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The 'Son of God' in the Gospel of John and Its Relevance for Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Ungaran Rashid¹ and Mark Harlan²

Abstract. The term "son of God" has been a source of confusion and controversy in the history of Christian-Muslim encounter. Christian tradition regards the gospel according to John as the account which most clearly portrays the deity of Christ and points to his being the "son of God" as proof of his divinity and equality with God.

This article presents a Muslim scholar's challenge to this understanding, arguing that "son of God" in John's Gospel refers to an anointed king (messiah) who as heir of the Davidic kingdom has authority to act as God's surrogate on the earth. The equality of the son does not refer to a divine nature but his being God's unique agent possessing full authority from God. It is not a claim to be on par with God or an incarnation of God.

A Christian scholar responds, agreeing with this exegetical emphasis on divinity as referring to Jesus' unique authority as the Christ. However, other nuances of meaning, such as his revelatory relationship to God, must also be considered, especially in tracing developments from John's usage to those in later Christian theology. Questions over the inner nature of God (reflected in Christian Trinitarian theology and Muslim *kalam* debates) are a related, but different topic – yet one in which there is a surprising measure of common ground. Several implications for Muslim-Christian dialogue are offered.

Keywords: God, son of god, Jesus, word, gospel, king, Christ, father, divine, messiah, scriptures, authority, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, theology, agent, human, Christology, wisdom, divinity, sonship, monotheism, incarnation.

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1.1 A Muslim Reading

1.1.1 The Term 'son of God' in the Jewish Scriptures

The term “son of God” is used in the Tanakh and in Jewish tradition. In addition, Jesus, whose name is linked to the epithet “son of God,” was a Jew. Al-Faruqi, a modern Muslim scholar, says, “Jesus was a Jew among Jews. He was brought up under the influence of their spirit, their consciousness, their ethic” (Segal, 2008). Therefore, those who are interested in studying the term “son of God” should delve into Jewish sacred writings and theology, otherwise, they will not understand it correctly. In this paper this researcher examines the term “son of God” from the Jewish Scriptures and theology and its relation to another figure in Jewish community, namely “Messiah.”

To understand Jewish theology, one must begin with the *shema*,³ the central declaration of the Jewish faith (Segal, 2008). The *shema* describes the relationship between God and the Children of Israel. To the Children of Israel, *YHWH* is not only their God, but also their loving Father, King, Judge, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Nevertheless, this does not imply that they know God completely; God is beyond understanding and comprehension. Although the Children of Israel may describe God in anthropomorphic terms, they disagree with the Christian concept of God assuming human form (Trepp, 1967, 5).

Monotheism in early Judaism developed in a polytheistic world. The situation of the early Jewish community, as ascribed by Goldenberg, was one in which the House of Israel was entering the land promised to them by their God. That land, however, was occupied by people who believed

³ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates,” NIV translation. The term LORD in this translation is derived from the Hebrew word *YHWH* who becomes the name of God for the Children of Israel.

they had been given the land by their gods. In this situation it appeared that the God of Israel fought against the gods of the other nations. Furthermore, Goldenberg states that this view was a development towards monotheism (2007, 26–27).

It appears that, on the one hand, the early Jewish community was growing in their understanding of monotheism, while on the other hand, from God's side, monotheism was a statute to be observed and kept in mind at all times by the Israelites.⁴

In Hebrew, the term son (*ben*) means a male offspring of human parents (Harris et al., 2003, 114). In the Jewish scriptures, however, the term is used to express a number of ideas. Firstly, the term is employed to denote one's profession, for example, *ben hasarpi*, literally, son of a goldsmith (Nehemiah 3: 31), meaning goldsmith. Secondly, it is used to show a state or condition, for example, *ben nekar*, son of a foreign country (Genesis 17: 12), meaning foreigner. Thirdly, *ben* is employed to expose a certain character such as in *ben hayil*, son of valor, (1 Samuel 14: 52) meaning brave. Lastly, it is used to explain a certain nature, for example, *ben adam*, son of man (Job 25: 6), which implies being human.

The term “sons of God” (plural) occurs several times in the Jewish Scriptures. This refers to individuals, nations, and angels who belong to God and have a close relationship with God (R. Brown, 2000, 42). The term “son of God” (singular) appears as an appellation from God to the nation Israel, to a king, and to the anointed one (messiah). For example, in Exodus 4:22 God says, “Israel is my firstborn son,” whereas in Psalm 2:7 God speaks to a king saying, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

⁴ This is expressed in different ways such as God is one, God is a jealous God, and no other God. See Deuteronomy 6: 4, Exodus 20: 25, 34: 14; Deuteronomy 4: 24, 5: 9; 6: 15; Joshua 24: 19; Isaiah 45: 14; and Daniel 3: 29. It is further confirmed by the Qur'an, an-Nahl: 36, “For We assuredly sent amongst every People a messenger, (with the Command) ‘Serve Allah, and eschew Evil’: of the people were some whom Allah guided, and some on whom Error became inevitably (established). So, travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth)” (Yusuf Ali Translation).

