

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

1995

Jesus as "Son of God"

Christoph Franz Dobrowolski

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dobrowolski, Christoph Franz, "Jesus as "Son of God"" (1995). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 932.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/932

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

JESUS AS "SON OF GOD"

by

Christoph Franz Dobrowolski

**34 Fifth Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada**

**A paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in Theology.**

**SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota**

May 1, 1995

This Paper was written under the direction of

William J Cahoy

Signature of Director

Professor William Cahoy

Form for Disclosure

Jesus as "Son of God"

Description:

For the purpose of this paper, the attempt will be to see how some contemporary scholars have addressed how the Newer Testament writers came to describe and proclaim Jesus as "Son of God." The attempt will also be made to see through the Newer Testament writers' theological retrojections of this title, to question whether or not Jesus understood himself to be "Son of God" in the same terms. Furthermore, discrepancies between consciousness and knowledge will be discussed - as contemporary scholars have presented them - in terms of Jesus' probable understanding of his divine sonship.

Purpose of Disclosure:

For others to read or consult but not for publication or quotation.

Party or class of parties to whom this disclosure may be made:

No restrictions.



Signature of Student Writer



Date

Was Jesus of Nazareth "the Son of God"? This is a statement of faith which was solemnly defined in the affirmative in A.D. 325 at the church council of Nicea (Brown ix).¹ However, the burning desire of modern humanity for an "empirical/objective" answer, even in the realm of faith, can lead the critical/"historical" scholar to sheer frustration. That is, there is no scientific, critically historical evidence to "prove" an affirmative or negative answer to the question (Schillebeeckx 27). Furthermore, it is not within the scope of this essay even to begin to deal thoroughly with all, or any of, the issues and problems a question like this posits. It is, however, possible to survey briefly what contemporary scholars have argued about Jesus as "Son of God."

For the purpose of this paper, the attempt will be to see how some contemporary scholars have addressed how the Newer Testament writers came to describe and proclaim Jesus as "Son of God."² The attempt will also be made to see through the Newer Testament writers' theological retrojections of this title, to question whether or not Jesus understood himself to be "Son of God" with the same understanding of the title. Furthermore, discrepancies between consciousness and knowledge will be

¹ The use of the phrase "statement of faith" is not intended to undermine the ontological reality of Jesus' divine sonship, rather, it is intentionally phrased this way to underscore that this statement is ultimately an act of faith.

² "Newer Testament" and "Older Testament" are used as such so as to remove any pejorative nuances New and Old may connote.

discussed - as contemporary scholars have presented them - in terms of Jesus' probable understanding of his divine sonship.

The Newer Testament Understanding of "Son of God"

Raymond E. Brown, in his books Jesus God and Man and An Introduction to New Testament Christology, treats extensively the issues of whether or not the Newer Testament calls Jesus God. After meticulous examination of all Newer Testament texts which seem to refer to Jesus as God, Brown affirms that this was the intention of the Newer Testament writers. However, he also claims:

There is no reason to be surprised at this. "Jesus is Lord" was evidently a popular confessional formula in N.T. times, and in this formula christians gave Jesus the title Kyrios which was the standard translation for YHWH. If Jesus could be given two titles, why could he not be called Theos, which the Septuagint often used to translate 'elohim? The two Hebrew terms had become relatively interchangeable and indeed YHWH was the most sacred term. (Intro 189)

The reader may argue that this is dealing with Jesus as "God" and not as "Son of God". Brown however continues, saying that although for the Jew "God" meant God the Father in heaven, christians in the latter part of the first century came to understand "God" in broader terms, "Father" and "Son" inclusive. "To know Jesus was to know the Father, and to know the Father was

to recognize Jesus ... one cannot talk about God apart from Jesus, or Jesus apart from God" (Goergen 259). "The broader definition of 'God' began to develop among the early Christian communities precisely under the necessity of gaining proper honor to Jesus, especially in the liturgy" (Brown, God/Man 87).

