

## “GOD HAS SPOKEN THROUGH HIS SON”: THE THEOLOGY OF SONSHIP IN HEBREWS 1

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### *Resumen*

Los primeros cinco versículos de la Epístola a los Hebreos, que transmiten una cristología muy marcada, comienzan con la aseveración de que Dios ha hablado por medio de su hijo de una manera que suplanta todas las formas en las que habló a su pueblo en el pasado. Gran parte del subsiguiente material hortatorio de la epístola se desprende de dicha aseveración. La referencia del autor al Salmo 2 establece la autoridad del hijo divino basada en su resurrección de los muertos. El título “Hijo de Dios” puede tener varios sentidos, no sólo para los lectores judíos de la Epístola en el siglo primero y sus expectativas respecto del Hijo/Mesías y de cómo cumpliría el oráculo del Salmo 2, sino para los cristianos de hoy en día que interpretan esos versículos a la luz de los credos niceno y calcedónico. El tema de la cualidad de hijo divino de Cristo resulta asimismo relevante en el campo de la traducción contemporánea de la Biblia, donde la preocupación en relación con la reacción de los musulmanes a la doctrina de la cualidad de hijo de Cristo ha llevado a algunos traductores de la Biblia a considerar una modificación de la frase “Hijo de Dios”, una práctica que debería evitarse.

### *Abstract*

The first five verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which convey a very high Christology, begin with the assertion that God has spoken through his Son in a way that supersedes all the other ways he spoke to his people in the past. Much of the subsequent hortatory material in the epistle follows from this assertion. The author's citation of Psalm 2 establishes the authority of the divine son based on his resurrection from the dead. The title “Son of God” can have several possible senses, not only to the first century Jewish readers of this Epistle and what they may have expected of the Son/Messiah, and how he might fulfill the oracle in Psalm 2, but also to Christians today who interpret these verses in the light of the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulas. The issue of Christ's divine sonship is relevant also in the field of contemporary Bible translation, where concern over the reaction of Muslims to the doctrine of Christ's sonship has led some Bible translators to consider modifying the phrase “Son of God”, a practice which should be avoided.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It could be said that one of the principal themes of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that *God has spoken to us through his Son*. In the very first sentence, which comprises the first four verses, this theme is introduced, with the superiority of God's new revelation (or “speaking”, *λαλήσας... ἐλάλησεν*) to the old as the subject of the main clause in vv. 1-2<sup>a</sup>, and being grounded and expanded upon in the dependent clauses that follow it

in vv. 2<sup>b</sup>-4.<sup>1</sup> As F. F. Bruce has said, the affirmation that God has spoken is basic to the argument of this epistle, as it is also to Christian faith. “As God had no greater messenger than his Son, he had no further message beyond the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> Meier says that the flow of thought of the first five verses shows us that for the author of Hebrews the title Son is the one title of Jesus that embraces all the rest, and everything that is said about him subsequently in the Epistle is rooted in the one idea that Jesus is God’s son.<sup>3</sup> From this one assertion, i.e., that God has spoken to us through his Son, flows much of the paraenetic material which follows throughout the Epistle. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not divide the Epistle more or less evenly between a statement of doctrine and the outworking of the significance of the doctrine in a subsequent section, as we find in some NT Epistles, but intersperses hortatory material with assertions of fact throughout the treatise until the beginning of chapter 12. But he does begin with basic doctrinal assertions about the Son of God, which is the subject matter of the entire first chapter, and especially the first five verses. Indeed, the first four verses, which comprise one sentence in the Greek text,<sup>4</sup> are perhaps the most articulate Christology in the New Testament. They form the heart of the Christology of this Epistle; as Bruce Etter comments, “nowhere is more said about Christ in so few verses.”<sup>5</sup>

This christological emphasis is not unlike that of other New Testament books, and in some can even be found in their opening passages just as in Hebrews. Christology was of paramount importance to first century Christians, and was by no means the exclusive interest of later councils. In the opening verses of John we read that the Word existed in the beginning with God and in fact was God (v. 1), and that all things were made through him (v. 3); moreover, this Word became flesh and lived among men (v. 14).<sup>6</sup> In the first chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians we read that Christ

<sup>1</sup> John P. Meier, “Structure and Theology in Heb 1:1-4,” *Bib* 66 (1985): 170.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), 1, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Meier, “Structure and Theology,” 188.

