

“No christological designation is as essential as ‘Son of God’; none is more important. This study makes that impressively clear by sound and careful exegesis and theological reflection in the face of misunderstandings and disputes, past and current. Once again, D. A. Carson serves the church well.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I know what it is to reject Jesus as the ‘Son of God.’ As a former Muslim, nothing baffled and, quite frankly, angered me more than hearing Christians call Jesus ‘the Son of God.’ I thought such persons were blasphemers worthy of condemnation. But now, nothing gives me more joy than to know that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and that the title ‘Son of God’ carries far more truth and wonder than I could have imagined. So I welcome this volume from D. A. Carson with all the enthusiasm and joy of one who once denied the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. With his customarily clear, warm, careful, and balanced manner, Carson gives us a fresh exploration of a precious truth that so many Christians take for granted and so many Muslims misunderstand. If you want to know Jesus and the Bible better, this surely is one aid that will not disappoint.”

Thabiti Anyabwile, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman; author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“What does it mean for us to confess that Jesus is the Son of God? D. A. Carson tackles this question in *Jesus the Son of God*. In this little book he lays a firm foundation to help the church understand ‘Son of God’ with reference to Jesus. After considering uses of ‘Son of God’ in Scripture, both in general and when applied to Jesus, Carson models the way systematic theology should be based on solid biblical exegesis. Carson is especially concerned to bring his study to bear on the controverted issue in missiological circles concerning how to present Jesus as Son of God in Christian and Muslim contexts. Here he critically, but kindly, calls for rethinking new translations that have replaced references to God the Father and Jesus as his Son to make them more acceptable to Muslims.”

Robert A. Peterson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Seminary

JESUS THE SON OF GOD

A Christological Title Often Overlooked,
Sometimes Misunderstood,
and Currently Disputed

D. A. Carson

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Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed*

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CONTENTS

Preface	11
1 “Son of God” as a Christological Title	13
2 “Son of God” in Select Passages	43
3 “Jesus the Son of God” in Christian and Muslim Contexts	73
General Index	111
Scripture Index	113

PREFACE

This little book originated in three lectures delivered at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, on March 5–6, 2012. In shortened form it became the Gaffin Lecture on Theology, Culture, and Mission at Westminster Theological Seminary on March 14, 2012, and then, slightly modified, became the substance of three lectures in French at the Colloque Réformée held in Lyon, France, in April of the same year. I am enormously indebted to Michel Lemaire and Jacob Mathieu for their very careful work of translation. It is a pleasure rather than a mere obligation to express my hearty gratitude to those who organized these lectures and invited me to participate. I am hugely indebted to them for their hospitality and kindness.

I chose the topic about three years ago. Some work I had done while teaching the epistle to the Hebrews, especially Hebrews 1 where Jesus is said to be superior to angels because he is the Son, prompted me to think about the topic more globally. Moreover, for some time I have been thinking through the hiatus between careful exegesis and doctrinal formulations. We need both, of course, but unless the latter are finally controlled by the former, and *seen* to be controlled by the former, both are weakened. The “Son of God” theme has become one of several test cases in my own mind. Since choosing the topic, however, the debates concerning what a

faithful translation of “Son of God” might be, especially in contexts where one’s envisioned readers are Muslims, have boiled out of the journals read by Bible translators and into the open. Entire denominations have gotten caught up in the controversy, which shows no sign of abating. The last of these three chapters is devoted to addressing both of these points—how, in a Christian context, exegesis rightly leads to Christian confessionalism, and how, in a cross-cultural context concerned with preparing Bible translations for Muslim readers, one may wisely negotiate the current debate. But I beg you to read the first two chapters first. They provide the necessary textual detail on which discussion of the controversies must be based.

This book is not meant to be primarily a contribution to the current disputes, as important as those debates may be. It is meant to foster clear thinking among Christians who want to know what we mean when we join believers across the centuries in confessing, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in his only Son Jesus, our Lord.”