"Indeed, Vermes (Jesus the Jew 192-222) considers it possible that Jesus was called Son of God during his lifetime in a 'Jewish sense' (pious miracle worker and exorcist)", but not in the ontological sense which only really became evident in these early Christian communities (Brown et al. 1324).³ Leonardo Boff affirms this shift:

The Gentiles also knew many sons of gods (theios aner) born of virgins: e.g., emperors (Alexander the Great), wonder-workers (Apollonius of Tyana), and philosophers (Plato). The Son of God pertains to the divine sphere. The Gentiles began to understand the biblical title attributed to Christ, "Son of God," no longer in its juridical but in its physical meaning. Christ is in fact the Only-Begotten of God sent into the world (Rom.8:3). (153)

Michael Ramsey and Edward Schillebeeckx both agree saying the appellation "Son of God" could more easily be connected to the Mosaic eschatological prophet than to the later Christian communities stance in faith (cf. Ramsey 43, Schillebeeckx 73).

Based on evidences such as these, one can begin to envision

³ The Jewish community understand themselves as children, or sons of God, as a chosen people in covenant with YHWH.

a radical movement of transitional growth - Jesus as proclaimer to Jesus as proclaimed - in the fundamental faith and thought of the early Christian communities; which they believed was the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst. This was a shift from understanding Jesus as eschatological prophet in his time, to understanding Jesus as the ontological Christ circa the time of these post-resurrection communities and subsequent gospel formation.⁴ Hence, at the time the gospels were written there was a clear motive for the gospel writers to depict this Jesus as the redeeming Christ of all humankind, who always was and always will be. This motive is most clearly exemplified by high Christology writings such as the Johannine and deutero-Pauline writings. Though certain authentic Pauline writings - considered the earliest of all N.T. writings - confirm this new ontological understanding of Jesus as Christ in terms of the Holy Spirit, Michael Ramsey asserts a caution:

It is not to be supposed that what we have called the doctrine of the cosmic Christ was the common property of all the Christian communities even in the later stages of the apostolic age, or that this particular imagery was universally used. What however seems clear is that behind

⁴ With this shift the disciples may well have begun to understand the title "Son of God" differently from how they first understood it. As the early Christian community struggled with how to articulate the saving action of Jesus (functional), they were faced with the inevitable question, "Who must this Jesus be?" (ontological) Clearly, the Hellenistic influences cannot be under-estimated here, thus, coming to understand Jesus Christ as the Logos fit very well into their understanding of reality. Consequently, this may have been a major force in their changing understanding of the title "Son of God."

the imagery is the union of faith in God and faith in Jesus.
(47)

Nevertheless, most contemporary scholars agree that in the light of retrojected theological motifs, the Newer Testament writers seemed to have made the distinct attempt to depict this Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, Christ, and "only Son of God" (Brown et al. 1323). "Behind each title, be it 'Christ,' 'Son of Man,' 'Son of God' etc. years of theological reflection lie hidden" (Boff 159). In the awareness, then, of this faith movement/growth, the critical scholar cannot help but ask the relentless question, did the historical Jesus himself know or believe he was "the Son of God" with the same meaning of the title, Father/Son inclusive? ⁵

Jesus' Understanding of "Son of God"

"Jesus did not claim deity for himself" (Ramsey 39). Further, "according to the synoptic Gospels Jesus never describes himself as Son of God" (Kasper 109). However, Brown contends, "there is not a word in the Gospels to indicate that at any stage

⁵ To help set the tenor of this question Brown states: "Thus, even though we have seen that there is a solid biblical precedent for calling Jesus God, we must be cautious to evaluate this usage in terms of the NT ambiance. Firm adherence to the later theological and ontological developments that led to the confession of Jesus Christ as "true God of true God" must not cause believers to overvalue or undervalue the less developed NT confession" (Intro 195).

