

The Relationship of the Lord Christ to God¹

The Lord Christ learned to read the Holy Scriptures and to pray just like any child growing up in a Jewish family in the first century. So he would go weekly to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, where he memorized many passages from the Scriptures, and learned to recite many prayers which were part of the regular Jewish worship. He would have heard many times these words:

“Hear, O Sons of Jacob: God our Lord is the one God. So love God your Lord with all your hearts and with all your souls and with all your strength’ (Torah: Deuteronomy 6:4 – 5).

The first indication that our Lord Jesus was aware of something special in his relationship with God came in the story of his first visit to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover (the feast celebrating freedom from the yoke of slavery in Egypt) when he was twelve years of age. So when his mother Mary and her husband Joseph had been searching for him, they found him in the Temple courts deeply involved in conversation with the religious leaders. They asked him to go and he answered, “You didn’t have to worry. Didn’t you know that I had to be concerned with the affairs of my Parent/Protector [*waliyyi*]?” (Luke 2:48 – 49). It is important to notice here that the Greek text mentions that the Lord Christ spoke about God with a word equivalent to “Father”.

When the Lord Christ reached the age of thirty he began his public ministry, and he was purified by immersion in the river Jordan by his cousin, the prophet John the son of Zechariah. “As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven torn open and the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are the Beloved, my Spiritual Son, and I am completely pleased with you.” (Mark 1:10 – 11). We shall soon see that these words were a quotation from the Psalms, which refer in their original context to the prophet David as viceregent of God or the beloved of God. This background from the Torah will help us to understand what Christ meant when he spoke of God as “Father” or “my Father”.

There is one very significant saying of our Lord Jesus which sums up these strange and extraordinary claims that the Lord Christ made about himself: “God my eternal Father has put me in charge of all things, and no one knows my identity except him, and no one knows the identity of God the eternal Father except me, the spiritual Son

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of the Almighty, and the people to whom I have desired to reveal it.” (Matthew 11:27).

The Lord Christ taught his disciples a prayer which was afterwards known as “The Lord's Prayer”. This prayer begins with these words that correlate to the original form of the prayer: “Our Father in heaven ...” There was nothing new in this expression, since it had been used by Jews in their prayers for several centuries, and it indicates that they belong to the community of God, and God is in the position of their father and they are his sons. What is notable is that the Lord Christ used an expression which no one had the right to utter except for the Messiah king, using in his private prayers the Aramaic word “abba” which correlates to the words “my father”. Thus, when Christ was praying a little before being arrested by the Jewish leaders, he interceded with God saying: "God, you are my eternal Father, and you are able to do all things, so send this cup of sufferings away from me, but oh Sustainer let it be as you want, not as I want." (Mark 14:36). There had not been a Jewish person previously who had dared to address God with this word, because it means that he is the true chosen eternal Messiah King, for no one other than the awaited Messiah had the right to address God with the title “my Father.” For this reason these words of Christ’s were an indication of his deep faith in a special relationship between him and God.

The two terms “the Son” and “Son of God” have become the most common terms used by Christians for the Lord Christ, but they are also some of the hardest terms to understand. If we want to understand the intention of the Lord Christ when he describes himself in this way, we must understand the meaning of these terms in the Torah. Here we find several very important ideas:

1. The Hebrew and Aramaic words normally translated “son” (ben, bar) are used in a number of idiomatic and metaphorical expressions including ones that deal with relationships between people, between people and society, and between people, society or its leaders and God. In some other languages, on the other hand, kinship terms are not used metaphorically. The word for son means biological son only (that is, offspring, progeny), and it is not used broadly or metaphorically for other interpersonal relationships, not even for a nephew, a step-son, or an adopted son.

In these languages, people would necessarily understand the Hebrew and Aramaic expressions “sons of God” and “son of God” in a literal way, without understanding the linguistic differences and cultural contexts of the word, which would make people think the reference in the expression “son of God” is to genealogical relationships.

