

The Title *Son of God*

John Hepp, Jr.

“*This is my Son, whom I love*” (Matthew 3:17)

“*What do you want with us, Son of God?*” (Matthew 8:29)

“*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16)

“*These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God*”
(John 20:31)

The verses above are quoted from the NIV, with *Christ* changed to its equivalent *Messiah*.¹ In these verses the Father, the demons, the apostles, and all believers agree that Jesus is the Son of God.² Romans 1:2–3 gives that title as the core of the gospel: “The gospel of God ...regarding his Son.” It is commonly assumed that the title implies Jesus’ pre-existence and asserts His divinity. Indeed, He was pre-existent and divine; but the title seldom, if ever, means that.

Jesus, God’s Son, Was Also Divine And Pre-existent.

Jesus was God’s Son on earth, but He existed before He was born on earth. He came from heaven and was sent by His Father. Most of the scriptural evidence for these facts is in the Gospel of John. Here is some of it.

- Jesus spoke of Himself as “Son” and of God as His “Father.” In John the first passage presenting this relationship in detail is John 5:17–30. “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (5:18).
- Jesus had existed as the divine “Word” (the *Logos*) even before creation. John’s prologue tells us that fact (1:1). Later it says that the pre-existent “Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:14). Jesus was aware of His origin—that He had existed in glory before He became a man (John 17:1, 5, 24).
- Jesus’ previous glory had been in heaven. He often said that He “came from heaven” (for example, in John 3:13; 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58).
- Jesus told His disciples, “The Father has sent me” (John 20:21; compare 3:17). The apostle John later reiterated, “The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14; compare verses 9, 10; John 3:17; Gal. 4:4).

From such passages some conclude that for Jesus the title *Son of God* implied divinity. Since He was the eternal *Logos*, they assume that He was God’s Son even before He became flesh. But you will see that the scriptural usage of His title is not that simple: (a) It was often used for beings who were not divine. (b) In Jesus’ case it usually, if not always, referred to Him as man. We will consider some of that usage in those two categories.

¹ This change is clearly authorized by John 1:41, as we will show later. Both titles refer to the anointed King.

² In Matthew 4:3, 6 even the devil says, “If you are the Son of God.” His words in Greek do not express doubt but assume the statement to be true.

Son of God Often Cannot Imply Divinity.

- **Angels** are not divine and must not be worshipped as such (Col. 2:18; Rev. 19:10; 22:8–9). Yet, God calls them “sons of God” in Job 38. He reports that when He “laid the earth’s foundation” (v. 4), “all the angels [Heb. sons of God] shouted for joy” (v. 7). Similarly, those called “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 are either angels or men, in neither case divine.
- **The nation Israel**, which God produced from Abraham, is called His son several times. For example, consider God’s instructions to Moses: “Say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son’” (Exod. 4:22). Centuries later, looking back at that early history of the elect nation, God recalls, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). This verse from Hosea was “fulfilled” when a similar thing happened to Jesus (Matt. 2:15).
- **The first man**, whom God made from dust (Gen. 2:7), was called God’s son. Jesus’ genealogy in Luke 3 goes back to that man, who was unique but neither pre-existent nor divine. Notice what he is called: “the son of Seth, the son of **Adam, the son of God**” (Luke 3:37).
- **All believers** in Messiah are/will be called God’s sons: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). Again, “Love your enemies...that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). Again, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (Rev. 21:7, also implied in Matt. 17:26). This relationship will be complete when believers are raised from the dead: “They are God’s children [sons], since they are children of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36). In that sense “we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons” (Rom. 8:23).

Son of God As a Human Title for Jesus

You have just seen some examples (not all) where the title *Son of God* does not imply divinity or pre-existence. Now you will consider its use for Jesus, first in other books, then in John. Jesus, of course, is different from all these other “sons of God.” He is unique. He is divine. Yet, even in His case the title was often clearly human. It was usually royal, equivalent to *Messiah*.³

Messiah, an Aramaic word from Hebrew *Mashiach*, means the promised King. That is Jesus’ title in the first recorded testimony by a disciple (Andrew): “We have found the **Messiah**” (John 1:41). John’s Gospel immediately explains the title by giving its Greek equivalent: “that is, the *Cristos*.” Our English versions usually do not translate that Greek title but simply write it in English, as “Christ.” Like *Messiah*, *Cristos* means “Anointed One,” the One God has anointed with His Spirit to be King. By God’s covenant with King David, that Person must be born in the family of David (Psalm 89:35–36; Matt. 1:1, 17; Luke 1:27, 69; 2:4; Rom. 1:3). Therefore, *Messiah* is a human title.