of his life Jesus was not aware of a unique relationship to God" (Intro 72). In contemporary scholarship, there are two primary arguments which have consistently come to the forefront in the attempt to "probe" how Jesus might have understood himself in relation to God. The first is how Jesus probably understood and defined the title "Son of God" in his time;⁶ the second is how Jesus, according to the narratives, addressed God as 'Abba,' revealing a distinctly unique and preeminent relationship with God. Addressing the former, John H. Hayes has written:

The use of the term "Son of God" in the Old Testament and rabbinic literature shows a wide range of usage: of angels, of the Israelite King, of Israelites or the people as a whole, of just men and of the messiah as an epithet." (114)

In describing the contextual basis for titles such as "Son of God" in Newer Testament times, Walter Kasper asserts:

Pagan mythology contains frequent references to sons of God in a biological or genealogical sense, men born of a divine father and human mother, and in the Hellenistic period famous and extraordinarily talented men (rulers, doctors, philosophers, and so on) were given the title theos auer. (109)

Geza Vermes agrees saying, "Jesus was a first century Galilean Hasid, a miracle worker, healer, and exorcist, who was referred to and known as a prophet, Lord, and Son of God" (211). In other

⁶ It is well to note here that there is no way to the historical Jesus save the faith accounts.

words, considering the context in which this appellation was used, contemporary scholars are saying it would have been no surprise to refer to Jesus as "Son of God". In this sense, the very accusation - claiming to be "Son of God" - used against Jesus in the story of his trial was seemingly just the use of an expression that was commonplace in his time. This peculiarity only reinforces the shift in divine sonship understanding, as mentioned earlier, from Jesus' time to the time the gospels were actually written.⁷ If this was the case, what was it about this Jesus that led many to die for him? To abandon their deeply rooted traditions and "faith"? To found what eventually became perhaps the largest and most influential religious movement in the history of humankind?

Apart from the evidences - and, thus, general scholarly consensus - that Jesus was a very powerful healer, miracle worker and exorcist and most probably claimed, or implied, to be "the Son of God" in terms quite different from Newer Testament

⁷ This shift was largely a result of the radical change of world view that occurred - Hebrew context to Hellenistic context. It is difficult to over estimate that actual penetration on platonic thought - FORMS more real than MATTER - in the formation of the Gospels (written in Greek), and the understanding of Christ as the Logos. Unfortunately, this cannot be dealt with in the scope of this study. One major influence directly related to the topic on hand in that of language. Every Greek noun has an article. Therefore, there is a strong tendency to reify - to substantialize, or definitively concretize. For instance, what would be called "Good" in Hebrew, becomes "The Good" in Greek. Thus, in the case of "Son of God", the tendency is to use "the Son of God". One may question whether or not the Greek language actually helped put into words what Hebrew was unable to express.

writers, "no objective [sic] and enlightened student of the gospels can help but be struck by the incomparable superiority of Jesus" (Vermes 224). What is implicit in Jesus? What is the ontological reality of Jesus? In some circles, certain scholars part from this gut-level reaction in an attempt to "prove," in a more scientific, "objective" fashion, the preeminence of Jesus.⁸

The argument, however, most founded in the scriptures - the faith history - seems to be the very unique and radically different way in which Jesus addressed God as 'Abba' (my own dear Father) (Brown et al. 1323). In view of this "central and indubitable datum in the life of Jesus, it inevitably follows that it is hard to deny Jesus' awareness of being Son of his Father in a special way" (Schillebeeckx 73). Raymond E. Brown agrees saying, "the way in which Jesus speaks of God as Father certainly indicates that he claimed a special relationship to God". However, he adds, "it remains difficult to find in the