In cultures with a polytheistic worldview, of which there are many even today, this is the natural interpretation, that is, that gods beget other gods. The best-known of these cultures are the ancient Greco-Roman world which gave abundant grounds in its polytheistic teachings before the rise of Christianity for a misunderstanding of the Jewish terms “the Son” and “the Father” and thus interpreted these to mean that God

had begotten another god.

The Jewish scholar Klausner states in his book that: “For Jews [‘son of God’] was a common poetic-figurative expression. But the Gentiles, who asserted that certain of their eminent men—Alexander the Great, Plato, Pythagoras—had been fathered by gods who had visited mortal women, saw in this expression an actual genetic relationship of Jesus to God.”²

2. God is called the Father of the Sons of Jacob, and the idea here is that God cares for the people of his covenant in the same way that a head of a household (father) has for his sons (his dependents). Just as the sons are required to obey and submit to the father’s authority, in the same way the Sons of Jacob (or Sons of Israel) are required to acknowledge the authority of God over their lives and to be obedient to him. The Prophet Isaiah (peace be upon him) says in one of his prayers: “Even so God, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter, and all of us are the work of your hands.” (Isaiah 64:8)

Grelot and Renard point out that Hebrew often uses constructions with the word for *son* to signify belonging, as in ‘sons of Israel’, ‘sons of Babylon’ (Eze. 23:17), ‘sons of Zion’ (Ps. 149:2), ‘sons of the prophets’ (2 Kings 2:5), and ‘sons of man’ (Eze. 2:1; Dan. 8:17).³

In the book of Matthew, the “sons of the kings” are actually their citizens, as opposed to conquered subjects (Matt. 17:25). Similarly in Matthew 13:38, “sons of the Kingdom” are “sons of the Kingdom of God”, which is equivalent to the expression “sons of God” which is used in the Bible in the singular and the plural to indicate people and groups and angels who belong to God and enjoy his special favor.

God had called the Sons of Israel and those who accompanied them to accept his covenant to be the faithful chosen people of his covenant, and he in turn would care for them “as a father” (see the Torah, Deuteronomy 32:6, and the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 31:9), and they would be united with him as his “son” or “sons”. In the Noble Gospel, the “sons of God” are “the sons of the Kingdom” (Matthew 13:38), for they are the ones who God has accepted and given eternal life in his kingdom.

3. When the Sons of Jacob speak of God as a father, they in turn represent the son in a collective sense. God spoke to the prophet Moses when he instructed him on what he was to say to Pharaoh in order to encourage him to permit the Sons of Jacob to depart the land of Egypt: And you must tell Pharaoh that God Almighty says: "The Sons of Jacob are my honored children. We have commanded you to release my children to worship me, but you have refused. Therefore We will kill the first and most honorable of your sons." (Torah, Exodus 4:22-23). Several centuries after this

² Klausner, Joseph, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955, p.527.

³ Grelot, Pierre and Renard, Henri (1988), 'Son of God', in Xavier Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2nd edn., London: Geoffrey Chapman), 561–63.

God spoke of the departure of the Sons of Jacob from Egypt through the prophet Hosea saying: “When the nation of the Sons of Jacob was young I loved him, and I called my spiritual son to leave Egypt”. (Book of the Prophet Hosea 11:1) So in these two verses God speaks to the Sons of Jacob using the word “my son” for he has established a special relationship between himself and them. They will worship him as the one God and not worship other gods besides him, gods worshiped by the other nations, while he considers them a people he has chosen and favored with his love.

Here sonship is connected with the covenant that exists between God and his righteous servant. So in the Book of the Prophet Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7, the phrase “sons of God” is applied to the righteous residents of heaven, which presumably means the faithful angels. Since the Hebrew word “malak” means “messenger”, it is possible that this term in the Book of the Prophet Job indicates all heavenly beings, whether they are actually messengers or not. This expression is used in a similar meaning in the Gospel (Luke 20:36), where the resurrected believers in the Eternal Abode are called “sons of the resurrection”.