<sup>4</sup> Structurally and theologically the first chapter is comprised of two sections: vv. 1-4 (which serve as *exordium*) and vv. 5-14, which expand and give the OT basis for the statements in vv. 1-4. Meier demonstrates that there is probably both a numerical as well as a theological correspondence between the seven christological designations in vv. 1-4 and the catena of seven OT citations in vv. 5-14. See Meier, “Structure and Theology,” 169-70.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Lee Etter, “Christology and Psalm 2:7 in the Book of Hebrews,” (M.A. thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2002), 22, 36. Meier, “Structure and Theology,” 170, calls vv. 1-4 “the most beautiful periodic sentence in the NT.”

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Williams believes that Hebrews contains a Logos Christology similar to that of the prologue to John’s gospel, or at least a Logos doctrine similar to that of Philo, in which the Logos is the intermediary between God and the world with its human inhabitants. Williams says that there are five primary characteristics of such a Logos doctrine or a Logos Christology. One would be the use of the term *λόγος*, which, of course, this Epistle lacks. A second would be the concept of pre-existence; a third would be a mediatorial role in creation; a fourth would be the association of the title “Son” with the Logos; and the fifth would be a clustering of verbs of speaking (such as *λέγω* or *λαλέω*) or verbs

is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15-17; NIV). This is not drastically different from the assertions of Hebrews 1. We also find a high Christology in Revelation where the “one like a son of man,” who is Christ, is identified in the same “first and last, Alpha and Omega” terminology as the Lord God, the Almighty, who is “the Alpha and Omega” (Rev 1:8, 17; 2:8; 22:13). Many other passages could be cited.

Likewise the Synoptics leave no question in their opening chapters that Jesus is more than a mere man or a good prophet. In Mark 1:1 he is the Son of God.<sup>7</sup> In the opening chapter of Matthew Jesus is a descendant of David, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and called Immanuel, “God with us” (1:20, 23). In Luke 1 Jesus is likewise presented as being born of a virgin, with the explanation given by the angel at the annunciation that her baby would be the “Son of the Most High” and “the Son of God” (1:32, 35). Clearly, these writers of Scripture felt it very important to state at the outset that Jesus was more than a man: he was the Son of God, the agent of creation, God in the flesh. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not depart from this practice, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that he consciously follows a pattern of the New Testament era in which the writers make bold and clear assertions about Christ as a foundation for what is to follow.

As Kistemaker says, Christ’s offices of prophet, priest and king are clearly articulated in the first few verses of the first chapter of Hebrews; he is the prophet in whom God has spoken in these last days, the priest who has provided purification for sins, and the king seated at God’s right hand who upholds the world by his powerful command.<sup>8</sup> Then in the remainder of the Epistle the author goes on to assert the superiority of Christ to all aspects of Jewish religion. The Son is superior in every way to the principle figures of Judaism, including Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and Melchizedek, as well as to its sacred institutions, including the Levitical priesthood, the tabernacle and its sacrifices, and even Israel’s “rest” in the land of promise. This superiority is to be understood in relation to the Son’s rank, dignity, authority and position, and not just as a moral quality; to obtain the designation “Son” by inheritance is far superior to having the name ‘messenger’ by virtue of created design and appointment.<sup>9</sup> It is this pre-

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having to do with revelation—all of which can be said to be found in the introductory verses of this Epistle, just as is the case in the prologue to John. See Ronald Williams, “The Incarnation of the Logos in Hebrews,” *ExpTim* 95 (1983-84): 5.

<sup>7</sup> Some manuscripts omit “the Son of God”. UBS includes it with a C rating.

<sup>8</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1988), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Neva F. Miller, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Analytical and Exegetical Handbook* (Dallas, Tex.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1985), 14.

eminently superior Son who is the one through whom God has spoken with finality. Even the author's discussion of the sacrificial system relates in a certain sense to the theme of how God has "spoken" in a better way through his Son. The Aaronic priesthood and the sacrificial system, which communicated God's laws and requirements, his standards of holiness, and the means whereby atonement was to be made, were established by Moses, a prophet, who is one of those to whom God spoke in the past "at many times and in various ways," but whose ministry has been superseded in these last days by the superiority of the Son through whom God has spoken.<sup>10</sup>