⁸ There are many problems involved with the relentless quest for the "historical" Jesus which, due to limited space, cannot be discussed here. However, it is well to point out that awareness of what one is seeking Jesus to be in the "historical" sense often leads to the discovery of select "proofs". This seems to be the case with "liberal scholars" - strong advocates of the historical-critical method - who attempt to drive a wedge between the New Testament and "what actually happened"; Reimarus (1694-1768) deemed the first to attempt this. Schweitzer claims the quest for the historical Jesus - employing this "objective" methodology - is futile, for there is no way to Jesus save the faith accounts themselves. Thus, scholars must continually be conscious of the presuppositions they bring to the quest - lest Jesus become the fulfilment of their own particular desires. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the way one approaches the differences between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith hinges on one's belief in the resurrection.

synoptic accounts of the public ministry an incontrovertible proof that he [Jesus] claimed a unique sonship that other men could not share" (91). Nevertheless, given the context within which Jesus lived, "it was customary for an author to place upon the lips of his characters speeches written by himself," which modern historians could not fathom doing (Leon-Dufour 207).⁹

With this in mind Brown states:

From all this evidence of Jesus' using 'Father' language for God, at least this conclusion can be drawn: If Jesus presented himself as the first of many to stand in a new and special relationship to God as Father, that priority implies that his sonship was in some way superior to the sonship of all who follow him. (Intro 87)

Xavier Leon-Dufour still finds it difficult to dismiss a paralleled synoptic passage such as:

No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. (Mt 11:27=Lk 10:22)

At minimum, it seems, Jesus is an agent of humanity's sonship in a way that humanity is not to itself. Notwithstanding, Brown argues, based on J. Jeremias' very convincing suggestion, that

⁹ This is not to say that the authors felt no accountability to properly represent the character of the figure. On the contrary, authors demanded authentic representation of character, even if the words were not verbatim. This stems out of the quite different sense of justice in the traditional Jewish heritage. That is, the concept of justice - including authentic character representation - was much more communative (concerned with one's responsible role in society) in nature, as opposed to distributive (concerned with equitable distribution of rights, not authentic character) as is the common understanding in the hyper-litigation context of modern day North American society.

this is an "adapted" text from an original which was more parabolic in style. This argument is based on translation claiming that Jesus is referring to a son, for the definite article before son is generic in parabolic style, eg: "the sower went out to sow seed". "English tends to use an indefinite article in such a situation, but the definite form is good Aramaic" (Brown 90). Hence, despite probable redaction of the texts, the non-Aramaic reader must also be aware of more basic problems such as translation which can otherwise be severely misinterpreted. Leon-Dufour disagrees with Brown on the point that "Jesus often spoke to them [disciples] about 'your Father' or 'my Father', but never spoke to them about 'Our heavenly Father', as if God were the Father of him and the disciples in the same way" (244). This issue is obviously not completely resolved and most probably never will be because of the ambiguous data. Kasper resolves that "while the title 'Son' does not go back to Jesus, Jesus did refer to himself as son in a unique way" (110).¹⁰ With this Dufour concurs that the Newer Testament, on the whole, supports that Jesus was understood as being in relation with Abba in some preeminently unique and distinctly different way than as the Jews of his time who addressed their

¹⁰ "In the Semitic languages, to say father and son know each other was a common idiom. This means the 'the Son' here is not a title, but embodies a generally valid empirical proposition. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Mt 11.27 [eg] is at least a 'reworking of authentic words of Jesus'" (Kasper 110).

creator as Abinu (our Father)(244). The most natural question which arises in the light of this evidence supporting both his divinity and humanity is, how much did Jesus himself know of this preeminent and divine sonship?

