

Why the Human Jesus is called “Son of God”

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Both Trinitarians and Unitarians have missed a very important distinction in the two titles assigned to Jesus throughout the Gospels, “Son of God” and “Son of Man.” Both groups apply both titles to Jesus’ existence from His birth in Bethlehem alone.

For Trinitarians, “Son of God” is a title that stems from their interpretation of the virgin birth. When the “Holy Spirit” is said to come upon the virgin Mary, she is said to have been with child ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου, literally, “*out of holy Spirit/Breath.*”¹ For Trinitarians, the “Son of God” is a title that only refers to the humanity of Jesus, being the product of God (as Father) and Mary (as mother) in the incarnation.

Consequently, even though Trinitarians believe in the preexistence of Christ, they do not refer to His preincarnate existence by the title “Son of God” but rather as “God the Son.” This last term is not biblical, but is a theological term that was invented only after Trinitarianism arose within Christianity centuries after the Apostles. It was concocted as a means to allow the concept of a co-equal and co-eternal “Son” found in later Trinitarianism to survive. For Trinitarians, Jesus is primarily “God” (equal to the Father in every way) and then only distinguished from the Father by the secondary title “Son.” However, “Son of God” (which is a biblical term) is clearly a title that makes Jesus subordinate to the Father because it describes a procreative relationship, thus a priority of the Father who begat a Son.

The problems with this view should be apparent.

1. If Jesus is a “Son” and God is a “Father,” regardless of how one switches the terms around, a “son” is always in the subordinate role to a “father.” So how could they be co-equal at any time, either before or after the incarnation? In human language, **a father always outranks a son because the son’s origin and very existence comes from the father.** The term “Son” in itself requires an origin out of the “Father.” Yet Trinitarians cannot allow for the “Son” to have an origin or beginning of existence.
2. If the “Holy Spirit” is a third Person of the Trinity, why did Jesus not call Him “Father” instead of “God the Father?” Since these are familial terms describing relationships, why is not the “Holy Spirit” given a familial term that describes His relationship to either “God the Father” or “God the Son?” Why is not Jesus the Son of the Holy Spirit?

¹ Matt. 1:18

Unitarians, who deny any preexistence for the Son, also use the terms “Son of God” and “Son of Man” interchangeably as though there is no significant distinction in meaning. For them, the term “Son of God” does not really indicate that God actually fathered Jesus. If it did, then Jesus would have to be of the God “kind” since procreation is always according to kind, as shown many times in the first chapter of Genesis. Unitarians actually believe that Jesus was a **creation of God not a literal Son begotten of God**. He is God’s “Son” only by election and adoption, not by procreation. As one of their proof-texts to support this interpretation of the term “Son of God,” they frequently appeal to the following verse.

*Luke 1:35 (NASB) And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and **for that reason** the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.”*

From this verse the conclusion is drawn that Jesus was to be called “Son of God” only because of the miracle of the virgin birth.

Yet, equally difficult problems emerge with the Unitarian interpretation.

1. If Jesus became “Son of God” because God chose Him from among mankind and adopted Him as His Son, why was He the only virgin-born human being? His completely unique origin, which God allegedly created as a special miracle, means He was one of a kind, and this predetermined His role. So where is the “electing” or “choosing” in that?
2. If Jesus was only “Son of God” by election and adoption, why does Scripture use “begetting” (procreation) terminology for His existence from God rather than creation terminology? Psalm 2:7-8 states that the Son said the following: “*I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘**You are My Son, Today I have begotten You**. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession.*” Jesus is the Son of God by procreation out of God, not merely by adoption. Jesus is said also to be “*the only begotten of the Father,*”² “*the only-begotten Son,*”³ “*the only begotten Son of God,*”⁴ and “*His only begotten Son.*”⁵ Jesus said, “*If God was your Father, you were loving Me, **for I issued forth out of God,** and am come.*”⁷ If language means anything, such terminology means that He was literally “begotten” out of God, not created as a unique man.

² John 1:14

³ John 1:18; John 3:16

⁴ John 3:18

⁵ 1 John 4:9

⁶ ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον (John 8:48 LGV)

⁷ (LGV) https://4windsfellowships.net/LGV/LGV_John.pdf

Neither Trinitarians nor Unitarians are using sound exegesis of Scripture, but are forcing their interpretations onto the Scriptures rather than allowing the plain sense to dictate their theology. Both systems ignore the interpretation of Luke 1:35 that was held by the earliest Christians and the reasons for it. Here is how Luke 1:35 reads in a literal translation from the Greek.