The implications of Christ's exalted status—in fact, his divine nature—are worked out in the chapters that follow. The word "superior" is used repeatedly to express the Son's status relative to all that was important in Jewish religion and practice prior to the incarnation and exaltation. The adjective κρείττων, "superior," occurs twelve times (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; and 12:24), and διαφωρότερον, which is more or less synonymous with κρείττων, occurs twice (1:4 and 8:6). These terms represent a theme of obvious importance. Because the Son is exalted, he is better than the angels. He is superior to Moses as revealer of God and mediator of the first covenant. The Son is superior to that covenant because he brings in a new one based on better promises. He is a perfect priest, better than Aaron and the Levitical priesthood. His sacrifice is superior to all the sacrifices of the old covenant, which could never take away sins.<sup>11</sup> The Son is superior even to Melchizedek, for although the author does not say so in so many words, he does say that Christ has become priest on the basis of an indestructible life (7:16), and he uses Melchizedek as a symbol or type prefiguring Christ who is the greater reality. In other words, the status of Christ as the exalted, divine Son of God is the leverage by which the writer urges the readers not to revert to outmoded Jewish religious forms. The truth he is communicating is that now in these last days God has spoken the final word through the Son, who is superior in every conceivable way. However much divine revelation is a story of progression up to him, there is no revelation beyond him because when Christ came, God's message through him was "indeed God's final word."<sup>12</sup>

The author's exhortations to endurance in faith and in holy living follow naturally from the assertion that God has "spoken" in a superior way through his Son. Many of these exhortations are framed in first person plural cohortative "let us" statements, indicating a certain humility on the part of the author who places himself in the same position of obligation as those whom he addresses. Here is the gist of what the writer is urging his readers to consider and do:

<sup>10</sup> Even the phrase ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, literally "at the end of these days," seems to imply a note of eschatological finality to God's message.

<sup>11</sup> As Caird remarks, "the weakness of Levitical religion was that it symbolized access without genuinely providing it." See George B. Caird, "Son by Appointment," in *The New Testament Age. Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (ed. William C. Weinrich; 2 vols.; Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1984), 1:80.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, 3.

God has spoken to us with finality through his own Son (1:1-4), and this Son is superior to all we have known before (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:11, 23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). Therefore we must pay more careful attention to what he has said so that we do not drift away from what he has told us (2:1). Beware lest any of you has an evil heart that would depart from the living God (3:12). Let us be diligent to enter into the “rest” that God has prepared for his people (4:11). Let us hold fast to our professed faith (4:14), and come boldly to the throne of grace when we need help (4:16). Let us press on to maturity and not always remain spiritual babies (6:1). Let us draw near to God in full assurance of faith, holding to our confession of faith and stirring one another up to love and good deeds (10:22-24). Let us lay aside all encumbrances and sin, and persevere in the race we must run, and fix our focus on Christ who did the same thing and has now entered into glory (12:1-2). See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks (12:25). Let us be thankful and worship God appropriately with awe, as we should do (12:28). Let us join Jesus in his reproach, suffering rejection as he did (13:13). And let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God (13:15). In other words, because God has spoken to us through Jesus his Son, who is greater than all that has gone before in the Jewish religious system, let us do all this.

## 2. PSALM 2 AND THE THEOLOGY OF SONSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The designation “son” dominates the Christology of the Epistle,<sup>13</sup> and is the focal point of emphasis in v. 2.<sup>14</sup> “Son” here is anarthrous (ὁ υἱός), stressing the quality of his person,<sup>15</sup> and is used in the absolute sense to indicate that he is the *only* Son.<sup>16</sup> In v. 5 the phrase υἱός μου εἶ σὺ, “you are my son,” is quoted from Psalm 2, to which, with the exception of Psalm 110, the NT refers more than any other psalm as a proof-text for Christ’s messianic role. Because of the importance of the concept of sonship to this Epistle and the extent to which the NT cites Psalm 2:8, we should give serious thought as to how the sonship of that passage corresponds to Christ’s sonship in the thinking of this and other NT writers, and how they apply the passage in their discussions of that sonship. It is worthy of notice that the NT does not use the begetting terminology of Psalm 2 to refer either to Jesus’ pre-existence or to his birth.<sup>17</sup> Paul uses Ps 2:7 in his address to the Jewish congregation in the synagogue at Pisidian An-

<sup>13</sup> J. Daryl Charles, “The Angels, Sonship and Birthright in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *JETS* 33 (1990): 175; Meier, “Structure and Theology,” 188.