In Psalm 2 God explicitly calls the king his son, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” Unfortunately, the word begotten in this section creates a problem because it could give the impression that the “son of God” is the offspring of God or even an incarnation of God as seen in the beliefs of the surrounding nations, such as Babylon and Canaan (Mowinckel, 1954, 23). Adam Clarke in his commentary states that this refers to a wonderful and supernatural birth (Clarke, n.d.). Clarke asserts that this verse describes the Incarnation of God. To the contrary, the Interpreter's Bible states that the word “begotten” in this section should be understood as the legal process of adoption which describes a special relationship between the king and his Lord (Buttrick, 1952, 25), a position supported by Mowinckel who explains that absent from Israel was any notion of a king being divine in relation to Yahweh. The phrase “You are my son; I have begotten you today” is only an adoption formula (1954, 78).

As mentioned above, this Psalm has similarities with the Egyptian tradition of viewing the king as the “son of God.” The same formula “You are my son, today I have begotten you” is found in an inscription at the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut (Collins & Collins, 2008, 13). Seeing the similarity, there is a possibility that the ritual appointment of the king in the kingdom of Israel or Judah was influenced by Egyptian ideas of kingship, at least from the understanding that the king is expressed as the son of god, or even *elohim* (a god) (Collins & Collins, 2008, 14–15).

Another passage in the Jewish Scriptures that directly links the king to being God's son is 2 Samuel 7: 14. This verse describes God acting as a father to the king, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.” In this passage God does not use the word “begotten” in stating his relationship with the “son of God,” but reveals the nature of the relationship is one in which God will punish him if the “son” diverges from the straight path. Therefore, the difference between 2 Samuel 7:

14 and Psalm 2:7 is that the Psalm shows the relationship between God and the “son of God” as a process of adoption, whereas 2 Samuel 7 shows the relationship between the two as a covenant between God and David’s descendants.⁵

God's covenant in 2 Samuel 7:14-15 is repeated in 1 Chronicles 17:13, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor.”

In conclusion, the term “son of God” in Jewish understanding is God’s appellation to whomever he loves and is primarily addressed to the anointed king (messiah) to show that this king has a special relationship with God, but certainly not parity with God. Although the king received a divine title, this did not mean the king had a divine nature. The divine title indicated that the king was authorized to act as God’s surrogate on the earth (Collins & Collins, 2008, 22). In addition, it indicated that God was always with him. Thus, in Jewish understanding there is no perception, or at least agreement, that the ‘son of God’ is a part of God or an incarnation of God.

1.1.2 Jesus as the ‘son of God’ according to the Gospel of John

As mentioned above, in the Tanakh the term “son of God” referred to the nation and an anointed (messiah) king. On the other hand, in Christianity, “son of God” refers to Jesus, the Christ, God who became human. Christians get this understanding from their New Testament. However, as we delve into the writings of the New Testament differences with regard to the term seem to surface. The researcher will look at one of these differences, the use of “son of God” in the Gospel of John.

⁵ Similarly, in first century Rome, it was through “adoption” that the next emperor was selected.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which present Jesus as a person focused on preaching about God and his kingdom, the Gospel of John presents Jesus focused upon himself (Tuckett, 2001, 151). Further, terms that are quite prominent in the Synoptic Gospels, like “kingdom of God,” rarely surface in John, occurring only twice. Conversely, terms which surface often in John, such as “eternal life” which appears seventeen times, is used only three times each by Matthew and Luke and twice by Mark. Noticing these differences, Clement of Alexandria commented that John wrote a spiritual Gospel. The Gospel of John is, therefore, accepted as containing a profound theological portrait of Jesus (Stanton, 1989, 108).

Furthermore, the description of Jesus in John’s Gospel is very different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus is described as if he is God and possibly as equal to God. For example, in the prologue the author explains that the word (Jesus) was not just with God from the beginning but was “God” (1:1). Five chapters later, the author records the view of the Jews, with their claim that Jesus was making himself equal with God (5: 18); and towards the end of his writing, the author tells the story of Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples who confessed Jesus as “my lord and my god” (20: 28). These three references cause a few questions to arise when one compares John with the Synoptics: Is it true that Jesus, in the Gospel of John, claimed to be God? Does the author introduce Jesus as God rather than the “son of God”? Or does the author understand the term “son of God” as a synonym to king and Christ as written in the latter part of the Gospel: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31)?

