

EDITORIAL

The Begetting of the Son — When?

A prodigious amount of scholarly ingenuity and energy has been dedicated to maintaining the amazingly problematic concept of the “eternal generation of the Son of God.” That the Son of God is Deity without beginning of existence is an essential prop of the Trinitarian system.

At the simplest level, however, the Bible is in direct contradiction of the idea that the Son has no beginning. Matthew devotes an entire chapter to the origin of Jesus Christ. In 1:18, in the best MSS, it is the “genesis” of Jesus he describes, not just his birth, but his origin or creation. If Matthew had been aware of a Son of God already in existence, and from eternity, he could not have written as he did. He is at pains to document not only the generating of some 40 of Jesus’ ancestors but the unique miracle which accounts for the beginning — the *genesis* — of the Messiah (1:18). Matthew 1:1 introduces the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David. By generation we are to understand the Messiah’s coming into existence. That is what both the Greek and the English mean.

Supporters of the traditional concept of an *already existing* second member of the Godhead are embarrassed at information producing the opposing impression, that the Son was begotten in time. The angel who visited Joseph knew nothing of the bewildering post-biblical arguments about the eternity of the Son. He announced to Joseph: “What is begotten in her [Mary] is from holy spirit.” Her son, in other words, is a divine creation, but not a person already in existence before conception and giving up one form of life for another. The holy spirit is the source of the divine miracle in Mary. By that creative act the Son is begotten. He comes into existence.

Translations have veiled the truth here, by rendering *to gennethen* — “what has been begotten” — as “that which is *conceived*.” This mistranslation of the verb *gennaō*, to beget of the father or to bear of the mother, avoids the unwanted association of the begetting of the Son of God by the Father, in time, in the womb of his mother.

Psalm 2:7 is the classic Old Testament source for the origin of the Son: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” Today, indeed. But Origen took the whole church off into the wildest “left field” by proposing, as by fiat, that “today with God means eternity.” Even the stalwart evangelical commentator Henry Alford, who clings to the plain sense of the text so often and so well, becomes unhinged when dealing with the quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5: “In applying [Ps. 2:7] to our Lord we want another and a higher sense in which both words, ‘I have begotten’ and ‘today’ may be applicable to Him: a sense in which I should be disposed to say that the words must in their fullness of meaning be

taken, *to the neglect and almost the obliteration of that their supposed lower reference.*"¹ So we must obliterate the proper sense of the words in order to find the right meaning to describe the Son!

Psalm 2:7 presents an insuperable barrier to the idea of an eternally generated Son. The biblical Son of God is a creature begotten in time, "today." Paul sees the date of that begetting as the beginning of the Son, not his resurrection. F.F. Bruce observes of Acts 13:33, "The promise of Acts 13:23, the fulfillment of which is here described [Acts 13:33] has to do with the sending of the Messiah, *not his resurrection*, for which see v. 34."² It should be obvious that the resurrection does not mark the coming into existence, the begetting, of the Son, though it is at his resurrection that Jesus is shown to be the Son of God "in power." Romans 1:3 announces the Gospel "concerning God's Son, who came into existence [*genomenou*] from the seed of David as to his human descent." But as the descendant of David he was at the same *also* the Son of God according to Paul (v. 3). His appointment to a new position *of power* as Son happened at the resurrection. The origin of his Sonship is not said to be the resurrection here or in Acts 13:33.

Paul and Luke were traveling companions. Their common understanding of the origin of Jesus should be assumed. It is confirmed by the definitive statement of Gabriel as reported by Luke in 1:35. "For that reason indeed [*dio kai*, i.e. because of the miracle to be performed in Mary] the holy thing to be begotten will be called the Son of God." Here, surely, the divine Sonship of the Messiah is firmly grounded not in eternity but in the historical intervention of God six months later than the remarkable conception of John the Baptist (Luke 1:26).

Commentators who are persuaded that Luke and Paul should have been orthodox like themselves have employed a battery of techniques to evade the obvious in Luke 1:35. It has been argued that Gabriel gave *only one* reason for the child being the Son of God. This would allow for the addition of another reason, his eternal Sonship. Others have decided that "Son of God" is only what the baby would be *called*, while in reality he is something much more. But "to be called" in the New Testament announces what you are (cp. Matt. 5:9; Luke 6:35). Raymond Brown was right: "We are dealing with the begetting of God's Son in the womb of Mary through God's creative spirit."³

The battle over the definition of the Son continues. Meanwhile the simplicity of the biblical Christology is lost in the fog of argument and counter-argument. If Psalm 110:1 had been taken, as the New Testament takes it, as the master key to Christology, perhaps the problem could have been resolved long ago. In that Psalm the Lord God addresses the Messiah to come as *adoni*. *Adoni* in all of its 195 occurrences never designates a figure who is Deity. Rather it describes a

¹ *Greek Testament*, Rivingtons, 1862, Vol. 4, 16, emphasis added.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, 1951, 269.

³ *The Birth of the Messiah*, Chapman, 1977, 312.

supremely elevated human being. That is who Jesus is. How well Dr. Colin Brown spoke when in an illuminating article on Christology he stated: “Indeed to be a ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God. It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God.”⁴

The sooner churches abandon the erroneous idea that the Son of God is coequally Deity with his Father, the better will be the prospect of fruitful dialogue between three world religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. At present the astonishing dogma that the Son of God was begotten and yet had no beginning — an abuse of language by any standards! — divides and confuses. The average churchgoer has no idea of what this central tenet means, yet is threatened with expulsion and damnation if he does not believe it. Such a terrorizing atmosphere cannot generate reasoned discussion from Scripture.

Professor William Sanday of Oxford, writing the article on the Son of God in the *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, found that “there is not a single reference in the Synoptic Gospels to Jesus having been the Son of God before his birth.” If we examine John’s Gospel “we have to look about somewhat for expressions that are free from ambiguity. *Perhaps there are not any.*”⁵ This was a welcome invitation to abandon the unscriptural notion that Jesus, Messiah and Son of God, had an origin other than by divine miracle performed in Mary. His origin in history adequately accounts for the biblical data and tells of the amazing destiny of man as pioneered in Jesus.

The apostle John fought hard to preserve the identity of the Son of God and complained urgently about any deviation from the historical Messiah Jesus who came on the scene as a human being with a mission (I John 4:2; II John 7), not God assuming an impersonal human nature as traditional views propose. Opposing any notion of a timeless “begetting,” John insisted on a point of time for the event by which the Son of God was begotten. “He who *was begotten* by God preserves [the believer]” (I John 5:18). Belief in the miraculously generated Son of God remains the basis of biblical faith along with belief in that unique Son’s Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

⁴ “Trinity and Incarnation,” *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991, 88.

⁵ *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Scribner’s, 1911, Vol. 4, 576, emphasis added.