<sup>14</sup> Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5-2:5,” *BSac* 145 (1988): 84, citing Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (ed. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), 663.

<sup>16</sup> Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> James W. Watts, “Psalm 2 in the Context of Biblical Theology,” *HBT* 12 (1990): 82.

tiach in Acts 13 to announce Christ's victory over death as the basis for the gospel *as demonstrated by the fact of his being raised from the dead*. He says, "What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your Father'" (Acts 13:33; NIV).<sup>18</sup> And although in Rom 1:3-4 Paul does not elaborate on the concept to our total satisfaction, it seems evident that he is portraying Christ as the descendent of David who has been appointed (ὀρισθέντος) son-of-God-in-power by the resurrection from the dead.<sup>19</sup> Heb 1:3-5 takes the same line of thought; in discussing the exaltation and enthronement of Christ (whom he has already designated as deity by virtue of being the creator of the universe), the writer cites Ps 2:7 as the proof that Christ has the name that is higher than that of any angel, and no doubt that name or designation is "Son of God."<sup>20</sup> That this is so is confirmed by how he uses Ps 2:7 to establish the superiority of Christ's priesthood in 5:9, where he says that it was after Christ was made perfect (i.e., by his exaltation), that he became the source of eternal salvation.<sup>21</sup> That the apostles and the NT church were willing to say that there was a sense in which Jesus "became" the Son of God through the exaltation does not imply that he was not considered the Son of God prior to the exaltation, as *καίπερ ὄν υἱός*, "although being Son," in Heb 5:8 makes clear. Thus, the "today" of the begetting refers not to the presumed eternal begetting of the Son of God, as Augustine understood the passage to mean, but to the event of his resurrection, ascension and exaltation to the right hand of the Father.<sup>22</sup> The exaltation to God's right hand then becomes the moment in salvation history when Christ is enthroned as Son in the inheritance of his

<sup>18</sup> In this quote from Ps. 2:7, both in Hebrew (יְהוָה יֵבֶן) and in the Greek version which our author quotes here in v. 5 (υἱός μου εἶ σύ), "my son" is forefronted, suggesting emphasis. This is also true of "today". This implies a change in status to that of Son occurring at a particular occasion; it is an event in time, and not the "eternal begetting" referred to by the Nicene creed concerning Jesus' eternal relation to the Father from before time began.

<sup>19</sup> The language of "appointment" is important for our theological understanding of Jesus' assumption of his messianic role at his exaltation. In Heb 1:2 the verb used is τέθημι, whereas in Rom 1:4 the verb used is ὀρίζω. Both passages refer to the "decree" (פֶּרֶט) of Ps 2:7. English versions translate ὀρισθέντος in Rom 1:4 variously: "declared" (NIV, NRSV), "designated" (NJB), "shown" (NLT, TEV), or "proved" (ISV), although the word is not used in this sense anywhere else in the NT. "Appointed" is the normal usage and should be retained.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Schenck, "Keeping His Appointment: Creation and Enthronement in Hebrews," *JNT* 66 (1997): 93. See also Meier, "Structure and Theology," 187.

<sup>21</sup> This is also suggested, though not proven, by the statement in 7:16 that he became a priest on the basis of an indestructible life, a probable reference to the resurrection.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 54; David A. De Silva, "Paul's Sermon in Antioch of Pisidia," *BSac* 151 (1994): 42. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (transl. John Owen; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), 42.

royal office.<sup>23</sup> As F. F. Bruce says, “he who was the Son of God from everlasting entered into the full exercise of all the prerogatives implied by his sonship when, after his suffering had proved the completeness of his obedience, he was raised to the father’s right hand.”<sup>24</sup> It was the title of Son as Davidic heir that was conferred at his exaltation, even though he had always been the eternal Son of God and in full possession of deity.<sup>25</sup> Although the author clearly understands that Jesus is the pre-existent Son of God, the incarnation, passion and exaltation brought him into a new dimension in the experience of sonship so that the enthronement becomes the occasion at which the title “Son” was conferred upon him.<sup>26</sup>