In the Gospel of John, the terms “(the) son,” “the son of God,” “the Only Son,” or “God’s Son” is written twenty-eight times in twenty-four verses. Of the twenty-eight times, only five times is it used by others to refer to Jesus – namely, John the Baptist (1: 34), Nathanael (1: 49),

Martha (11: 27), Jews accusing Jesus of using the term (19: 7), and the author (20: 31), while all the other times it is utilized by Jesus, either to show his relationship with God or as his prayer to God. This researcher will not discuss all of these passages, but only those that are important for understanding the meaning of the ‘son of God’ in this Gospel.

The term “the son of God” was uttered for the first time by John the Baptist in 1: 34, “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” John said this in a conversation with some of the priests and Levites who asked him, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am not the Christ.” The next day when he saw Jesus, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1: 29). Explaining further, John eventually declared that Jesus is the son of God (as quoted above). The conversation strongly implies that the Christ was not John, but the “son of God” - in other words, Jesus. This shows that “son of God” is equivalent to “anointed” (messiah, Christ in Greek) the one who is designated as heir from the royal Davidic line (Collins & Collins, 2008, 181).⁶

The epithet “the son of God” was also used in 1:49 by Nathanael who declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” This was Nathanael’s response to Jesus stating that he already knew him, even though they had never met before. Although Nathanael did not use “Christ” to refer to Jesus here, he used two synonymous titles; hence, Nathanael was implicitly confessing that Jesus was the Christ. For John as the author, this conversation revealed the identity of Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic expectation (Fitzmyer, 2007, 135-36).

Two passages in the Gospel of John which explicitly indicate that “son of God” is synonymous with Christ are the author’s statement of his purpose in writing this Gospel (20:31, mentioned previously) and Martha’s response to Jesus’ declaring himself to be the resurrection

⁶ After David was “anointed” by the prophet Samuel, years passed before he actually ascended the throne.

and the life, when she confessed, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (11: 27). The juxtaposition of the term “son of God,” with Christ/Messiah in the two passages implies that “son of God” is used for the Messiah in an adaptation of the traditional royal epithet found in Ps 2: 7 and 2 Samuel 7: 12-16 (Collins & Collins, 2008, 181). By saying Jesus is the Messiah, Martha asserted her dignity as an anointed child who had received the salvation of God (Brodie, 1811, 394).

Furthermore, Jesus’ statement that he is the Son (of God), as stated in 5:18-20 is one of the most important aspects to examine whether the “son of God” is equal to God or not.

For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these.”

One important question raised from these verses is, in what sense is the “son of God” equal to God? It seems that the equality between the “son of God” and God in this respect should be seen from the perspective of the “sender” and the “sent” or the “authority” and “agent.” Indeed the sent or agent has full authority to execute a task based on the command of the sender; however, if the sender does not give any order to the agent, then the agent must not/cannot do anything on his own desire (Witherington, 1995, 140). So, the equality between the “son of God” with God in this sense is that the authority held by the “son of God” is equal to the authority owned by God since God has given the authority to the Son.⁷ If God does not give any order to the son, then in this regard, the son does not have any equality with God because he does not possess the authority

⁷ As in the following illustration: An ambassador from a certain country has equal authority and position to the president of that country at the time he brings a message from his president to another country. When he is not bringing a particular message from his president, the position of the ambassador is actually lower than that of his president, since he is an assistant to the president.

(Witherington, 1995). This is emphasized by Jesus when he says “the Son can do nothing by himself.” Thus, it seems that John tells the audience that Jesus presented himself as God’s unique agent who had full authority from God (Witherington, 1995, 141).

