

THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON

Before being immersed, a person should be instructed in “knowledge about the unbegotten God” and “understanding about the only begotten son.” Under this subject, we touch on some of the ideas in Christology—the study of Messiah. This is among the deepest and most mysterious subjects in the Bible, so this lesson will only introduce a few of the topics pertaining to the sonship of Yeshua. The material dives into some deep waters, so don’t feel distressed if it goes over your head at time. It’s enough to get a rough idea of the concepts.

The Son of God

Yeshua regularly referred to himself as “the Son” and to God as “the Father.” It wasn’t uncommon for Jews in his day to describe God as their loving Father. Even to this day, Jewish prayers still address God warmly as “our Father,” and “Father in Heaven.” But there was something unique about the way Yeshua talked. When he addressed God, he called him “Abba,” a term of special endearment. When he talked about himself, he referred to himself as “the Son” that was sent by the Father. After his death and resurrection, his followers began to refer to him as “the Son of God,” and the “only begotten son.”

God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life. (John 3:16)

What do we mean when we say that Yeshua is the Son of God and why is he called “the only begotten Son?” It’s not just because he was born of a virgin. It’s blasphemous to even think that the Almighty fathered him through his mother Miriam. In Greek mythology, the gods routinely impregnate human women who subsequently give birth to demi-gods, but those mythological and idolatrous ideas have nothing to do with the story of Yeshua’s miraculous conception or why he is called the Son of God. So why is he called the Son of God?

Today I have Begotten You

Let’s start with the idea of Messiah. The word “messiah” means “The Anointed One.” It’s directly related to the Hebrew word *Mashiach* and the Greek word *Christos*. That’s where we get the English word “Christ.” In the days of the kings of Israel, a new king was anointed with oil to symbolize that God had chosen him and put his Spirit upon him to lead the people. Every king of Israel was called an anointed one.

God promised that, in the future, the descendants of king David would beget a son who would be anointed by God’s spirit to restore the kingdom of Israel and conquer the whole world. The LORD promised King David, “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me” (2 Samuel 7:14). We call that promised king “the Anointed One,” i.e. the Messiah.

Son of God is a title for the Messiah. The LORD says to the Messiah in Psalm 2, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” (Psalm 2:7). The word “beget” means “to give birth to” or “to bring forth.” In Psalm 2, God says that the Davidic Messiah is called his “son” because he has begotten him.

When Yeshua was immersed in the Jordan River, the voice of God declared him to be the fulfillment of the promise made to David. He said, “You are my son.” With these words, the voice at the Jordan identified Yeshua as the Messiah.

Yeshua asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of living God!” (Matthew 16:16). The two titles were connected in Peter’s mind. Not long after that, Yeshua took three disciples with him up onto a high mountain. They heard the voice of God say, “This is my son! Listen to him.” That revelation dispelled any lingering doubts.

All of these instances point to the connection between Yeshua’s identity as the Messiah and the promise made to King David, “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me” (2 Samuel 7:14). By saying to Yeshua, “You are my son,” the voice at the Jordan River declared, “You are the Messiah.” By saying to the disciples, “This is my son,” the voice on the high mountain declared, “This is the Messiah.”

The Logos Becomes Flesh

But what about the idea that the Messiah is God? How is that supposed to work?

Sometimes people say that Yeshua is fully God and fully man: 100% God and 100% human. Mathematically, that doesn’t work very well. That would make him a 200% being which, by definition, would be two different things, not a single person. But Yeshua is not a math equation, nor is he a recipe calling for equal parts God and equal parts man, stirred together and baked in an oven. The spiritual world doesn’t work according to those rules or simple ideas.

Let’s take a look at how the apostles solved the problem. In the previous chapter, we learned that God is the first-cause and that he created the whole universe through the agency of his Word. The “Word” of God functions as his avatar, so to speak, expressing his being within the confines of the created order. Through his Word he spoke and the world came into being. His Word hovered over the waters of creation and said, “Let there be light.” In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God’s Word appeared in the form of the Angel of the LORD, and in the days of Moses, his Word spoke from inside a burning bush. From on top of Mount Sinai, the Word spoke the ten commandments, declaring, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” The same Word of God came to dwell in the Tabernacle and spoke to Moses from between the wings of Cherubim over the ark of the covenant.

When the time came for God to fulfill his promises to the house of David by bringing forth the Messiah, the Word of God divested itself of glory and clothed itself in a human body. Much as the Word dwelt in the Tabernacle, the Word came to dwell within the human being named Yeshua ben Yosef of Nazareth. The Gospel of John says, “The Word became flesh (a human body), and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory: the glory of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Make no mistake, this is about as close as the apostles ever get to saying, “God became a human being.” Of course, they don’t say it in those words, but the apostle Paul says essentially the same

thing in slightly different language. He says, “In him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).