*Luke 1:35 26-38 (LGV) 35 And the messenger answering said to her, "A holy Breath will come over you, and a Power of the Highest will envelop you, by which even **the holy Thing which is begotten** will be called 'Son of God'."*

Here is how the earliest Christians understood this verse. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) wrote: "It is wrong, therefore, to understand **the Spirit and the Power** of God as anything else than **the Word**, who is also the first-born of God."⁸ Theophilus of Antioch (AD ?-185) wrote: "but **His Word**, through whom He made all things, being **His Power** and His Wisdom, ..."⁹ Tertullian of Carthage (AD 155-220) wrote: "Pray, tell me, why **the Spirit of God descended into a woman's womb** at all, if He did not do so **for the purpose of partaking of flesh** from the womb."¹⁰ Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170-235) wrote: "Who, then, was in heaven but **the Word** unincarnate, who was dispatched to show that He was upon earth and was also in heaven? For **He was Word, He was Spirit, He was Power**. ... Rightly, then, did he say that He who was in heaven was called from the beginning by this name, the Word of God, as being that from the beginning."¹¹ Lactantius (AD 250-325) wrote: "**Therefore the Holy Spirit of God, descending from heaven, chose the holy Virgin, that He might enter into her womb**. But she, **being filled by the possession of the Divine Spirit**, conceived; and without any intercourse with a man, her virgin womb was suddenly impregnated."¹²

These earliest Christian writers did not interpret Luke 1:35 as a third Person of the Trinity called "the Holy Spirit" creating a human sperm in Mary's womb (as in Trinitarianism). Neither did they suppose that the "holy Spirit/Breath" and the "Power of the Highest" describes God the Father. They did not believe that either the Father or a third Person created a human sperm in Mary's womb. Rather, they all understood "holy Spirit/Breath" and "Power of the Highest" which came upon Mary to be the one called "Logos" (Word) **who was already the Son of God**, who had been formerly begotten out of God as "the Beginning." He is the one who entered into the womb of Mary to become flesh. Because of having been previously begotten out of God and existing as "Word," (both "holy Spirit/Breath" and "Power of God"), He was called "the Son of God." I realize that this

⁸ Justin Martyr, First Apology, ch. xxxiii

⁹ Theophilus of Antioch, To Autolycus, Bk. II, ch. xxii

¹⁰ Tertullian, On the Flesh of Christ, XIX

¹¹ Hippolytus, Against Noetus, ch. iv

¹² Lactantius, Divine Institutes, Bk. IV, ch. xii

concept is strange and new to both Trinitarians and Unitarians. However, there is very good reason for this most ancient interpretation of Luke 1:35.

There is an important and very unique clause in this verse – τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον. It is literally and correctly translated: “*the holy Thing which **is** begotten.*” The articular present participle is present tense, meaning that the subject already existed as “begotten” when Gabriel made the announcement to Mary. This statement is less precisely¹³ or incompletely rendered in several common translations as follows: “*that holy thing which **shall be born***” (KJV); “*that Holy One who is **to be born***” (NKJV); “*the holy offspring*” (NASB); “*the holy one **to be born***” (NIV); “*the child **to be born***” (ESV); “*the Holy which **shall be born***” (Douay-Rheims); “*the baby **to be born** will be holy*” (NLT); “*the child **to be born** will be holy*” (NRSV); “*the holy-begotten thing*” (Youngs Literal Translation).

Of all these translations, Youngs Literal Translation is the closest to the Greek, yet stops short of the full sense. Notice that most of these translations place the “begetting” either in the future tense “*will/shall be born*” or as an infinitive “*to be born*” which also implies a future event. The NASB and Young’s stop short of implying anything related to time. However, the Greek is quite explicit, indicating that He was already “begotten” (present) when Gabriel made this announcement to Mary prior to her pregnancy.

The clause in question is τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον. It is literally word for word, “*the Thing-which-IS-begotten, holy.*” All of the above translations are incorrect. They either wrongly indicate a future event of “begetting” or make no connection to time. None of them have accurately conveyed the true and full sense of the Greek.

The word τὸ is the definite article (the) in the neuter gender. The word γεννώμενον is a participle form of the verb that means beget/begotten. The word ἅγιον is “holy,” an adjective modifying the participle. In Greek the modifying adjective usually comes after the substantive it modifies. In English we typically put the adjective before the substantive (noun) it modifies. So what is literally “*the Thing which is begotten, holy*” is better expressed in English as “*the holy Thing which is begotten.*” What is important about this particular clause is that Luke used the participle rather than a noun or even an adjective used as a noun (which is common). Luke could easily have written “*the holy Child*” or “*the holy Son,*” or “*the begotten One*” (as an articular masculine or neuter adjective). Instead, he chose to use a participle with the definite article (as a substantive, like a noun). This is not uncommon in the New Testament. But the reason this is done is

¹³ While the present tense primarily refers to present time, on a few rare occasions the present tense is used of a future event that is certain. However, the natural reading indicates present time from the perspective of Gabriel’s announcement.

to convey more information than can be conveyed any other way. **The participle used as a noun (with the definite article) has nuances which cannot be conveyed using merely a noun, or even an adjective.** This particular construction gives INFORMATION that is not possible with any other way of expressing all that is contained in a substantive participle. Using the participle as a substantive (acting like a noun) adds the aspect of “tense” like a verb. This places the person or thing described by the substantive participle in a particular relationship with time, past, present, or future.