³ Some will not even listen to the evidence that follows. They will consider that the full truth is what we already quoted: “The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). However, we must beware of the trap they have fallen into, to think that John’s emphasis cancels other scriptural facts.

Now, consider some examples ending with John's writings.

In the Gospel of Luke

Luke treats *Son of God* as a human title. You saw in 3:37 how it applies to Adam. It also applies to (a) Jesus' birth and (b) His Messiahship. (a) Luke never mentions Jesus' pre-existence but first traces His sonship to the Holy Spirit's part in His birth: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you... **So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God**" (Luke 1:35). (b) An example of equating the title with *Messiah* is 4:41: "Demons came out of many people, shouting, 'You are the **Son of God!**' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was **the Messiah.**" See the same equivalence at His trial (22:67, 70; 23:2, 3, 35, etc.).

In the Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 1:4 calls this title a "name he has inherited [Greek, obtained by inheritance]" as a human.⁴ Unlike Luke, Hebrews (1:2) does speak of Jesus' pre-existence. Yet, notice that the words we will bold from Hebrews 1:4 point to His time on earth, not before: "He **became** as much superior to the angels as **the name he has inherited** is superior to theirs." As Creator He was always superior to the angels, but as man He "became" so, when He inherited the name *Son*.

The next verse (1:5) leaves no doubt that Jesus' new "name" (title) *Son* is royal. It traces it to two Old Testament Scriptures that use it in that sense. We will quote them in all-capital letters, then comment on each.

**Hebrews 1:5
The Royal Son**

"For to which of the angels did God ever say,
'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BECOME YOUR FATHER'?
(Psa. 2:7)
Or again,
'I WILL BE HIS FATHER, AND HE WILL BE MY SON'?"
(2 Sam. 7:14)

In Psalm 2

The first passage quoted by Hebrews 1:5 and applied to Jesus is Psalm 2:7. In its four stanzas of three verses each, that psalm uses the title *Son* as equivalent to *Messiah*, the anointed King.

- Stanza 1 (vv. 1–3) speaks of *the Messiah*. "The nations conspire...the peoples plot...the kings of the earth take their stand...the rulers gather together against the

⁴ The Greek verb for "has inherited" is used eighteen times in the New Testament. It always means to come into possession of something not possessed before. See 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Heb. 1:14; 6:12; 12:17. In Jesus' case the name *Son* is here presented as new for Him to fit His new condition as man. Similarly, Phil. 2:9–11 says God "hath...given Him a name which is above every name," probably the name *Lord* (cf. Acts 2:36).

LORD and against his **Anointed One** [to] break their chains...and throw off their fetters.” In the Greek version of verse 2, the term “Anointed One” (Hebrew *Mashiac*) is translated *Cristos* (Christ, the Messiah).

- Stanza 2 (vv. 4–6) calls the just-mentioned Messiah *King*. Here the LORD “scoffs at” the foolish nations and “rebukes them” for their futile rebellion. He identifies the Anointed One/Messiah as “my King” (v. 6).
- Stanza 3 (vv. 7–9) reports that this Messiah is God’s Son and Heir. The one who speaks here is the Anointed One/Messiah/King Himself. He repeats the LORD’s previous decree: “**You are my Son; today I have become your Father.** Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance.... You will rule them....” It is evident that His sonship (a) is not eternal but something new in His life, (b) has to do with inheritance and ruling the nations on earth.⁵

The language of this psalm was by no means unique. It was common in the Ancient Near East to call the king “Son of God” at his coronation. It implied, as in this psalm, that the king was the “royal Heir,”⁶ For example, the following lines are from the Pyramid Texts in Egypt. Compare them to expressions God used from Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 at Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:17):

“This is my son, my firstborn.”

“This is my beloved, with whom I have been satisfied.”