Once again it is a pleasure to record my indebtedness to Andy Naselli for his invaluable suggestions.

Soli Deo gloria.

CHAPTER ONE

“SON OF GOD” AS A CHRISTOLOGICAL TITLE

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in his only Son Jesus, our Lord.” Millions of Christians recite these words from the Apostles’ Creed week by week. But what does it mean to confess Jesus as God’s only Son? What does it mean to say that the God of the Bible has a Son? It cannot possibly mean exactly the same thing that I mean when I tell people, “Yes, I have a son.” Moreover, here and there in Scripture we learn (as we shall see) that Adam is God’s son, Israel is God’s son, King Solomon is God’s son, the Israelites are sons of God, the peacemakers shall be called sons of God, and angels can be referred to as God’s sons. So in what way is Jesus’s sonship like, or unlike, any of these? Why should we think of him as God’s *only* Son?

PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

For at least a century, Christian preaching and writing have focused much more attention on Jesus’s deity and Jesus’s lordship than on Jesus’s sonship. In recent times, when Christians have written and spoken about Jesus as the Son of God, they have tended to focus on one of three topics.

First, many works forged within the discipline of systematic theology discuss the sonship of Jesus, and especially the title “Son of God,” within their broader treatment of Trinitarian theology. The volume by Alister McGrath offers no “Son of God” entry in its index.¹ When Professor McGrath treats “the biblical foundations of the Trinity,” he mentions three “personifications” of God within the Bible (though he prefers the term “hypostatizations”), namely, wisdom, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God.² “Son” is not mentioned. But McGrath nicely treats the “Son” in the ensuing pages that work through the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity during the patristic period. Here readers learn the Eastern approach to the Trinity (the Father begets the Son and breathes or “spirates” the Holy Spirit) and the Western approach to the Trinity (the Father begets the Son, and Father and Son breathe the Holy Spirit).³ McGrath devotes almost no effort to tying these discussions down to what the *biblical* texts actually say: this part of his treatment is caught up in patristic controversies. The recent and fine work of systematic theology by Michael Horton, in keeping with its greater length, devotes much more space to the Trinity, including more effort to tie his theological conclusions to Scripture.⁴ Yet neither McGrath nor Horton works through the different ways in which the title “Son of God” applies to Jesus. They focus almost exclusively on passages in which “Son of

¹ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994).

² *Ibid.*, 248–49.

³ Here, of course, McGrath includes a brief treatment of the *filioque* controversy: does the Holy Spirit proceed “from the Father” only (the agreed terminology of the Nicene Creed) or “from the Father *and the Son*” (captured in Latin by the *filioque*)? The Western church insisted on the latter addition.

⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

God” applies to Jesus *and appears to have some bearing on our understanding of the Trinity*. That is understandable, even commendable, granted their projects. Nevertheless, it leaves readers in the dark about the diversity of ways in which “Son of God” is used to refer to Jesus, and about the ways in which the same “son” language can be applied to Adam, Israelites, Solomon, peacemakers, and angels.⁵ And this list is not exhaustive!

Second, a handful of works are specialist volumes focusing not on the categories of systematic theology but on slightly different lines. Sam Janse traces the reception history of Psalm 2, especially the “You are My Son” formula in early Judaism and in the New Testament.⁶ The history Janse reconstructs is minimalist; certainly he draws no lines toward Trinitarianism. Following a rather different procedure, Michael Peppard analyzes the adoptive procedures in the social and political contexts of the Roman world and reads the New Testament and developing patristic evidence against that background.⁷ Readers will not be entirely mistaken if they conclude that his thesis is a new reductionism, one more example of exegesis by appeals to ostensible parallels (in this case, Graeco-Roman parallels)—of “parallelomania,” to use the lovely term coined by Samuel Sandmel.⁸

Third, in the last few years two spirited controversies

⁵ One might usefully add here the few pages devoted to “Son of God” in the finely reasoned book by K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

⁶ Sam Janse, “*You Are My Son*”: *The Reception History of Psalm 2 in Early Judaism and the Early Church*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology (Leuven, BE: Peeters, 2009).