We find in the first century other usages which are less common. So the expression “sons of God” indicates the Jews who God called to righteousness and being chosen, those who we might say are the true Sons of Israel, so he says: “the righteous man...calls himself the son of God...and boasts that God is his Father.” (Wisdom 2:12, 16). He also says: “Why was he reckoned among the sons of God? And why was his portion among the righteous?” (Wisdom 5:5) We also find, “Let him be a father to the orphans, and like a husband to their mothers, and you will be in this way like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than your mother does.” (Sirach 4:10)

We find this same usage in the Gospel (Matthew 5:44-45 and Luke 6:35). The expression “sons of God” (people of God’s household) there seems to indicate approaching God’s high moral attributes, with the guarantee that they will become set aside for his good deeds and his fatherly love. “But I tell you: Love your enemies, and pray asking good for those who persecute you, and in this way you will become the people of the household of God your merciful Father in his loftiness.” So we see, in general, that the expressions “sons of...” means the people who obey or follow those they are associated with, or those who are distinguished with certain characteristics, or those who take part in a certain matter such as the afterlife or God’s light. Thus in the Noble Gospel the term “sons of God / children of God / God’s household” means in general the people that God is pleased with, in other words the citizens of his kingdom, who are also called “the righteous.”

4. Sometimes the King of the Sons of Jacob is described as “the Son,” since he rules the people on behalf of God. This idea is found in the words spoken by God to the Prophet David the king (peace be upon him) through the prophet Nathan. God addressed the prophet David (peace be upon him) in this discourse speaking of the prophet Solomon (peace be upon him) who would inherit the throne of his father and

construct the Temple in the sacred precincts saying: “I will cause you to be settled on the throne of your rule without enemies. I, God, tell you that I will raise up a house for you, so from your descendants will come kings. And when the days of your life are ended and you are buried in your place of rest with your fathers, I will raise up a successor for you from your own body and will establish his rule. Your successor is the one who will raise up a house for me to honor my name, and I will establish the throne of his reign forever. I will be in the position of a father to him, and he will be in the position of my spiritual son, and if he commits wrong I will correct him, for I will place over him other peoples, and they will correct him with their blows.” (Book of 2 Samuel 7:11-14). The idea of the king being described as “the son” is also found in a poetic expression in the Psalms which refers to the enthronement of the king, when the prophet David says: “I now proclaim the decree of God: God revealed to me: “You are my son, you whom I have today placed on the throne..,We will give you the nations as an inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession.” (Psalm 2:7).

It was common in the ancient Near East that the king after his coronation would be called “the son of God,” that is, if he did not claim to be God himself. It is clear that the importance of this title is found in its function and the meanings of awe and sovereignty that it communicates, rather than it being a title that speaks of an ontological reality. Even so, some tyrannical kings did call themselves gods. The title “son of God” means that they have authority from God or the gods to rule the people under them, and these kings are not subject to anyone but the one God or in the case of pagans the many gods.

We find similar terms also used among the Sons of Israel. So in the time of the prophet Moses (peace be upon him) he was to Pharaoh as if he were “a god” (Torah, Exodus 4:16, 7:1) and the early heroic leaders (known as Judges) were called “gods” (Exodus 22:8, 9), as is the case of rulers (Psalm 82:1, 6) and the king (Psalm 45:6-9; Book of the Prophet Isaiah 9:6). In any event, the term most used was “son of God.” Newman and Stine give a broad definition: “In the Old Testament and in Judaism, ‘Son of God’ is rather frequently used of persons whom God has chosen to act in his behalf and for the benefit of his people.”⁴ This was an appropriate title for the king as their representative before God, and as God’s vicegerent among them. This term indicated that the authority of the king was from God and that his kingdom was entrusted to him by God, and they are those whom God would certainly hold accountable.

It is clear from the above that the Sons of Jacob saw themselves as “like a son” and God as “like a father” in a metaphorical sense only. The terms father and son were not intended to refer to the origin of the people or the king or where they have come from, but these terms were intended to describe the relationship existing between God and the people of his covenant in general, and between God and the king in

⁴ Newman, Barclay Moon and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: American Bible Society, 1988, p.521

particular. This relationship resembled any close relationship between a father and his son.