Geerhardus Vos has outlined four different senses in which the designation “Son of God” is applied to Jesus in the NT. These four aspects are not mutually exclusive, but are in fact integrally related to one another. The primary sense is the pre-temporal eternal relationship of the second person of the Trinity to the first, existing from all eternity past before the foundation of the world, and which would exist even if the world had never been created. This aspect of Christ’s sonship is what is referred to in the statement “this is my son” given by the voice from heaven at Christ’s baptism and at his transfiguration. The second aspect of sonship is the Messianic sonship, which develops out of the first sense. Because the Messiah must act as an absolute representative of God and is promised dominion over the ends of the earth (both in Psalm 2 and in Revelation), only a Son in the highest sense can adequately fulfill the Messianic office, because a world ruler in such a comprehensive sense needs to be super-human. Christ’s Messianic sonship expresses his eternal sonship in a definite historical situation. A third sense in which Jesus is the Son of God is the nativistic sense spoken of in Luke 1:35, in which the birth of Jesus, who will occupy the Messianic throne of his father David (Luke 1:32), is not on the basis of human paternity, but is by divine action. The fourth sense is the moral and religious sense in which Jesus lived as a child of God in terms of his perfect faith and character.<sup>27</sup>

No doubt Paul had Psalm 2 in mind as he wrote Rom 1:3-5, which speaks of the Son of God becoming the son of David through the incarnation (v. 3), then being appointed the Son-of-God-in-power through the resurrection (v. 4), and whom Paul was calling the Gentiles to obey (v. 5).<sup>28</sup> That is, just as his *physical* existence as son of

<sup>23</sup> Schenck, “Keeping His Appointment,” 99. Ellingworth notes that the author may not have distinguished the exaltation from the resurrection. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 114.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Oberholtzer, “The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5-2:5,” 84.

<sup>26</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1991), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate About the Messianic Consciousness* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 140-41.

<sup>28</sup> Don B. Garlington, “Jesus, the Unique Son of God: Tested and Faithful,” *BSac* 151 (1994): 290, comments that Satan’s temptation of Christ in the wilderness to bow down to him in order to possess all

David in v. 3 has an historical beginning, so also his enthronement in heaven as the descendant of David who became the Son-of-God-in-power—with due emphasis on the phrase “in power”—has an historical beginning, which is the resurrection.<sup>29</sup> The eternal son, who alone was qualified to be the true Messianic Son of God, was born of a virgin as a descendant of David, lived a pure and holy life as God’s child as no one else could, was crucified, resurrected, and exalted, and was appointed Son-of-God-in-power.<sup>30</sup> He who always was the Son became, in a new and comprehensive sense, the Son enthroned, with all authority in heaven and earth given to him (Matt 28:18). From that position of authority he commands the evangelization of the nations and invites them to take refuge in him lest he destroy them with the iron rod of judgment.

### 3. THE THEOLOGY OF SONSHIP IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Not all interpreters of Hebrews agree that the author articulates a clear theology of Christ’s preexistence, or even holds such an idea. G. B. Caird, for example, noting that the theme of *τελείωσις* or “completion” is a major theme of the Epistle, sees Christ’s life as one of growth in understanding and experience as he explored what it means in the life of this world for a man to be God’s Son. In Hebrews none of the dignities of the earthly Jesus are said to be held by virtue of his heavenly origin.<sup>31</sup> He comments, “the author of Hebrews has no place in his thinking for preexistence as an ontological concept. His essentially human Jesus attains to perfection, to preeminence, and even to eternity.”<sup>32</sup> L. D. Hurst, in a *Festschrift* for Caird, agrees, saying that if we read Hebrews 1 from the beginning, the figure in view is essentially a human one. The author’s main interest is not in a divine being who becomes man, but rather in a “human figure who attains to an exalted status.”<sup>33</sup> Our problem, he believes, is that the chapter is too often read in the light of Nicea and Chalcedon.

While I agree that it is true that in this chapter there is much emphasis on what Christ the man became at his exaltation, that fact alone should not obscure what the author clearly sees him to have been all along. In v. 2 the deity of the Son is affirmed in that he is the one through whom God made *τοὺς αἰῶνας*, literally “the eons,” a term

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the kingdoms of the world was a “direct assault on his right as the Davidic Son to command the obedience of the nations (Gen 49:10; Num 24:17-24; Ps 2:8).”