In the Davidic Covenant

The second of the Scriptures quoted in Hebrews 1:5 and applied to Jesus is 2 Samuel 7:14. This verse was from the LORD’s covenant with David. It originally referred to Solomon, David’s first royal offspring. As the LORD promised on that occasion, Solomon did “build a house” for Him (the temple). As also foreseen, he did wrong and was punished—but did not lose the kingdom. So it is obvious that in the Davidic covenant even Solomon (and every succeeding Davidic king, including Jesus) was God’s “son” as Ruler and Heir. Read some of the LORD’s words:

I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name.... **I will be his father, and he will be my son.** When he does wrong, I will punish him.... But my love will never be taken away from him as I took it away from Saul. (2 Sam. 7:12–15)

In the Great Confession

After its introduction, the Gospel of Matthew has two main divisions: 4:17 to 16:20, then 16:21 to the end. The climax to the first division is the Great Confession made by Jesus’ apostles. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all give parallel accounts of that climactic occasion and confession.

⁵ When did God **become** His Father? In preliminary senses at His conception (Luke 1:35) and when He was baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21–22). But in the fullest sense, when He was raised from the dead (Acts 13:33–34; Romans 1:4).

⁶ Sonship usually implies heirship: “Since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (Gal. 4:7).

But of the three, only Matthew includes “Son of God” as part of it (“the Messiah, the Son of the living God”). Mark and Luke have only the one title—“the Messiah.” See the chart.

The Great Confession in the Synoptic Gospels		
Matthew 16:20	Mark 8:29	Luke 9:20
You are the Messiah (Anointed One), the Son of the living God.	You are the Messiah (Anointed One).	You are the Messiah (Anointed One) of God.

We must assume that Mark and Luke understood the confession and gave accurate accounts.⁷ Therefore, the two titles in Matthew must mean basically the same thing. “Son of God” does not refer to His deity. Rather, as in Psalm 2, it emphasizes what is already implied in “Messiah”—that He is the royal Heir.

In Apostolic Preaching

In Acts. How did the apostles use the title *Son of God* in their preaching? The evidence from the Book of Acts suggests that they rarely used it. In the many summaries in Acts of such preaching, it calls Jesus the “Son of God” only once! That is in Acts 9:20.⁸ In 13:33 “My Son” is quoted from Psalm 2:7, with the same meaning of messiahship as in that psalm.⁹ What does the title mean in 9:20? Not likely deity, because it can certainly mean royalty, which (rather than deity) is stressed everywhere else in Acts.¹⁰

⁷ In other words, if “Son of God” here referred to Jesus’ deity, how could we explain why Mark and Luke left it out?

⁸ In the KJV, which is based on the *Textus Receptus*, Acts 8:37 also calls Jesus “Son of God.” For centuries, however, none of the Greek manuscripts had that verse. “The earliest known New Testament manuscript that contains the words dates from the sixth century” (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, p. 315). It is found neither in the Majority Text (that is, most Greek manuscripts) nor the Alexandrian Text (usually considered the best textual family). It is one of many interpolations (paraphrases and additions) by the Western Text in the Book of Acts. In fact, the verse was not even in the key medieval manuscripts from which the Humanist Erasmus prepared the *Textus Receptus*. Assuming that the verse gave a necessary explanation omitted by careless scribes, he inserted it from the margin of another manuscript. There are other examples of Erasmus’ using ingenuity in place of evidence. For example, since his Greek manuscript lacked Revelation 22:16–22, he translated those verses to Greek from Latin. But his Latin version was defective. As a result, he used the word for *book* in 22:19 instead of *tree*, which is found in every Greek manuscript of Revelation! These changes continue in versions based on the *Textus Receptus*, such as the KJV.

⁹ The King James Version two other times in Acts (3:13, 26) calls Jesus God’s “Son.” But the Greek word involved (*paidos*) does not really mean “son.” Instead, it means “child” or “servant.” KJV translates the same title as “child” in 4:27, 30 (for Jesus) and as “servant” in 4:25 (for King David) and in Matthew 12:18 (for Jesus). A key to the use of *paidos* is the Matthew passage, which quotes from the Greek version of Isaiah. In this and other Isaiah passages, *paidos* refers to the future *Servant* of the Lord, who would both suffer and rule, namely, the Messiah. Jews listening to the Acts sermons would recognize that meaning.

¹⁰ Some consider Jesus’ deity a better evangelistic theme than His messiahship. If that is what *Son of God* means in Acts, why use it so sparingly?