⁷ Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 2–13.

have erupted and garnered their share of publications regarding “Son” or “Son of God” terminology applied to Jesus. The first of these clashes concerns the extent to which the Son is or is not subordinate to the Father, with a correlative bearing on debates over egalitarianism and complementarianism. I shall not devote much time to that debate in these chapters, but merely offer a handful of observations along the way. The second clash debates how the expression “Son of God” should be translated, especially in Bible translations designed for the Muslim world. I shall devote part of the third chapter to that subject—but I shall be prepared to do so only after laying the groundwork in the first two chapters.

These, then, have been the three major foci of interest when “Son of God” has been probed in recent years. Interesting exceptions occasionally surface. For example, one thinks of the recent excellent volume by Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ*.⁹ Despite its many strengths, however, it says relatively little about how the Son-language *works* as applied to Jesus—that is, what it actually *means*. One may charitably suppose that this is primarily because Peterson’s focus is on the *work* of Christ rather than on the *person* of Christ. Again, the uniquely arranged and massive biblical theology of Greg Beale devotes many pages to Jesus’s sonship.¹⁰ Precisely because he is interested in tracing out developing trajectories through the Bible, Beale’s treatment is often much more tightly bound to specific biblical texts and less interested in

⁹Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹⁰G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), esp. 316–19, 400–429, 441–43, 670–72, 704–8, 761, 913–15.

later theological controversies that developed their own specialist terminology.

In the rest of this chapter, I focus first on sons and sonship, then on son or sons of God where there is no undisputed link with Jesus as the unique Son, and finally on Jesus the Son of God. I shall not restrict the discussion to passages where “son” or “sons” occur: after all, if God is portrayed as the Father, then in some sense those who are in relationship with him are being thought of as his sons or his children.

SONS AND SONSHIP

A large majority of the occurrences of “son” in the Bible, whether singular or plural but without the modifier “of God,” refer to a biological son. Sometimes the son is named: “When [Boaz] made love to [Ruth], the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. . . . And they named him Obed” (Ruth 4:13, 17); “Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you’” (Gen. 22:2). Sometimes the son, unnamed in the immediate context, is identified with a patronymic: “I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre” (1 Sam. 16:18); or frequent references in the New Testament to the sons of Zebedee. If not the patronymic, there may be some other identifier, for example, “the son of Pharaoh’s daughter” (Heb. 11:24) or “the carpenter’s son” (Matt. 13:55).¹¹ At other times the son is not named, but the context shows the relationship envis-

¹¹Of course, in this instance Jesus is not biologically the son of a carpenter, but in the mind of the speakers he is. At this juncture I am interested only in language usage.

aged is entirely natural, as when the Shunammite woman berates Elisha, “Did I ask you for a son, my lord?” (2 Kings 4:28). This usage is very common: for example, “[Ahaz] followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire” (2 Kings 16:3); “When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son” (Luke 1:57)—and of course the context soon discloses the son’s name, John (1:63). Under this usage are the occasions when a parent addresses a child, whose name is known, with the word “son,” as when Mary says to Jesus, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you” (Luke 2:48).

Sometimes the context shows that the word “son” is not referring to an individual, named or otherwise, but to a class, a typical son, as it were: “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you” (Deut. 8:5); “But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things” (Ezek. 18:14). This kind of usage is scarcely less frequent in the New Testament: “Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37); “There was a man who had two sons” (Luke 15:11). Perhaps this is also the place to mention passages where “son” is used, not to address an immediately male biological descendant, but a more distant relative, a member of the larger clan or tribe who is considerably younger—almost an avuncular usage, as when, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham addresses the rich man as he suffers torments in Hades, “Son, remember . . .” (Luke 16:25).