<sup>29</sup> David Abernathy, “Christ as Life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15:45,” *IBS* 24 (2002): 7.

<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, Augustine said, “while remaining God, he who made man took manhood.” That is, he became what he never was while remaining what he always had been (*Homilies in John*, Tractate 17, ch. 7).

<sup>31</sup> Caird, “Son by Appointment,” 76-77.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>33</sup> L. D. Hurst, “The Christology of Hebrews 1 and 2,” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 156, 163.



which can denote all of material creation as well as all the successive ages of history.<sup>34</sup> As Meier has said, he is the eschatological heir and mediator of redemption precisely because he is the mediator of creation.<sup>35</sup> He also upholds all things by his powerful command (v. 3). Not only is the Son the agent of creation, but all creation must heed his word. This can only be spoken of deity, whose divine authority alone may speak into existence and must maintain in continued existence all that is. Those who deny or question whether or not the author assumes the preexistence of the Son must disregard the implications of this statement. Moreover, sonship, as Vos has described it, is not a one-dimensional concept. The fact that Christ the man does go through the process he goes through *as a man* does not mean that he was not preexistent, nor that the author did not think so. As Vos comments, it is his eternal sonship that qualifies him for Messianic sonship, which is simply the eternal sonship expressed in history. Only a Son in the highest possible sense could fulfill such an office, particularly in view of the fact that it involves inheriting God's rule over the world, for such a world ruler must of necessity be superhuman.<sup>36</sup>

Schenk makes an interesting distinction between Christ's *identity* as Son and his *role* as Son. He says

[...] in his identity he has always been the Son, the one whom God had destined to be enthroned from the foundation of the world (cf. 9:26), who bears God's purpose for humanity (cf. 2:9). Christ's enthronement involves the destiny of the whole creation. It is an 'appointment' that Christ had in the wisdom of God long before his earthly life. In this light, it makes sense for the author to think of Christ as the Son at all points of his existence. One might say, thus, that although Christ is always the Son in terms of his identity (even before his exaltation, as a kind of 'heir apparent'), he can only be said to be 'enthroned' as Son in the inheritance of his royal office when he is exalted to God's right hand.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, one must discount the significance of the Old Testament quotations throughout the rest of the chapter in order to assert that the author was not clearly convinced of Christ's preexistent sonship. He who laid the foundations of the earth and created the heavens will outlast them precisely because, as their source, he existed before them. And as creator of the "eons" he is the source not only of the material universe but also of time itself, and therefore by necessity must himself be uncreated

<sup>34</sup> The word designates "creation as related to time...the universe from eternity to eternity" in distinction from κόσμος, which is "the world as an ordered system." Miller, *Hebrews*, 7. Meier, "Structure and Theology," 178, comments that the plural αἰῶνας may be intended to communicate the same idea of the present age or world expressed by the καιρός in 9:9, as well as the age/world that is to come as is expressed by οἰκουμένη in 2:5.

<sup>35</sup> Meier, "Structure and Theology," 182, points out that in v. 3 the author of Hebrews moves, at least in a temporal sense, *backwards* from the exaltation (ἐκάθισεν) to creation (ἐποίησεν) to Christ's timeless pre-existence (ὡν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης, etc.).

<sup>36</sup> Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, 190-92.

<sup>37</sup> Schenk, "Keeping his Appointment," 99.

and timeless. So instead of seeing current interpretation of Hebrews 1 as being unduly influenced by Nicea and Chalcedon, we need to see rightly how much Nicea and Chalcedon were simply coming to conclusions that Hebrews 1 had already affirmed.<sup>38</sup>

We may ask at what point in time believers of the first century came to understand the implications of the messianic sonship. Is it really true that pre-Christian Jewish theology did not apply the title *Son* to the Messiah, as Kistemaker suggests?<sup>39</sup> Certainly there was no uniformity of belief in the first century any more than there is today or in any other time or place, but there is evidence that during Jesus' ministry and possibly even before, the title "Son of God" was associated with the Messiah. John reports that in the very beginning of Jesus' ministry Andrew went to find Peter to tell him that they had found the Messiah, and the next day their fellow townsman Philip goes to find Nathanael to tell him as well. When Jesus informs Nathanael that he saw him while he was still under the fig tree, out of his sight, Nathanael's response is "You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel," which is to say, the Christ (John 1:40-49). At Jesus' trial the council wanted to know if he claimed to be the Christ, the Son of God (Mark 14:61, Luke 22: 67-70). At his crucifixion he was challenged to come down from the cross if he really were the Son of God (Matt 27: 43), and if he really were the Christ, the king of Israel (Mark 15:32). The assumption that the Christ would be not only the king of Israel but even the Son of God is what Psalm 2 might lead a reader to believe.