The participle γεννώμενον is from the verb that means “beget/begotten.” Luke placed it in the present tense and neuter gender. The neuter gender is often used of things that are not narrowly or precisely defined. (This is why the KJV and YLT render it as “*that holy thing*” (neuter), and the Douay-Rheims renders it “*the holy,*” avoiding gender altogether, and the NASB has “*holy offspring*” without indicating gender).

The critical point for our analysis, however, is that an articular present participle (used as a substantive {like a noun – person, place, or thing}) stresses **independent time relationships** by its tense. The use of the present tense here places the verbal concept of “begotten” as **already being present in time** from the perspective of Gabriel’s speaking to Mary, before she became pregnant. In other words, the one who will come from Mary’s womb was already “*the holy-begotten Thing*” **before** “*the holy Spirit/Breath,*” “*the Power of the Highest*” came upon her. (If Luke did not wish to indicate this, it would have been better for him to use an articular adjective (which does not indicate time) rather than the articular participle. Luke says that it was **for this reason** that He would be called “*Son of God.*” He was already “*the only-begotten of the Father*”¹⁴ before Mary became pregnant. This is likely the reason that the earliest Christian writers identified “*the holy Thing which IS [already] begotten*” as the Word, Logos. They understood the nuances of the Greek as it stands without trying to impose either Trinitarian or Unitarian presuppositions onto the text.

As a comparison of this verse in many different translations shows, the translators struggled to convey the full meaning because it was hard to mesh Luke’s precise language with their theological systems. But it meshes quite well with the theological system conveyed by the earliest Christian writers. The following quote from Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130-202), disciple of Polycarp (disciple of John), is typical of the earliest writers.

*“He speaks undoubtedly these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption, but who despise **the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God,** defraud*

¹⁴ John 1:14

human nature of promotion into God, and prove themselves ungrateful to **the Word of God, who became flesh for them**. For it was for this end that **the Word of God was made man**, and **He who was the Son of God became the Son of man**, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had **become that which we also are**, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that might receive the adoption of sons? For this reason [it is, said], ‘Who shall declare His generation?’¹⁵ since ‘He is a man, and who shall recognize Him?’¹⁶ But he to whom the Father which is in heaven has revealed Him,¹⁷ knows Him, so that he understands that He who ‘was not born either by the will of the flesh, or by the will of man’¹⁸ is the Son of man, this is Christ, the Son of the living God.” ... “Now, the Scriptures would not have testified these things of Him, if, like others, He had been a mere man. But that **He had, beyond all others, in Himself that pre-eminent birth which is from the Most High Father, and also experienced that pre-eminent generation which is from the Virgin**, the divine Scriptures do in both respects testify of Him:” ... “**He therefore, the Son of God**, our Lord, being the Word of the Father, and the Son of man, since He had a generation as to His human nature from Mary — who was descended from mankind, and who was herself a human being — **was made the Son of man**.”¹⁹

This was the consistent view of the earliest Christians.

Finally, it is important to consider a variant reading in the Textus Receptus. While the oldest and vast majority of manuscripts of Luke read τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον, the Textus Receptus (base text of the KJV) has τὸ γεννώμενον ἐκ σοῦ ἅγιον, adding ἐκ σοῦ (out of you). This variant reading has the effect of implying that the begetting indicated by the present participle is from Mary rather than the previous procreation out of God. The KJV reading is clearly a late addition to the text meant to confirm the Trinitarian interpretation. Even the NKJV, which normally follows the same Textus Receptus, does not follow the TR in this instance because of the lack of early evidence.

The correct and full rendering of Luke 1:35 supports two distinct begetting events, the first out of God as being of the God “kind” (thus “Son of God”) and the later of the human

¹⁵ Isa. 53:8

¹⁶ Jer. 17:9

¹⁷ Matt. 16:15-17

¹⁸ Note the quotation of John 1:13 using the singular (referring to Logos) rather than the plural (referring to Christians).

¹⁹ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. xix:1

“kind” out of Mary. The “Son of God” afterwards became “Son of Man” just as the earliest Christians claimed.

A careful reading of the New Testament will show that the term “Son of God” always refers to His real origin as having been procreated out of God previously as described in Psalm 2 (not to the virgin birth). The term “Son of Man” always refers to His humanity having been procreated as a human out of the virgin Mary. Likewise, whenever Jesus called God His “Father” it always has reference to His preexistence and never to His human birth. While the writers of the early books of the New Testament may not have had a mature understanding of the full significance of the title “Son of God” while writing their Gospels,²⁰ the holy Breath of God which guided their pens caused them to embed these teachings in the New Testament.²¹ The full significance of the Mystery was gradually revealed through Paul, and then reinforced by John. Reading the New Testament through this lens like the earliest Christians instead of through either Trinitarian or Unitarian presuppositions will add depth to your Bible study that is not possible when the two terms are used synonymously as in both Trinitarianism and Unitarianism.

²⁰ Matt. 16:16-17

²¹ The situation was the same with the prophets (1 Pet. 1:10-12).