In the times of the ancient prophets, the king of the Sons of Jacob had a special position because he represented God, with the prophet David (peace be upon him) being considered the greatest king of the Sons of Jacob. As for the kings that came after him, there were some who were faithful and obedient to God, and some who were evil, leading the people astray from the Straight Path with them. The line of these kings ended with the exile of the Sons of Jacob to Babylon. But after many centuries people began to anticipate the coming of another king from the house of the prophet David, in that he was an ideal king. They awaited a coming God-fearing king who would establish peace, prosperity and justice not only among his people but also among all the nations.

All of these ideas gradually developed into one idea of the “Messiah”, which simply means “one anointed with oil”. This special ritual of anointing the head of the king with oil expressed his being appointed to a special role as God’s representative and his viceregent on earth. So for many centuries the Sons of Jacob continued to ardently wait the time when they would regain their freedom and independence, under their anointed king (the Messiah) who would reign in justice and establish God’s rule on the earth.

Based on this cultural information discovered by scholars regarding the Torah and other books of the ancient prophets, we can understand what the Lord Christ meant when he used the terms “the Father” and “the Son” to describe his special relationship with God. We must remember five essential points in order to understand what the Lord Christ meant when he referred to God as “Father” or when he said “my Father” or when he referred to himself as “the Son”.

Point One:

When the Lord Christ refers to God as “Father” and himself as “Son,” he is using a metaphor. This rhetorical usage found in the Torah refers to the relationship existing between God and the people of his covenant, and there is no indication of biological origin or human procreation, God is far beyond such things.

Point Two:

Father/Son language is derived from the Torah, the Psalms and the other books of the prophets. It would never have occurred to the Jews to understand the terms “father” and “son” in a narrow literal sexual sense, as did pagans who believed in many different gods and goddesses who begat sons and daughters.

Point Three:

When the Lord Christ refers to himself as a “son,” he is continuing in the traditional terminology of his people, the Sons of Jacob. For Christ symbolizes, in truth, and in a special way, this people. For even though the Sons of Jacob were disobedient to

God's command, the Lord Christ demonstrated a complete submission to his will. The people God had covenanted with and chosen to be a light and blessing to the other nations failed, so the Lord Christ came to complete the mission forsaken by the Sons of Jacob.

Point Four:

There is something unique in the relationship between the Lord Christ and God. While the Sons of Jacob addressed God using the term "our Father" in the plural to indicate their belonging to his community, we find that the Lord Christ goes much further and addresses God using the term "my Father." This showed that he was the awaited Messiah king, the one near to God, because this particular expression is only used by the awaited Messiah.

Point Five:

The Lord Christ bestowed upon his followers the right to know God as "Father". When the followers of the Lord Christ think of themselves as people of God's household, they believe that the Lord Christ is the one who granted the right to such a claim. The apostle John recorded the following words: "But as for those who responded to him and believed in him, he gave them the right to be the children of God. This sonship is not of a human nature, but God is the one who granted them this quality and so made them his children." (John 1:1-12)

The apostle Paul wrote the followers of the Lord Christ saying: "But as for you who are in Galatia, you who have believed in the Lord Messiah, you have also become people of the household of God, and our Lord Jesus, the spiritual Son of God, was the way of the Almighty's Spirit to our hearts, and you say guided by his Holy and Exalted Spirit: "Oh God, you are our Merciful Father!" (Galatians 4:6)

Those who recorded the inspired text of the Gospel could only record bold language like this because they were certain of what the Lord Christ had meant when he spoke of his relationship with God, using the terms "the Father," "the Son." In the same way the followers of the Lord Christ used the expression "son of God" (the Spiritual Son of God) as one of the most important names for the Lord Christ, and in so doing they testified to the relation of eternal love that exists and ties together God and Christ through the power of His Holy and Almighty Spirit.