All the examples mentioned so far presuppose natu-

ral sonship, biological sonship, as opposed to metaphorical usage. Before turning to the extensive metaphorical use of “son” and related terms in the Bible, it will prove helpful to reflect on what many of the expressions I am about to list have in common. In contemporary Western culture, sonship is established irrefutably by DNA: the biological connection can be established scientifically within a minuscule margin of error. By extension we also speak of adopted sons: the biological link disappears from view, but the legal and familial ties are very strong. What we are *not* used to are expressions like “sons of affliction,” “son of the morning,” “son of a bow,” and a host of others I shall list—all of them found in Scripture, though mostly unpreserved in contemporary translations. What do they have in common?

Vocationally speaking, in our culture relatively few sons end up doing what their fathers did; relatively few daughters end up doing what their mothers did. In many contexts I have asked this question: “How many of you men are now doing, vocationally, what your fathers did at the same age? How many of you women are now doing, vocationally, what your mothers did at the same age?” The percentage is rarely as much as 5 percent. In the ancient world, however, the percentage would have been much higher, frequently well over 90 percent. If your father was a farmer, you became a farmer; if your father was a baker, you became a baker; if your father was a carpenter, you became a carpenter—which of course is why Jesus could be known both as the carpenter’s son (Matt. 13:55), and, in one remarkable passage, as the carpenter (Mark 6:3—presumably after Joseph had died). If your family name was Stradivarius, you became a violin maker. You learned your

trade, your vocation, even your identity, *from your father*. If you were a farmer, you learned *from your father* when and how to plant, when and how to irrigate, when and how to harvest—not from a nearby agricultural college. If you made violins, you learned *from your father* what woods to choose, what sizes and ratios each piece had to maintain, what glues to use, and how to make and apply the finish. To put the matter differently, your father determined your identity, your training, your vocation. He generated you not only biologically, but, shall we say, functionally. You were derived from him, not only biologically, but functionally. Transparently, this father-son relationship works only one way: the son does not generate the father, biologically or functionally, nor does the son give his identity to the father.

In other words, your paternity was responsible for much more than your genes; your father provided much more than school fees. He established your vocation, your place in the culture, your identity, your place in the family. This is the dynamic of a culture that is preindustrial and fundamentally characterized by agriculture, handcrafts, and small-time trade.

This social dynamic does not necessarily shape the linguistic structures of all cultures characterized by it, but it certainly does the Hebrew culture. As a result there are many “son of X” idioms in the Bible, where the identity of “X” is highly diverse and the relationship between the son and X is certainly not biological.

Consider, for example, the expression “son(s) of Belial,” or “men [or occasionally ‘daughter’] of Belial,” where “Belial” is usually masked by contemporary translations:

Chart 1

Text	KJV	NIV	ESV
Deut. 13:13	the children of Belial	troublemakers	worthless fellows
Judg. 19:22	certain sons of Belial	some of the wicked men	worthless fellows
Judg. 20:13	the children of Belial	those wicked men	the worthless fellows
1 Sam. 1:16	a daughter of Belial	a wicked woman	a worthless woman
1 Sam. 2:12	sons of Belial	scoundrels	worthless men
1 Sam. 10:27	the children of Belial	some scoundrels	some worthless fellows
1 Sam. 25:17	a son of Belial	such a wicked man	such a worthless man
1 Sam. 25:25	this man of Belial	that wicked man	this worthless fellow
1 Sam. 30:22	the wicked men and men of Belial	the evil men and troublemakers	the wicked and worthless fellows
2 Sam. 16:7	thou man of Belial	you scoundrel	you worthless man
2 Sam. 20:1	a man of Belial	a troublemaker	a worthless man
2 Sam. 23:6	the sons of Belial	evil men	worthless men
1 Kings 21:10	sons of Belial	scoundrels	worthless men
1 Kings 21:13	children of Belial	scoundrels	worthless men
2 Chron. 13:7	vain men, the children of Belial	worthless scoundrels	worthless scoundrels
2 Cor. 6:15	And what concord hath Christ with Belial?	What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?	What accord has Christ with Belial?

