

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #115: THE RICH MEANINGS OF THE WORD “SON” IN THE BIBLE

By John Temples

Would you think a word that occurs over 3,700 times in the Bible might be important? I would say yes. The word “son” and its plural are found 3,705 times in the New King James Bible. Like many Bible words, it is used both literally (to mean male offspring) and figuratively (as in “son of encouragement”). A study of its rich and diverse meanings would be most profitable to you and me as Bible students.

First, here are some interesting facts about the word “son” and its various forms:

- Frequency of usage (NKJV):
 - “Son”--2,364 times
 - “Sons”--1,341 times
 - “My son”--132 times
 - “Son of God”--47 times
 - “Son of Man”--194 times
 - “Sons of God”--10 times

- Hebrew words for “son”:
 - *Ben* is the customary Hebrew word for son, occurring some 1,700 times.¹ *Ben* occurs as a prefix in many Hebrew names with the meaning “son of...” For instance, the name Benjamin in Hebrew means “son of the right hand.”

 - A related Aramaic word is *bar*, which also means “son” or “son of.” “Simon bar-Jonah” (Matthew 16:17) means “Simon, son of Jonah.” In modern usage, a *bar mitzvah* (“son of the commandments”) is a coming-of-age ceremony for a Jewish boy.

¹ The corresponding word for “daughter” is *bat*, as in Bath-sheba, meaning “daughter of an oath” or “daughter of the oath.”

- Greek words for “son”:
 - *Huios* (“hwee-os”) is the usual word for son in the Greek New Testament, occurring 382 times. Its basic literal meaning is “male offspring or descendant,” but it can have figurative meanings related to dignity or rank (as in “firstborn son”) or moral characteristics (e.g., “sons of light”).
 - *Teknon* also means “male offspring” and occurs 99 times in the Greek New Testament. The difference between *huios* and *teknon* is that *teknon* emphasizes parentage or biological descent, while *huios* stresses relationship or status.

This article is mainly concerned with the figurative or idiomatic application of the word “son” in the Bible. An idiom is an expression peculiar to a language or culture which is not meant to be taken literally. Idioms exist in every language, and Hebrew is no exception. One of the most interesting and fascinating idioms in Jewish culture was the use of the word “son” or “son of” to express **likeness, nature, destiny, or relationship**. It is essential for every Bible student to be aware of this usage. Here are some examples:

The use of “son” to denote membership in a group or class: 2 Kings 2:3 speaks of “the sons of the prophets” who were at Bethel. This Hebrew term occurs eleven times, all during the period of Elijah and especially Elisha, and only in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. The reference is to the members of a prophetic order, school, or guild; there is no reference to physical descent from a prophet. “Sons of men” in such passages as Psalms 33:13 denote members of the class of men, that is, human beings.

The use of “son” to mean “belonging to or associated with”: Job 41:28 speaks of an arrow. The Hebrew literally means “a son of the bow.” Matthew 13:38 speaks of “the sons of the kingdom” (meaning those belonging to God’s kingdom) and “the sons of the wicked one” (slaves of Satan).

The use of “son (or daughter)” to denote residency or ethnicity: Lamentations 4:2 speaks of the “sons of Zion,” a reference to inhabitants of Zion or Jerusalem.

“Daughters of Jerusalem” in Luke 23:28 means female citizens or residents of the city. The same term occurs some ten times in Song of Solomon and refers to maidens or young women of the city.

The use of “son” to indicate fate or destiny: Psalms 79:11 speaks of “those who are appointed to die,” meaning condemned prisoners. The literal Hebrew is “sons of death.” Judas is called a “son of perdition” in John 17:12. “Perdition” means damnation or eternal ruin. Such was the destiny of Judas due to the choices he made, hence the designation. Jesus called the Pharisees “sons of hell” (literally, “sons of gehenna”) in Matthew 23:15. He was speaking of their being worthy of eternal punishment due to their wickedness. Jesus in Luke 20:36 spoke of “sons of the resurrection,” describing righteous people destined to be raised to eternal glory.

The use of “son” to indicate likeness or similarity: Paul wrote, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7). Paul meant that to have a faith like Abraham had--faith that led to unquestioning obedience--makes faithful Christians worthy to be called “sons of Abraham.” Similarly, Peter called godly women “daughters of Sarah” because they have a loyalty to their husbands as Sarah did to Abraham (1 Peter 3:6)..