A Real Human Being

Why didn’t the apostles just come right out and say, “Yeshua is God”? Why beat around the bush? They refer to him as the “Son of God,” the “glory of God,” the “representation” and “image of God,” the “exact imprint” of God, and so forth? Why do they always seem to take one step back from just saying, “Yeshua is God”?

Well for one thing, that’s not a Jewish way of speaking about God. They did not want to imply that God was two different beings, nor did they want to give people the idea that they were teaching polytheism. Besides, that wasn’t what they meant. The human body of Yeshua is not God nor is it the Word of God. When God dwelt inside the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle did not become God.

One might say that Yeshua is God in the flesh, so long as we remember that his flesh is not God. The human body of Yeshua is a real human body. Unlike God, it began at a fixed point in time, conceived and born of a woman. Perhaps this is one reason why he also referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” The term “Son of Man” is an obscure title for the Messiah, but it is also a Hebrew idiom that simply means “human being.” Yeshua was the human being who took up Adam’s job of being the image of God.

Yeshua was not a fake person that only looked human but was actually a deity in disguise. In Greek mythology, the gods occasionally masqueraded as men to fool people, but that’s not what is happening in the gospels. Yeshua was a real person who hungered, thirsted, tired, experienced a full range of human emotions, felt both physical and emotional pain, and suffered temptation. But the living God in the form of the Word dwelt within him and permeated his whole being. The glory of God shone through him.

When it says that the Word “dwelt among us,” the Gospel alludes to how God’s presence dwelt in the Tabernacle and the Temple so that he could “dwell” in the midst of his people. It’s similar with Yeshua of Nazareth. Much as God can be said to dwell in his sanctuary in a unique way, he chose to dwell within a single human being in a unique way. But unlike the Tabernacle or the Temple, Yeshua is a person with his own will, his own inclinations, and his own consciousness. For example, when praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he distinguished between his own will and God’s will. He prayed, “Not my will, but let your will be done” (Luke 22:42). Come to think of it, just by praying to God he was making it clear that he made a distinction between himself and God. Otherwise he would have been praying to himself. The Apostle Paul explains that Yeshua did not “consider equality with God a thing to be seized” (Philippians 2:6).

Divestment

How does that work? How can the Word dwell in Yeshua, yet make room enough for him to keep a distinct will and consciousness of his own?

God's Word dwelt within him much the way your spirit dwells within you. Human beings are not merely physical creatures of flesh and blood and bone. We are more than just mudballs, and more than just monkeys. There is a spiritual spark hidden inside of us that existed before we were conceived, and it will continue to live on after we die. The body is like a suit of clothing that the spirit within us wears.

When the spirit enters the human body at conception and birth, it conceals itself in the person. You wouldn't even know its there. It functions within you on an unconscious level, beneath the surface of your awareness. But it's very much the real you, deep down inside. In order to become you, your spirit first divests itself of its heavenly identity and any memories it had. That's why you don't remember being a spirit before you were born.

It's not exactly the same, but the Word that became flesh in the person of Yeshua did something similar by divesting its identity to indwell a man and live a real human life through Yeshua of Nazareth:

Although he existed in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God a thing to be seized. Instead, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Of what did the Word divest itself? He stripped himself of glory, divesting himself of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence in order to inhabit a human life. This explains why Yeshua would have appeared to anyone who knew him as a normal human being. He did not glow, and he did not have a halo floating over his head. This also explains why he didn't know everything all the time, and how he could have been tempted, and why he achieved merit for his obedience. After all, it wouldn't have been any great accomplishment for the omnipotent and omniscient God to pass temptations and trials, but Yeshua earned merit and God's favor by doing so.

He himself was tempted in everything he suffered, so he is able to help those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:18)

He has been tempted in all things as we are, yet he was without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, he became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation. (Hebrews 5:8-9)

The Suffering of Messiah

Disciples of Yeshua believe that his death on the cross obtained the forgiveness of sins for us. How is that supposed to work? Doesn't it seem strange to believe that the death of one Jewish man, 2000 years ago, could bring us the forgiveness of sins today? Why would the death of anyone bring forgiveness of sins to someone else?

God's Favor

To begin with, Yeshua found favor in God's eyes. He lived a life of complete righteousness in perfect submission to God's will, but he suffered unjustly. The apostles teach, "This finds favor with God, if for the sake of his convictions toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly" (1 Peter 2:19). That's the same way that Yeshua earned God's favor. Now he is able to share that favor with all of his disciples. When we pray to God or ask him for forgiveness for sins, we do so not according to our own merit or righteousness, but in the merit and favor that Yeshua earned with God. We know that we don't deserve God's mercy, but Yeshua does, so we associate ourselves with him. It's as if we say, "I know that I don't deserve your favor or your forgiveness, but please remember your son Yeshua and include me along with him."