A few observations will draw attention to salient points. (1) The word “Belial” is preserved as a transliteration from the Hebrew, and in the last instance, from the

Greek,¹² in every occurrence in the KJV. It is preserved by both the NIV and the ESV in only one passage, namely, the last—that is, in the one passage where there is no “son of” or “man of” locution to introduce it, where “Christ” is set over against “Belial.” (2) Apart from this last instance, the ESV consistently understands the “of Belial” component to mean “worthless.” That may be right, but it is not certainly so; it is in line with one of four or five commonly suggested derivations of the word “Belial.” In the last instance, Paul uses “Belial” as a synonym for Satan. (3) Calling someone “a son of Belial” is not necessarily suggesting that the *biological* father of the son is Belial/worthless/wicked/a scoundrel/Satan. Rather, it is a dramatic way of saying that the conduct of the son is so worthless/wicked that he is identified with the worthless/wicked family. That is his identity. (4) There is probably little difference between “son of Belial” and “man of Belial.” In both cases “Belial” identifies the son’s or the man’s character and conduct. If there is a difference between the two expressions, “son of Belial” calls up a mental image of “Belial” *generating* the son, while “man of Belial,” though it identifies the man with Belial, conjures up no image of Belial generating the man. (5) Neither the NIV nor the ESV attempts to preserve the “son of” or “daughter of” component of the expression.

There is a substantial number of other “son(s) of X” expressions in the Bible that only rarely get translated in such a way as to preserve the “son(s) of” component. The following list is not exhaustive but is broadly comprehensive:

¹²There is, of course, a well-known textual variant here, “Beliar.”

Chart 2

Text	Literal Rendering	KJV	NIV	ESV
Ex. 12:5	son of one year	a male of the first year	year-old males	a male a year old
Deut. 25:2	sons of the beating	worthy to be beaten	deserves to be beaten	deserves to be beaten
2 Sam. 17:10	sons of might	a mighty man	a fighter	a mighty man
2 Kings 6:32	son of a murder	son of a murder	murderer	murderer
2 Kings 16:7	your son [i.e., a king subordinate to another king]	your son	your vassal	your son
Neh. 12:28	sons of the singers	sons of the singers	musicians	sons of the singers
Job 5:7	sons of a flame	sparks	sparks	sparks
Job 41:28	son of a bow	arrow	arrows	arrow
Ps. 89:22	son of malice	the son of wickedness	the wicked	the wicked
Ps. 149:2	sons of Zion	the children of Zion	the people of Zion	the children of Zion
Prov. 31:5	sons of affliction	the afflicted	the oppressed	the afflicted
Isa. 14:12	son of the morning	son of the morning	son of the dawn	son of Dawn
Isa. 19:11	son of wise men	son of the wise	wise counselors	son of the wise
Isa. 21:10	sons of the threshing floor [i.e., threshed corn]	O my threshing and the corn of my floor	My people who are crushed on the threshing floor	O my threshed and winnowed one
Isa. 57:3	sons of a fortune-teller	ye sons of the sorceress	you children of a sorceress	sons of the sorceress
Lam. 3:13	sons of the quiver	arrows of his quiver	arrows from his quiver	arrows of his quiver

Zech. 4:14	sons of oil	anointed ones	who are anointed	anointed ones
Matt. 13:38	sons of the kingdom	children of the kingdom	people of the kingdom	sons of the kingdom
Matt. 13:38	sons of the evil one	children of the wicked one	people of the evil one	sons of the evil one
Matt. 17:25	sons [of kings]	their own [kings'] children	their own [kings'] children	their [kings'] sons
Mark 2:19	sons of the bridechamber	children of the bridechamber	guests of the bridegroom	the wedding guests

Once again a few observations will clarify the significance of the chart.