B. B. Warfield asserts that in fact the doctrine of a superhuman Messiah was native to Judaism even before the beginning of the Christian era. He agrees with Hermann Gunkel that the Christology of the New Testament was simply the Christology of the pre-Christian Judaism before it.<sup>40</sup> "He who reads the Old Testament, however cursorily, will not escape a sense, however dim, that he is brought into contact in it with a Messiah who is more than human in the fundamental basis of his being, and in whose coming Jehovah visits his people in some more than representative sense."<sup>41</sup> He also points out that the messianic hope was at the heart of Israelite religion throughout the ages, and that the prophets themselves "attribute a divine nature and ascribe divine functions to the Messiah."<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that messianic ideas were necessarily uniform nor that various strands of messianic belief were even held in a coherent and consistent way within anyone's thinking or in the thinking of any group. But the vari-

<sup>38</sup> Meier, "Structure and Theology," 181, says that it is true that Hebrews had not developed the patristic doctrine of the Son's eternal generation, but it was in fact the affirmations of Hebrews that led in time to the question being raised.

<sup>39</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: Wed. G. Van Soest, 1961), 136.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Divine Messiah in the Old Testament," *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (1916): 377.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

ous strands of belief certainly came together and were fulfilled in Christ in a way that, on the one hand, no one was prepared to fully comprehend until after the resurrection, but which on the other hand was consistent with Scripture and not inconsistent with much of Jewish belief and general expectation, with the notable exception of the expectation of deliverance from political and military oppression. While there was no Trinitarian doctrine prior to the resurrection of Christ, the idea that the Christ was the pre-existent Son of God and of divine status himself was not an insurmountable obstacle to the minds of many Jewish people who knew and believed their own Scriptures. As Watts has said, the early Christians claimed that Jesus was the fulfillment of *all* such expectations no matter how diverse.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. THE THEOLOGY OF SONSHIP AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

Our discussion of the issue of Christ's sonship has relevance in the context of Bible translation among minority language groups, particularly those in predominantly Muslim areas. There are some involved in the work of Bible translation who question the legitimacy of translating the phrase υἱός θεοῦ as "Son of God" when working in Muslim contexts due to the fact that the assertion that Jesus is the Son of God is abhorrent to Muslims, who often assume such a statement can only refer to physical procreation and do not even consider the possibility of any other sense of meaning. Over the years Bible translators have learned that if a translated passage communicates little meaning, no meaning, or wrong meaning, the linguist/translator should assume that more work is required and that better wording can and should be found. That assumption is basic to translation practice. However, such an assumption rests on another assumption, which is that comprehension problems are essentially of a linguistic nature; the alternative wording that is sought must convey essentially the same thought in a different way. I would contend, however, that some things are irreducible, and cannot be said another way and still mean the same thing. The problem in the Muslim context is not linguistics, but theology. When Muslims assert that the only sense in which Jesus could be God's Son is the physical sense, and which would occur through natural sexual reproduction, it is an ideological problem and not a linguistic one.

If the problem is essentially an ideological one it would seem that Bible translators would recognize that changes of wording or phraseology are missing the point and would run the risk of serious theological error. However, if a translator, a translation consultant, or even a translation agency is theologically weak on this point they may go on ahead with alternatives that fall far short of the ancient standards established at Nicea and Chalcedon and affirmed by Scripture itself. This appears to be what De Kuiper and Newman have done in their 1977 article in *The Bible Translator*. They assert

<sup>43</sup> Watts, "Psalm 2," 85.