The use of “son” to describe predominant personal character traits or moral qualities:

- Son of valor, 1 Samuel 14:52 (rendered in English as “a valiant man).”
- Sons of rebellion, 2 Samuel 23:6 (rebels or contentious men).
- Sons of wickedness, 1 Chronicles 17:9.
- Sons of Belial, Deuteronomy 13:13 (KJV). “Belial” means worthlessness or wickedness, so a son of Belial is a worthless person. The NKJV reads “corrupt men.”
- Sons of disobedience, Ephesians 2:2.
- Son of consolation or exhortation (describing Barnabas, Acts 4:36).
- Sons of thunder, Mark 3:17. Jesus gave this nickname to James and John, perhaps because they possessed thunderous dispositions!
- A son of peace (Luke 10:6) means a peaceful man.

“SON OF GOD” AND “SON OF MAN” AS APPLIED TO CHRIST

Son of God: We noted earlier that “son” can be used in the Bible to refer to status, likeness, or nature, with no reference to biological descent. Such is the case with the title “Son of God” in reference to Christ. Jesus was called “the Son of God” because He fully possessed the nature and essence of God. In no way was Jesus the biological offspring of God the Father or the Holy Spirit, nor was He created by God at some point in time.

Some might say, “But doesn’t Psalms 2:7 imply a physical begetting or descent from God the Father?” Psalms 2:7 reads, “I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” These words are being prophetically spoken by the Messiah, Christ. But do they refer to Christ’s conception and birth, or to something else? We are not left to wonder, because an inspired apostle quotes these words and applies them to the resurrection--not the birth--of Christ. Paul said to Jews in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, “And we declare to you glad tidings — that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’ And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: ‘I will give you the sure mercies of David’” (Acts 13:32-34). Psalms 2:7 has no connection with the biological incarnation or birth of Christ.

So the expression “Son of God” with reference to Christ means equality with God, not inferiority or descent from God. This is further seen in John 5:18, which reads, “Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, *making Himself equal with God.*”

Son of Man: This was Jesus’s preferred designation for Himself; He used it much more frequently than “Son of God.” Unlike “Son of God,” which stresses equality and identity with God, “Son of man” emphasizes Jesus’s humanity. In the case of mankind, “son of man” simply means a man, a human being. Professor S. Herbert Bess says, “The expression ‘son of man’ clearly exhibits the use of the word ‘son’ to show the possession of a certain nature. Numbers 23:19 reads: ‘God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent. . . .’ This part of the verse might be paraphrased as follows: ‘God is not like a man, who

frequently lies; nor does he possess the nature of man, who by reason of his own limitations must often change his mind.' The term 'son of man' is used frequently in Ezekiel as addressed to the prophet (Ezek. 2:1, 3; 3:1, 3, 4, 10; 4:16; etc.) and means something like O man, or mortal man. The term puts the emphasis on the nature of man."²

But in the case of Jesus, "son of man" does take on an added spiritual, Messianic significance. In a prophecy clearly speaking of Christ, Daniel said, "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

The wicked Jewish leaders recognized that in calling Himself "the Son of man," Jesus was not merely claiming human nature, but was claiming that He was the Messiah, the subject of Daniel's prophecy. In comments on John 1:51, Burton Coffman says, "Jesus meant by the title 'Son of man' to affirm his deity and Godhead just as dogmatically as the title Son of God could have done it, but with the additional advantage of stressing his unique relationship to the human race as well.... That Jesus did positively intend that 'Son of man' should be understood in a unique and supernatural sense is proved by his own use of the title, as follows: He used the title: (1) in connection with his power to forgive sins (Matt 9:6); (2) of his lordship over the sabbath (Matt 12:8); (3) of his second advent in glory (Matt 19:28); (4) of his resurrection (Matt 17:23); (5) of his seeking and saving that which is lost (Luke 19:10); (6) and of his coming in the final judgment (Matt 26:64). The frustrated hatred and enmity of the Pharisees at his trial before Caiaphas reached a point of frenzy over this very title. The Pharisees knew perfectly that 'Son of man' was fully as adequate a title of the Messiah as was 'Son of God.'"

"ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON"

Every Bible student is familiar with John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The term "only begotten" comes from the Greek word

² http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/te_d_hildebrandt/OTeSources/23a-Prophets/Text/Articles/Bess-SonOfGod-GTJ.pdf.

monogenes. The first part of this word, *mono*, means “only, one of a kind, or unique.” The second part, *genes*, comes from the verb *ginomai* (meaning “to be” or “to come into existence” or “to be made”) or its noun form, *genos* (meaning “family” or “kind” — related to our modern English word “genetics”).

Scholars differ on the exact meaning and translation of *monogenes*. “Only begotten” is the reading of the KJV, NKJV, ASV, and NASV. The trend in modern translations is to translate it as “only” (ESV) or “one and only” (NIV).

It’s interesting that Hebrews 11:17 in the KJV, NKJV, and ASV also describe Isaac as being Abraham’s “only begotten” son. Isaac was not Abraham’s “only son”—he had some eight sons—but Isaac was the one son who was conceived miraculously, as Jesus was. So whatever the proper translation of *monogenes* is, it has to do with some special circumstances surrounding the conception or birth of an individual.

Here is the understanding I have basically come to on this word:

- It is a reference to the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary, and describes it as a unique, God-caused conception.
- *Monogenes* is a compound word, and to translate it as “only” or “one and only” in reference to the conception of Christ would seem to leave the latter part (*genes*) untranslated.
- The “only Son” translation also seems to be in conflict with 1 John 3:1, which calls all Christians “sons of God”; and with many passages that speak of “sons (plural) of God.”
- “Only begotten” seems to be the most accurate rendering of *monogenes*. “Only” or “one and only” are misleading and only partial translations of the Greek word.

“FIRSTBORN SON”

Another important term relevant to this study is “firstborn” or “firstborn son.” The term has two meanings in Scripture: (1) a literal or biological meaning, simply denoting the child born first; and (2) a figurative meaning, denoting authority, privilege, or status. The figurative usage derives from the fact that in Old

Testament times, the firstborn (first born) son received preferential treatment, leadership status, and a double portion of the family inheritance.

This figurative usage of “firstborn” is powerfully demonstrated in Exodus 4:22, where God declares, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.” This has reference to status, glory, and honor which God bestowed on the nation, and obviously has no reference to biological origin or birth.

Jesus is “firstborn” in both senses of the word:

- Biologically, He was the first Child born to Mary. Luke 2:7 says, “She brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger.”
- In a figurative sense, the sense of pre-eminence or position, He is called:
 - “The Firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 2:15);
 - “The Firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 2:18, Revelation 1:5);
 - “The Firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29).

An article at Bible.org explains: “He is the first-born of all creation, not in the sense that he himself is a created being, but rather that as God’s Son he was his agent in creation and hence has authority over all created things (Col. 1:15-17).

Similarly, he is the first-born in the new creation by being raised first from the dead, and is thus Lord over the church (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). He is thus the first-born in a whole family of children of God who are destined to bear his image (Rom. 8:29).”³

Christians are called God’s firstborn in Hebrews 12:23, which speaks of “the church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.”

“SONS OF GOD”

³ (<https://bible.org/question/what-significance-%E2%80%9Cfirstborn%E2%80%9D-bible>)

There are nine references to “sons of God” in Scripture--four in the Old Testament, five in the New.⁴ The term usually means the people of God, both male and female. In all of the New Testament references, “sons of God” refers to human beings, not angels. There is more debate about the Old Testament references, especially Job 38:7. The important lesson to draw from this aspect of our study is that when the Bible speaks of “sons of God,” it almost always refers to human beings who because of obedience to God have become heirs of His glory.

CONCLUSION

The word “son” (along with its related word “daughter”) is indeed a rich Bible word. A student of the Bible must be familiar with the figurative usage of the word “son” throughout its pages to denote character traits, associations, and relationships. God in His grace now bestows upon us--the church--the status, rank, and privilege of sons, yea, even firstborn sons. “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3, KJV).
--John Temples

⁴ The passages are Genesis 6:1-4, Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:4-7, Matthew 5:9, Luke 20:36, Romans 8:14 and 8:19, Galatians 3:26. For a fuller study of these passages and the meaning of the term “sons of God,” see Biblical Insights #41, “Was Satan Ever In Heaven?”