The Law of Sin and Death

The Bible also speaks about a principle called "the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). According to this principle, human suffering and death come into the world only as a consequence for sin. If there was no sin in the world, there would be no human suffering or death. We would live in paradise. But this theory raises a serious problem. How do you explain it when innocent people suffer and die? What about when a very righteous person suffers and dies as a martyr? Obviously innocent people, like small children, cannot be said to have suffered and died to pay for their sins. They didn't have any sins. Neither can it be said that the righteous suffer and die for their sins. Surely there are plenty of worse sinners who go unpunished. Where is the fairness?

Judaism explains that when righteous people suffer and die, it comes not as a consequence for their own sins, but for the sins of others. God even uses the suffering and death of the righteous as a way to atone for others who otherwise would not deserve his mercy. According to this idea, an extremely righteous person might suffer for the sins of his whole generation.

The apostles applied this same reasoning to explain Yeshua's suffering. Since he was tempted in all things but without sin, he accrued merit with God. When he suffered and died, it tipped the scales of justice far out of balance. To bring the scales of justice back into balance, his suffering must have been on behalf of the sins of others. This is what the prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah would do:

He bore our griefs, and he carried our sorrows. But we considered him to be plagued, struck by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced through for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him fell the discipline to bring us peace, and by his welts (from scourging) we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Higher than the Angels

In the Bible, angels are also called "sons of God," but the Messiah occupies a station higher than the angels. He is the Son of God on a higher level than they can claim.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son?” (Hebrews 1:5)

The Messiah is called God’s firstborn and only begotten son. But how does that square with the idea that he existed since the beginning of creation? Physically, we know he was begotten through Miriam the wife of Joseph and born in the town of Bethlehem, but spiritually, he was with God in the beginning. He is called “firstborn” because he is God’s agent through which all things came into being, that is, the Word. If God is the first-cause, the Word is the action that initiates the first effect. This is why Yeshua is called “the beginning of God’s creation” (Revelation 3:14) and “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15).

In the days of the Bible, a firstborn son took a double portion of his father’s inheritance. By calling the Messiah the “firstborn,” this implies that the Messiah was “begotten” before the angels were created. Because he is the firstborn over God’s household, the angels must pay homage to him as their superior:

When he brings his firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” (Hebrews 1:6)

The Resurrection of Yeshua

Disciples of Yeshua believe some enormous claims about him. How do we know that these things are true? He claimed to be the Son of God and the Messiah. He claimed to submit to God’s will completely. The apostles claimed that he lived a sinless life, and they claimed that, thanks to the merit and favor he earned with God, his disciples can obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, i.e. the resurrection of the dead and a share in the World to Come. They also claimed that he will come again and bring the Messianic Era to earth.

We believe all of these things on the basis of his resurrection from the dead. If Yeshua was a deceiver, a false prophet, a liar, or even a self-deluded madman, God would not have endorsed his claims by resurrecting him from the dead. The resurrection of Yeshua and the empty tomb that he left behind testify that everything he said is true and valid, and everything his disciples believed and taught about him are also true.

The resurrection of Yeshua endorses all of his Messianic claims and his teachings about the coming kingdom. His resurrection also provides evidence for hope in a future resurrection of the righteous and a share in the world to come. Finally, the resurrection of Yeshua proves that he is the Son of God. In fact, it declares him to be God’s son:

He was physically descended from David, but he was *declared to be the Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. (Romans 1:3-4)

The Children of God

In summary, Yeshua is regarded as the “only begotten son” of God on the basis of three indisputable things. He is the Messiah the son of David, and therefore the heir to the Davidic title “son of God” as it says in Psalm 2, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

He is the Son of God on the basis of the divine Word made flesh. The Word was begotten of the first-cause from the before the beginning as the firstborn “son” over creation, and the Word inhabits and fills him.

Finally, he is declared the “Son of God ... by his resurrection from the dead.” The evidence of the resurrection confirms his claims.

Yeshua invites his followers to join the family as sons and daughters of God too. When we become his disciples, we join his family. He becomes the elder brother, and we become children of his Father. We enter into the family and enjoy the same intimate relationship that the Father and Son share together:

For in the Messiah Yeshua you are all sons (and daughters) of God, through faith.
(Galatians 3:26)

And because you are sons (and daughters), God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, praying, “Abba! Father!” Since you are no longer a slave, but a son, now, as a son (or daughter), you are an heir through God. (Galatians 4:6-7)