"Son of God": Knowledge or Consciousness

Did Jesus know he was the unique "Son of God"? Ultimately, this question is impossible to answer, but it may help in one's understanding of this issue if one approaches the methodology of this question more critically. That is, how does one define knowledge? ¹¹ Raymond E. Brown eloquently treats this issue by making the distinction between knowledge and consciousness. He describes knowledge as one may understand it in modern day, that is, "the ability to express by formulating concepts and words". Consciousness, however, might be better understood as "an intuitive awareness" (God/Man 94). After making this distinction, Brown posits this hypothesis:

Against Apollinarianism the church maintained that Jesus had a human soul and thus a human intellect. Can theology admit that this intellect was also a tabula rasa, activated not by

¹¹ Even more fundamentally, the philosophical question of how one comes to know - epistemology - is a vast area of study in itself. Unfortunately, in the need to continue to focus on the issue at hand, let it suffice to say that there are various theories on epistemology dating back even before Socrates.

infused knowledge but by human experiences, as are other men's [sic] intellects? In this case it would have taken Jesus time to formulate concepts, and he might have found some of the concepts of his day inadequate to express what he wanted to say. One would then be able to say that his knowledge was limited, but such a limitation would not at all exclude an intuitive consciousness of a unique relationship to God and of a unique mission to men [sic]. The struggle of his life could have been one of finding the concepts and words to express that relationship and that mission. (God/Man 95)

Other scholars, such as John H. Hayes, have argued that "at baptism - the most decisive event in his life - Jesus came to believe he was the messiah [Son of God] (100). Xavier Leon-Dufour holds that Jesus was publicly proclaimed to be the messiah and "Son of God" nowhere in his life until his trial (243). This is not a new debate, as these contentions began to arise in the very inception of the early Christian communities as they attempted to grasp in words and concepts what was implied by the ontological reality of Jesus' life, death, resurrection. From post-resurrection Christology to pre-existent Christology the issue thrust itself upon the early communities vis á vis the ever-greater delay of the parousia.

Hence, contemporary scholars are restricted to very limited and ambiguous data on how much Jesus might have actually known, or more likely been conscious, of his "unique" divine sonship. Likewise, from the contextual evidence, it is also most probable

that Jesus himself understood the title "Son of God" in more generic terms than the post-resurrection Christian church. Nevertheless, on the whole, the Newer Testament writers - in faithful witness to the soteriological and ontological realities which confronted them - made consistent attempts to depict this Jesus as the unique and only begotten "Son of God".

As Walter Kasper suggests, in the realm of faith it is much less difficult to transcend an overly "objective"-scientific approach to a text which never initially intended to be the object of modernity's ultimate arbiter: reason (37). That is, due to the obscure "evidence", there is a certain impenetrable element of mystery - like a cloud of mist - around the "historical" Jesus and the earliest Christian communities - prior to Newer Testament writings. Ultimately, this mist leaves a faithless scientific analysis in frustrating confusion. As Edward Schillebeeckx maintains, "unless Jesus is received by others in faith, he can never be the Christ for them" (27). Michael Ramsey takes this further saying, "it seems what is most significant is not the titles in themselves [Son of God], but the faith towards God and towards Jesus which caused the titles to be used" (44). With this Kasper concurs:

Through his appearance and his preaching Jesus summoned his people to a final decision, and linked that decision to accept or reject the kingdom of God specifically to the decision for or against himself,

his word and his work. (102)

In this sense, is it possible that the faith history of Christianity is actually more "historical" than the man Jesus who actually lived circa 2000 years ago? If so, is not the actual hermeneutical value of the Newer Testament possibly more relevant to us today than this "historical" man Jesus ever could be? It is at this crucial point that scholars find themselves at an impasse. The school of thought that leans towards a more existential tendency - Bultmannian - is satisfied with answering the foregoing question in the affirmative. Although Bultmann affirms the redemptive action in Jesus as a historical occurrence in space and time, what Bultmann deems important to the modern Christian is an existential response to the kerygma - this is all that really matters.