Though the agency of Jesus is not mentioned explicitly in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ testimony in 13:16 demonstrates it: “I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent him.” The word *apostolos* in the Greek tradition was not solely used in religious terms, but also employed in general to mean “an agent” (Witherington, 1995). In conclusion, this study has sought to demonstrate that the Gospel of John refers to Jesus as the “son of God” in keeping with the term’s meaning in the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus is the anointed king (messiah) who in a special relationship with God acts as his agent with the full authority of God. However, the term ‘son of God’ does not carry the connotation that he himself is God.⁸

1.2 A Christian Response

Rashid carefully examines the Gospel of John’s references to Jesus as the “son of God” in light of the term’s usage in the Jewish Scriptures. He concludes that it is synonymous with Messiah/Christ, God’s anointed king and agent who is authorized to exercise divine authority. To

⁸ Many Christian theologians rely on other New Testament scriptures (e.g., Hebrews 1 and Colossians 1) in holding that Jesus the Messiah is the personification of deity (e.g., Bauckham, 2009). However, others have understood those same passages somewhat differently. Nonetheless, our discussion here is bounded by a Jewish understanding of the meaning of “son of God” in the gospel of John.⁹ On the other hand, Boyarin observes that Christians commonly understand the phrase “son of Man” as a reference to Jesus’ human nature, whereas in light of Daniel 7, it ultimately points to a heavenly or divine figure (who resembles a human) (2012, 25–26). Jewish traditions developed after Daniel and before the Gospels that combined the hope of a king descended from David ruling over Israel with Daniel’s “Son of Man” who would be given dominion over the world. This divine/human redeemer was later called Messiah. Jewish views on nature of the humanity and divinity of this son of Man varied widely in the period before Christ (2012, 31–34). Yet Boyarin holds that the Gospel only makes sense if both Jews and Jesus held that the Messiah was a “divine man.” While we may interpret the nature of divinity as either “functional” or “ontological, Boyarin explains, “It is that former sense to which I refer throughout this book, as I believe that the very distinction between ‘functional’ and ‘ontological’ is a product of later Greek reflection on the Gospels” (2012, 55). This view is akin to Rashid’s emphasis on a representative agent carrying divine authority or his fulfilling divine activities.

the surprise of the average Christian, his analysis is essentially correct. The eminent Jewish scholar, Daniel Boyarin, observes that most Christians think that “son of God” indicates Jesus’ divinity. However, he shows that the title actually refers to a human Messiah, king of Israel.⁹

If this is the case, then Rashid’s study leads to the question: Are not Christians then misinterpreting the term “son of God” as an indication that Jesus Christ is equal in deity with God as the second person of the Trinity? I will endeavour to provide support for Rashid’s thesis but examine other aspects of divinity as it relates to Jesus Christ and trace developments from John’s usage to those in later Christian theology. Christians have various views on these issues, so my views do not represent the views of all other Christians.

1.2.1 “God” and “son of God” in the Jewish Scriptures

First, additional discussion of Jewish monotheism may be instructive. Modern Jews, Christians and Muslims consider themselves to be monotheists, by which they mean that there is only one deity and that all other so-called gods are idols or imagined, angelic or demonic beings. However, many scholars affirm that the early Hebrews were not monotheists in the same way as moderns. Rather they were henotheists – their worship was monolatrous, offered to a single, supreme god while not denying the existence or possible existence of other “gods” (*elohim*). Hence, by reciting the Shema, Jews proclaimed the LORD (YHWH) as supreme above all other

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supernatural beings and they were offering their worship and allegiance exclusively to him (cf., Heiser, 2015).

In addition, we must recognize the unusual semantic range of this Hebrew word *elohim*. It referred to Israel's deity (typically translated as God with upper case g), to lower supernatural beings and deities, whether good or evil (translated as god or gods with lower case g), as well as to humans, prophets, princes, rulers and kings. All were named *elohim* and *bene Elohim* ("sons of God"). Thus, Abraham (Gen. 23:6, usually translated as "mighty prince"), Moses before Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1), judges (Exod. 22:8-9; 1 Sam 2:25), the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13-14 appearing to the witch of Endor), kings and rulers (Ps. 138:1; 95:3; 82:6) are all called *elohim* in the Hebrew scriptures. Rashid correctly points out that calling the king *elohim* does not suggest that he has a divine nature. Rather, he is *elohim* functionally, ruling as God's representative with his authority. We see this in 1 Chron. 29:20 where after David commands all Israel to praise the LORD, they bow down to the LORD *and the king* (David's son, Solomon) who at his second coronation is seated on the throne of the LORD (v. 23). But the sacrifices were offered only to the LORD (v. 21).