In Romans. *God's Son* is used in the royal sense in Romans 1:3 and 4. The gospel is primarily two facts about Him, as Paul points out: “[God’s] Son,

1. who was a **descendant of David** with respect to the flesh [Greek *sarks*]¹¹
2. who was appointed the Son-of-God-in-power according to the Holy Spirit by the **resurrection from the dead.**”¹² (NET Bible, emphasis added)

In other words, He (1) was born in David’s royal family and (2) was given all authority when God raised Him from death. These two facts point not to His divinity but to His royal authority. He has the right and the power to bring the promised kingdom. At the end of verse 4 Paul reiterates this gospel even more succinctly: “Jesus Messiah our Lord.” All four Gospels and the evangelistic sermons in Acts emphasize these same facts.¹³

What Does Jesus’ Sonship Imply in the Gospel of John?

In the Gospel of John nearly thirty times Jesus called Himself the “Son of God” or the “Son” with “of God” implied. In other Gospels He rarely referred to Himself as God’s Son except indirectly in parables (such as, Matt. 21:37–38 and 22:2). Others called Him that, but not He. He made no such direct references in Mark or Luke, and only in 11:27 and 24:36 of Matthew. Far more often (over thirty times in Matthew) He called Himself the “Son of Man.” In fact, even in John He used the latter title thirteen times.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in that Gospel the dominant thought was “Son of God.” Following are listed some aspects of that title’s usage there.

1. Jesus’ sonship is unique. No one else is God’s son in exactly the same sense. In 3:16 and 18 He is called the “one and only Son.”¹⁵ It is possible that 1:18 has the same phrase with the same meaning.¹⁶ That concept is the basis for Jesus’ distinguishing, after His resurrection, between “My Father and your Father, My God and your God” (20:17). Jesus’ use of this title was seen as claiming equality with God (5:17–18; 10:33–38; 19:7).

¹¹ Instead of “with respect to the **flesh**,” NIV says, “as to his **human nature**.” But that can wrongly imply a contrast between Messiah’s human and divine natures, which is not the point in Romans or the gospel. NIV also employs a similar meaning for *sarks* in 1 Corinthians 5:5 (“sinful nature”), where it does not fit.

¹² NIV translates the Greek verb as “declared” here but, more accurately, as “appointed” in Acts 10:42. The NET Bible says that this verb “is used eight times in the NT, and it always has the meaning ‘to determine, appoint.’ Paul is not saying that Jesus was appointed the ‘Son of God by the resurrection’ but ‘**Son-of-God-in-power** by the resurrection,’ hence the hyphenation. He was born in weakness in human flesh (*with respect to the flesh*, v. 3) and he was raised with power.” (p. 519, emphasis added)

¹³ The Gospel of Mark, for example, is a full-length sermon giving the gospel this way. Acts 10:36–43 summarizes that sermon in Mark. Romans does not preach that sermon but explains the gospel’s power.

¹⁴ A quick check gives the following total figures. “Son (of God)”: Matthew 12, Mark 6, Luke 8, John 28. “Son of Man”: Matthew 30+, Mark 14, Luke 26, John 13.

¹⁵ “One and only” translates Greek *monogenes*. The King James Version translates it “only begotten.” *Mono* indeed means “only.” *Genes*, however, is not from *gennao* (beget) but from *ginomai* (become).

¹⁶ NIV in 1:18 has “God, the One and Only,” a title for Jesus that is puzzling even in John. As usual, NIV follows the current critical Greek text. Here that text, adopting the reading of several Alexandrian manuscripts that are usually considered good, has “God” (*theos*) instead of “Son” (*huios*).

2. The Son often related His mission to His being sent by the Father. For example, see 5:23, 24, 36–38. This thought was so common that He often referred to the Father as “Him who sent Me.” The Father sent Him “into the world” (3:17ff.; 16:28; 17:18). As a result, He came into the world (16:27–30; 18:37). This is related to the facts that He came (down) from heaven (6:32–58) and from God (8:42; 9:33; 13:3; 16:27–30). He knew that His mission would be brief (17:4). After His resurrection He would ascend to His Father and His God (20:17).

3. The Son spoke of several aspects of His relation to the Father. Because of these relationships, whoever knows the Son knows the Father (14:7, 9; 16:3; 17:3, 26; compare 12:44–45).