(1) In the expression “son(s) of X,” the “X” is often abstract, or at least nonpersonal, nonhuman (e.g., son of one year, sons of affliction, son of morning, sons of oil, sons of the quiver). In all such cases, the relationship between the “son” and “X” cannot, of course, be biological. Even where “X” is a person, the relationship is not, in these examples, biological. The “son of wise men” does not refer to the literal progeny of wise men; it refers, rather, to those whose conduct and counsel are so wise that they are identified, as it were, with the company of the wise, with the wise family: that is their family, their identity. The sons of a fortune-teller are not her literal children; they are, rather, those who go to fortune-tellers for guidance, and thus show themselves to belong to those who cherish fortune-telling.

(2) The exact nuance of the relationship between the “son” and the “X” is highly variable. The “sons of the beating” (Deut. 25:2) refers to those who *deserve* to be beaten, that is, they deserve to be punished; they belong to that class.

By contrast, the “sons of a flame” do not *deserve* a flame; rather, the entire expression metaphorically conjures up sparks. Ordinarily the exact nuance is easily discernible from the context. Sometimes there is a sense of the “X” generating the “son”: for example, the flame generates the spark.

(3) In some instances, to preserve a more direct rendering in English is distinctly misleading. The ESV preserves “sons of the singers” in Nehemiah 12:28, and an untutored English reader might well take this to refer to the biological progeny of singers. In fact, the reference is to singers, musicians—not their progeny.

(4) “Sons of the bridechamber” (Mark 2:19) is particularly interesting. Both the NIV and the ESV recognize that the expression refers to guests at a wedding, but each handles the “X” component of the expression, the bridechamber, in a different way. Recognizing who issued the invitations in a first-century Jewish wedding in Palestine, NIV renders the expressions “guests of the bridegroom.” The ESV in this instance adopts the more contemporary and colloquial expression, “wedding guests.” Both, of course, have lost any hint of a literal bridechamber. The bridechamber does not in any sense, metaphorical or otherwise, *generate* the “sons,” but it does establish the identity of these “sons.”

(5) In any case, all three translations recognize that at least some of the time the most direct rendering is inappropriate. A reader can on occasion discern that the translators recognize they are dealing with a slightly alien idiom: their interpretive wrestlings may issue in an orthographic convention not available in the original language (hence the ESV’s

“son of Dawn” [Isa. 14:12], with a capital letter, instead of the more prosaic “son of the morning”).

This sort of background is what makes a number of other expressions in the Bible more readily comprehensible. Who are the sons of Abraham? The true sons of Abraham, Paul insists, are not those who carry Abraham’s genes, but those who act like him, who imitate the faith of Abraham (Gal. 3:7; cf. John 8:33, 39–40), the “man of faith” (Gal. 3:9). The obligation of a son to imitate his father surfaces very movingly when Paul tells his converts in Corinth, “Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me” (1 Cor. 4:15–16).

One final observation before wrapping up this section. Sometimes quite different uses of “son of X” language can be found in the same passage. For example, in 1 Samuel 20:30 we read, “Saul’s anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, ‘You son of a perverse and rebellious woman!¹³ Don’t I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?’” Here the first of the two expressions, “son of a perverse and rebellious woman,” is not saying anything about Jonathan’s biological

¹³ This or something similar is how the Hebrew expression is rendered by KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, HCSB, and NIV. The NET Bible has “You stupid traitor!” and appends the following note: “*Heb* ‘son of a perverse woman of rebelliousness.’ But such an overly literal and domesticated translation of the Hebrew expression fails to capture the force of Saul’s unrestrained reaction. Saul, now incensed and enraged over Jonathan’s liaison with David, is actually hurling very coarse and emotionally charged words at his son. The translation of this phrase suggested by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner is ‘bastard of a wayward woman’ (*Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. הוֹטֵר), but this is not an expression commonly used in English. A better English approximation of the sentiments expressed here by the Hebrew phrase would be ‘You stupid son of a bitch!’ However, sensitivity to the various public formats in which the Bible is read aloud has led to a less startling English rendering which focuses on the semantic value of Saul’s utterance (i.e., the behavior of his own son Jonathan, which he viewed as both a personal and a political betrayal [= ‘traitor’]).” Cf. NLT: “You stupid son of a whore!”; *The Message*: “You son of a slut!”