Wer es schon Mythologie nennt, wenn von Gottes Tun, von seinem entscheidenden eschatologischen Tun, die Rede ist, für den gewiß. Aber jedenfalls ist dann solche Mythologie nicht mehr Mythologie im alten Sinne, die mit dem Untergang des mythischen Weltbildes versunken wäre. Denn das Heilsgeschehen, von dem wir reden, ist nicht ein mirakelhaftes, supranaturales Geschehen, sondern es ist geschichtliches Geschehen in Raum und Zeit. (63)

However, other schools of thought leaning towards a more essential, Thomistic, philosophical disposition - like Kasper - are unsatisfied with Christ alone, longing to reconcile the

universality of Christ with the particularity of Jesus. Kasper argues that if we adhere only to Christ we are believing in an ideology or myth. "If Christological profession has no connexion with the historical Jesus, then belief in Christ would be no more than ideology: a general world-view without any historical basis" (19). Thus, Kasper contends that Christ is essentially rooted in the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.¹² If one pursues Kasper's position, the problem becomes deciphering how much of Jesus' particularity actually resides in the ontological realm. That is, if Jesus is "the Son of God", to what degree are the cultural particularities - male, Jewish, bearded - to be applied to the ontological Christ? ¹³

If there is a middle ground to be found, it seems to lie somewhere in the relational tension between a "Jesus of history/Christ of faith" emphasis, and a "Jesus of faith/Christ of history" emphasis. ¹⁴ How Jesus Christ is "the Son of God",

¹² This ultimately leads to the classic polemic between rationalists and romantics.

¹³ This is the core issue in the debate over ordaining females to the priesthood. If the priest stands with the authority of consecrating and offering the true body and blood Christ, does it necessarily follow that the priest must be male because Jesus was male? The Catholic Church says, yes. One may ask, then, why are not all priests bearded, circumcised Jews? Inevitably, where to draw the line on particularity becomes a very complex issue - an issue that remains unresolved and closed at present.

¹⁴ Rahner would present this in a dialectical paradigm, as Kasper writes on Rahner: "Rahner examines that historical mediation and tries to define the reciprocal influence of transcendality and history, ...history is essentially the categorical material in and through which transcendental freedom is realized"

therefore, remains subject to the dialogue of these two preeminent positions.¹⁵ In faith, the dialogue continues though never immune to the shifting of scholastic trends and cultural influence.

(50). It is well to note here, however, that Kasper still thinks that, in this, Rahner has made far too neat a package.

¹⁵ Though not specifically addressed here, it is important to note that this dialectic also embodies other tensions, like the classic tension between the Alexandrians (who over-emphasized the divinity of Christ) and the Antiochenes (who over-emphasized the humanity of Jesus). Also, particularly since "the Enlightenment", the tension between an existentialist mode and essentialist mode of epistemology - the question of how one comes to know Jesus as "the Son of God." These questions alone could produce volumes.

Bibliography

- Boff, Leonardo. Jesus Christ Liberator. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1978.
- Brown, Raymond E. An Introduction to New Testament Christology. New York: Paulist Press, 1994.
- Brown, Raymond E., Fitzmyer, Joseph A., Murphy, Roland E. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:Prentice Hall Inc., 1990.
- Brown, Raymond E. Jesus God and Man. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1967.
- Bultmann, Rudolph. Neues Testament und Mythologie. Munchen, Germany: Kaiser Verlag, 1985
- Goergen, Donald. The Jesus of Christian History. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Hayes, John H. Son of God to Superstar. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1976.
- Kasper, Walter. Jesus the Christ. Kent, England: Burns & Oats, Paulist Press, 1976.
- Leon-Dufour, Xavier. The Gospels and the Jesus of History. London: Collins, 1970.
- New Jerusalem Bible, The. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1985.
- Ramsey, Michael. Jesus and the Living Past. Oxford, London: The Chaucer Press, 1980.
- Schillebeeckx, Edward. Jesus and Christ. New York, N.Y.:Crossroads Publishing, 1981.
- Straus, David Friedrich. The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.
- Vermes, Geza. Jesus the Jew. New York:The Macmillan Company, 1973