A. The Son

1. does and says what He sees and hears from the Father (5:17–30; 8:26, 28–29, 38; 12:49–50; 15:15; 17:4)
2. has come and does works in His Father’s name (5:43; 10:25, 37–38)

B. The Father

1. was greater than the Son (14:28), probably referring to limitations inherent to the Son’s condition as man
2. loves the Son (5:20; 10:17; 15:9, 10). Therefore, He always hears the Son (11:41–42).
3. makes all provisions for the Son, giving Him
 - a. work to do, including dying and rising again (5:36; 10:18; 18:11)
 - b. the words to say (12:49–50)
 - c. all the Father’s authority and power (5:19–30; 13:3; 16:15; 17:7–12, 22; 18:9)
 - d. specifically, the powers to grant eternal life and to judge (5:24–26; 6:40; 17:2)
 - e. people (whom the Father draws to Him) to nurture, give life, prepare for glory (6:37, 39, 44, 65; 17:2, 6–26)
4. seeks honor for the Son
 - a. wants Him to be honored as the Father is honored (5:23; 12:26)
 - b. will love those who love the Son (14:21–24)
 - c. gives Him glory (17:1, 5, 22, 24)

C. Both the Son and the Father

1. are in each other (14:10, 11, 20)
2. know each other (10:15)

4. In John Jesus’ sonship sometimes, if not always, refers to His human messiahship.

- **First Use.** When *Son of God* is equivalent to *Messiah*, it too is not divine but human. That seems to be the case the first time *Son of God* is used in John (1:32–34). That was John the Baptist’s testimony the first time he saw Jesus after he baptized Him (1:29). At His baptism (therefore, as a man) Jesus had been anointed with the Spirit and thus constituted as the Anointed One (*Cristos, Messiah*). John twice referred to that anointing: “I saw the Spirit come down...and remain on him” (1:32, 33). In that context John announced his conclusion that Jesus “is the Son of God” (1:34). The clear implication is that Jesus is the Son because He is anointed to be King. Immediately afterward (1:40–41), Andrew gave the first apostolic witness, that Jesus is Messiah.

- **Second Use.** The title *Son of God* is quickly used in John a second time. This time its equivalence to *Messiah* is even more certain. Nathanael testified, “You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (1:49).
- **Other Uses.** Later uses of *Son of God* in John also equate it with the title *Messiah*. For example, Peter’s confession for all the apostles was “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (6:69). This is identical to the Great Confession as announced in Matthew 16:16 and discussed earlier. Martha combined the same two titles: “You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (11:27). In fact, the purpose of the entire book was “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (20:31, Greek).
- **Conclusion.** In John Jesus’ being *Son of God* emphasizes His human Messiahship. There are many aspects to that relationship, but the main one is His right and ability to rule.¹⁷

One More Passage & Conclusions

One More Passage. The Synoptic Gospels and Acts do not clearly teach Jesus’ pre-existence and divinity. Nevertheless, the Gospel of John and some of the epistles do. Also, His divinity is implied by the Lord’s final question in the temple (Matt. 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44). First, He established the fact that the law experts (correctly) called Messiah “the son of David.” Then, referring to Psalm 110, He asked, “If David calls [the Messiah] Lord, how is He his son?” (Matt. 22:45). This implied what the law experts never imagined: (a) Messiah has a greater sonship than to David. (b) His sonship to God is divine.

Conclusions About the Title *Son of God*

1. There is lots of scriptural evidence that this was a human title, which Jesus acquired as a man.
2. It was basically equivalent to *Messiah*, God’s anointed King.
3. Since it often summarizes the gospel, that message should always center on Jesus’ royal dignity.
4. Though not emphasized in the first stage of evangelization in the New Testament, the *Messiah*’s (Son of God’s) divinity is implied.

¹⁷ Consider this in respect to the Father’s “sending” the Son. Even in John this may not imply His pre-existence and divinity. Because Jesus relates that sending not to His being “Son of God” but “Son of **Man**” (John 3:13; 6:53, 62; compare 5:27). “Son of Man” is clearly a human title. He was sent as a man among men. What about the fact that His Sender was divine? That in itself does not prove that the sent one is also divine. Because (a) God also sent the prophets, and (b) Jesus sent His own followers on the same kind of mission: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21; cf. 17:18). No one in those two sent groups was pre-existent or divine. So even the Father’s sending the Son of Man refers to Jesus’ human mission and not necessarily to His pre-existence or divinity.