mother. If that were so, why would King Saul imagine, in the second part of the verse, that Jonathan’s actions would bring shame on her? In the second of the two expressions, “son of Jesse,” the sonship is at lone level unavoidably biological, yet the searing sneer in King Saul’s voice suggests he is not opting to refer to David merely by referencing his patronymic. Rather, he wants to damn not only David but Jesse’s entire clan—or, better put perhaps, he holds that David is utterly contemptible *because* he springs from this contemptible clan. In other words, the distinctions in how “son of X” functions in the two occurrences of this text are subtle, but not really obscure once one pays attention to the flow of the argument and the nature of this metaphor.

THE USE OF “SON(S) OF GOD” TO REFER TO BEINGS OTHER THAN JESUS

We move now from a survey of “son(s) of X” expressions where “X” is anything but God, to “son(s) of X” expressions where X is God. I shall include some instances where, for example, God is portrayed as the Father who has sons, even though the precise expression “son(s) of God” is not used. On the other hand, I shall exclude instances where “son of God” is clearly christological,¹⁴ reserving such passages for

¹⁴I am using “christological” in a fairly broad sense to include references to the one who comes to be named Jesus. This awkward way of putting things stems from the fact that the terminology is a bit tricky. For example, if I had said, more simply, “to include references to Jesus” instead of “to include references to the one who comes to be named Jesus,” I would be excluding Old Testament references to the Coming One for no other reason than that he is not yet named Jesus. Again, “christological” is itself awkward because, at its basic level, it is simply a Greek version of the Hebrew “messianic.” But as we shall see, there are numerous passages where “son of God” is tied to the promised Davidic Messiah (hence this is a messianic usage of “son of God”), and others where “son of God” is tied to a coming figure who is not in that context connected with the Davidic Messiah (hence this is a nonmessianic usage of “son of God”). Both kinds of usages we shall nevertheless label christological, provided “son of God” refers to the Coming One (however he is understood in any passage), whether before he comes as the man Jesus, or once he is here.

the next two chapters. The immediate aim is to remind ourselves that in the Bible “son(s) of God” can refer to a diverse range of beings—a fact we may overlook because “son of God” is so tightly tied, for many of us, almost exclusively to the second person of the Godhead. Technical introductions to this diversity are found in many of the better biblical and theological dictionaries.¹⁵ Here I intend to do no more than survey the range.

Most of the entries in this section refer to human beings, but a handful of entries clearly refer to angels. “One day the angels [*Heb.*: ‘the sons of God’] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them” (Job 1:6; see also 2:1; 38:7). “Sons of God” is found in the original of Psalms 29:1 and 89:6; both NIV and ESV render the Hebrew “heavenly beings” rather than “sons of God.” Unfallen angels, one supposes, reflect God’s character in many ways. In various passages they take on revelatory roles and carry out God’s purposes. The carefully worded comment—that Satan also came with them—suggests both proximity and distance: it is not too much to infer that he should have been one with them, but at this juncture must be mentioned separately, for his purposes are malign. But for the time being we shall set to one side further mention of angels.

What, then, are the ways in which “son(s) of God” refers to human beings other than Jesus?

¹⁵ See, among others, Jarl Fossum, “Son of God,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 128–37; J. W. Drane, “Son of God,” in *Dictionary of the New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 1111–15; D. R. Bauer, “Son of God,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 769–75; L. W. Hurtado, “Son of God,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 900–906.