that the gospels give three different interpretations of what it means that Jesus is the Son of God; Mark is concerned about *when* Jesus was adopted as the Son, which was at his baptism, while Matthew and Luke concern themselves with *how* Jesus came to be God's Son through being conceived by the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb. John, they say, sees him as being eternally the Son of God. So far as the content of the term "Son of God" goes, De Kuiper and Newman see it as meaning that Jesus belongs to God, is specially chosen by God, or is a servant of the Lord.<sup>44</sup> It is a "predication, or description of Jesus, the subject." According to De Kuiper and Newman Jesus himself did not require the people of his day to believe in him as the Son of God, since his message was about proclaiming God's rule and not about himself as the Son of God.<sup>45</sup> Consequently they recommend what they call a *functional* translation, using wording such as "God's servant". If this were only a matter of an article written 26 years ago I would not have the concern that I do, but there are translators for whom it is a very current issue. One translator I know recommends using the wording "the man who was also God" for υἱός θεοῦ in Mark 1:1. His reasoning is that Mark is often the first book translated, and he does not want Muslims to read the first verse and then just shut the book because they misconstrue the meaning of "son of God". While I acknowledge that the problem is real and that this may very well happen in Muslim contexts, I believe that we cannot adjust how we translate such an important phrase based on how we expect a first-time non-Christian reader to react. Another veteran translator, who has studied this problem at length and who acknowledges that the Muslim reaction to this doctrine may be a spiritual conflict representing a basic antagonism that rejects Christ and not just a communication problem, suggests translating υἱός θεοῦ in Luke 1:32 and 35 as "the Son who proceeded from the power of God."<sup>46</sup>

In my view there are inherent problems with all these approaches. There is a lot of difference theologically between "the Son of God" and "the man who was also God". "The Son of God" shows a relationship between two persons, and implies something about the status within that relationship. It also implies a status for the Son relative to all other persons since it puts him at the level of the divine. The phrase "the man who was also God" accomplishes the purpose of putting Jesus at the level of the divine, but does not touch on the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. *This relationship is so important that it cannot be dispensed with.* "The Son who proceeded from the power of God" is faithful to what Vos calls the nativistic sense of Jesus' sonship described in Luke 1:32 and 35,<sup>47</sup> and allows room for the inherent relation between the first and second persons of the trinity, but focusing as it does on the

<sup>44</sup> Arie De Kuiper and Barkley M. Newman, Jr. "Jesus, Son of God—A Translation Problem," *The Bible Translator* 28.4 (1977): 433.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 434-35.

<sup>46</sup> Fritz Goerling, "Translation of 'Son of God' into Jula," *Notes on Translation* 4.3 (1990): 7.

<sup>47</sup> Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, 141."

incarnation it does not do justice to Christ's eternal, preexistent sonship, which is more important.

The suggestion by De Kuiper and Newman is equally unacceptable because it says nothing about Jesus' divinity or heavenly origin, nor about the uniqueness and intimacy of his relation to the Father. *I conclude that "Son of God" is irreducible.* Nothing else says as much or even the same thing in so few words, and so far as I can tell, it is the only designation for the second person of the Trinity, with the possible exception of the title "Mighty God" in Isaiah 9, that speaks of him absolutely, that is, in terms that have nothing to do with created beings or his role with relation to creation or created beings. Terms such as Savior, Lord, Prince of Peace, Christ, Messiah, deliverer, judge, King of kings, and virtually all others say something about who he is relative to the human race. Only *Son of God* says who he is and was before all time, and who he would have continued to be had the world never been created. The title *Son* is the most basic title of all because his relation to God is eternal and is the most basic reality of all. It is the one title embracing all the rest.<sup>48</sup> The concept of Christ's sonship is not a metaphor; we could argue that human father-son relationships have been created by God to enable us to understand from experience something of the relationship between the first and second persons of the trinity. If that is true then, in a sense, the human father-son relationship is the metaphor of the divine father-son relationship, which is the real and absolute one.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I believe it is imperative for the church and for Bible translators to recognize the importance of the doctrine that Jesus is the Son of God, both for doctrinal as well as devotional reasons. As the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says, *God has spoken to us through his Son*, and we should pay careful attention to what he has said lest we drift away from it and neglect so great a salvation. Whether or not individuals or people groups react negatively to the concept that Jesus is the Son of God we must still be faithful to accuracy in translation and look to the work of evangelists and caring Christians to convince them over the course of long-term relationships, and not strip away the content of what the first epistle of John tells us is necessary to believe in order to be saved: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ" (3:23). "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God" (4:14-15). "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:12-13).

<sup>48</sup> Meier, "Structure and Theology," 188, cited above, says this regarding the Epistle to the Hebrews but it could also be said to be true of the NT view of Christ in general.