32-34)*

-John the Baptist is the first person in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel to openly identify Jesus as the Son of God. The Baptist does so in the context of Jesus’ baptism, an event that is central to launching the ministry of Jesus in all four Gospels. The newly baptized and anointed for ministry Jesus, as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is regarded as the Son of God. While the synoptic counterparts of John announce Jesus as Son of God via the voice from heaven, the Fourth Gospel notes how the confession comes from John the Baptist (although the Baptist admits that the God who sent him told him to look for the one who would be baptized in this manner). The narrative has already pointed to the authority John possesses in John 1:6, where the Baptist is sent from God authoritatively. So the Baptist’s confession bears the authority of God. When one thinks of the anointed Son of God, it is easy to hear the echoes of Psalm 2. Psalm 2 begins by speaking of Yahweh and his anointed one (2:2). The psalm goes on to describe this anointed figure as the king in 2:6, a newly installed king. The installation of this anointed king is described with the announcement of his sonship in 2:7 (You are my son, today I have become your Father). Son of God, according to Psalm 2, is a title given to the anointed king at his installation. All four Gospel writers, including the Gospel of John, make it a key point that Jesus is anointed and installed as the messianic Son of God at his baptism, making the baptism of Jesus the obvious place to begin their narratives of his life.

-So what does Son of God mean in John 1:34? Son of God is a title for the newly baptized and installed messiah, the anointed one. Jesus, anointed with both water and the holy spirit, bears the authority of God’s installed king. And if God installs a king, then God authorizes that king with considerable influence. In other words, Son of God in this passage is a title referring to one who is distinct from Yahweh but is installed and authorized as Yahweh’s anointed king, his son. No mention or indication of a preexistent Son of God who came down from heaven is found in the confession by John the Baptist. This picture of the Son of God is consistent with the christology of the Synoptic Gospels.

3. The 'Son of God' According to Nathanael

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." (John 1:47-49)

-Nathanael is the next person to openly confess Jesus as 'Son of God'. This passage involves a dialogue with Jesus and Nathanael. Jesus first acknowledges Nathanael as a faithful and blameless member of Israel an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Not having been with Jesus thus far, Nathanael expressed his surprise in how well Jesus seems to know him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answers him and states that he has observed him under the fig tree. The fig tree was a common place of Jewish instruction, so it was likely that Nathanael had spent some time there studying Torah, and Jesus observed or overheard Nathanael during such occasions. There is no need to assume that there is some supernatural miracle of knowing taking place here, Jesus himself admits that he saw Nathanael under the fig tree. s knew of Nathanael so intimately. Nathanael's response to Jesus having admitted his knowledge of his character is interesting. He does not assume that Jesus is the true God as if only God can know the thoughts of men. Rather, Jesus is called "Rabbi", meaning "my teacher" (which is an interesting confession in light of the fig tree being a place of study hypothesis). Jesus is also called by Nathanael the Son of God, the King of Israel. There seems to be a connection in the confession between the titles Son of God and King of Israel. According to Psalm 2:6-7 (which we referenced earlier and is already in the minds of attentive readers of the Gospel thus far), the installed king is the Son of God, both are synonymous titles. It is also interesting to note the connection to Jesus' confession of Nathanael as a faithful Israelite and the returned confession of Jesus as Israel's king. The 'Son of God/king" motif is also found in the crucially important OT passage of 2 Sam 7:12-14, where God covenants to King David and his descendants that they will continue the royal line of regents:

> *"When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me* (2 Sam 7:12-14 NAU)

2 Sam 7:14 identifies the Davidic king as Son of God, not unlike what we observed in Psalm 2. So there is plenty of room to understand the Son of God connection with the human Israelite king.

-So what does Son of God mean in the confession of Nathanael? Son of God is the King of Israel, the messianic ruler. Jesus is also identified as a teacher, likely the ideal teacher in light of the Gospel of John's polemic against Judaism's teachers. The references in the Hebrew Bible that speak of the royal Son of God, both Psalm 2 and 2 Sam 7, clearly distinguish God from the Son

of God, never confusing the two. Nathanael's confession of Jesus as Son of God is consistent with a high human Christology, and would not have been heard by the original readers as a confession of divinity.

In conclusion, we have observed that:
The Gospel of John, which many assume bears the highest Christological depiction of Jesus among the four canonical Gospels, seems to instead describe Son of God in a manner that is consistent with a high human Christology. The initial portrayal of Jesus as Son of God, if "unique Son" is the original reading of John 1:18, regards him as the one who uniquely interprets, reveals, and explains the unseen God. In doing so, Jesus remains distinguished from God but functions as the authoritative Son who shows us what the unseen God is like. This places Jesus, albeit the exalted and resurrected Jesus, in a considerably empowered role, but a role as a Son who is clearly differentiated from God. This initial description of 'Son of God' as the authorized revealer of the unseen God will be critical to understanding Jesus's various descriptions throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus is openly confessed as the Son of God by John the Baptist and Nathanael. The Baptist does to on the context of Jesus' baptism, the event that publicly anointed him as the royal and messianic Son of God. Nathanael's confession says much of the same, identifying the Son of God as the King of Israel and the authoritative Rabbi. So despite popular opinions, the Son of God in the Gospel of John (at least thus far in our study) does not refer to a preexistent divine figure who came out of heaven or to the second person of the Trinity. Instead, the Son of God is someone who is not God, while at the same time is closely tied to the Father as his authoritative revealer and king on earth. Son of God, as a title in the Gospel of John, fits better in a high human Christology than it does in a trinitarian or preexistent Christology.

Please look forward to the subsequent episodes where we will dig deeper into the Gospel of John in its understanding of the title 'Son of God' as it pertains to Jesus Christ! And if you think this podcast might speak truth into the lives of your friends, please share it!

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