Furthermore, Jews believed that the supreme God alone was creator of heaven and earth and that he had chosen Israel for a special purpose by identifying them as his people. The God of the Hebrews, though transcendent, maintained an intimate and active involvement with creation. N.T. Wright presents five primary ways that the Hebrews expressed God's activity in the world without compromising his transcendence: (1) God's *Spirit* hovering over the waters, (2) his *Word* generating life, (3) his *Law* directing his people; (4) his *Presence* (or *Glory*) dwelling among them (in the pillar of fire and cloud, in the tabernacle and then the temple); and (5) his *Wisdom* through which he created everything (Proverbs 1-8). The early Jewish followers of Jesus utilized

these terms and images to express the relationship of Jesus and the Spirit to God, as in John's prologue: "In the beginning was the *Word*, the *Word* was with God and the *Word* was God...all things were created by him (1:4); The *Word* became flesh, and *tabernacled* in our midst; we saw his *Glory*, *Glory* as of God's one and only" (1:14); The *Law* was given through Moses, but grace & truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17)" (Wright, 1998). They began to use the term *Son of God* as one more description of God's inimitable activity in and through Jesus the Messiah. It became, a new way to express "the one God present, personal, active, saving, and rescuing, while still being able to speak of the one God sovereign, creating, sustaining, sending, and remaining beyond" (Wright, 1998).

Regarding 2 Samuel 7, the Jewish scriptures prophesy the fulfilment of both Davidic promises (of a coming individual son of God) and new exodus promises (of a people who would be the corporate divine son¹⁰). The New Testament then portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of the former and his followers as the latter (those who follow Jesus become sons of God, spiritual siblings of their elder brother) (Wright, 2019).

1.2.2 Jesus as the 'son of God' in the Gospel of John

Rashid states that in "Christianity, the term 'son of God,' refers to Jesus, the Christ, God who became human." This is true of many Christians; however, others would express the incarnation with greater nuance. The gospel of John declares that in the beginning the Word of God was "with" God (*ho theos*, a noun with the definite article) and "was" God (*theos*), a predicate (1:1). The Word was distinct from "the God" – yet still called God. Then the Word of God (not "the God," became "flesh." God's Word came not as a verbal message, but as a human

¹⁰ The image of corporate sonship seems to arise from the nation of Israel becoming God's "firstborn" son (Exod. 4:22-24) when he reaches into the nation (womb) of Egypt and "delivers" his son by taking "a nation from within a nation" (Deut. 4:34); also Exod. 6:6-7) (Feinberg, personal communication, March 1, 2022).

being, Jesus the Messiah who revealed the glory of God like an only son (1:14).¹¹ Moreover, when the New Testament applies *theos* to Jesus, it is primarily in the context of his roles – e.g., in John, as creative Word (1:2-3), revealer of God (1:18), and Lord (20:28). Hence, more probably, the point is to indicate that God’s actions have been accomplished through his agency (2013, 91).

Church councils debated v. 1 within the framework of Greek philosophy. But Hebrew worldview, observes Krauss, views God’s Word as “a dynamic act and not a divine being.” Jewish writings associate Wisdom with Law and consider it “a preexistent hypostasis, or personification and it was even called the ‘daughter of God.’” Read Hebraically (cf. Proverbs 8:22), John 1:1-14 says that as God’s Wisdom (daughter) was expressed in the Law of Moses, so his Word (son) was “embodied” in Jesus. “The Word [rather than Wisdom] was in the beginning with God ... it was truly the expression of God himself . . . [what] we see in Jesus already existed in the creation. It is the same creative, salvific word spoken at the beginning” (Kraus, 1990, 99–101).

Rashid correctly observes that statements in John equating Jesus with God are not indicating identity of being, but rather his being invested with God’s authority. James McGrath agrees, observing that in ancient Jewish rabbinic literature “the one sent is like the one who sent him.” God’s duly appointed agent carried full authority in representing Him. Hence, God’s agent could at times share in the “divine identity.” He could “not only carry out divine functions, but also be depicted in divine language, sit on God’s throne or alongside God, and even bear the divine name” (2010, 14). Related to this, was the use of “son of God” in Roman imperial

¹¹ The incarnation personifies the promise of the Davidic covenant that David would never lack a descendent to sit on his throne (2 Sam 7:12-16). Jeffrey Feinberg’s study of *’ēmet* (2020) demonstrates that *hesed wē ’ēmet* (lovingkindness and truth) is the universal principle that operates exclusively in covenant relationships, including God’s oath to David which is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Psalm 110).

theology. Michael Peppard asserts, “Jesus’s acclaimed status as ‘son of god’ was a direct challenge to the emperor’s claim to that title” (this why Pilate acquiesced to Jewish demands for his execution) (2019, 147).

John’s Gospel includes another important meaning of “son of God.” Krauss states, “Jesus’ sonship is to be understood as a relation of complete reliance on and obedience to the Father” (1992, 88). Likewise, Dodd affirms, “Entire obedience to the Father is the inseparable condition of the mission of the Son” (4:34) (1963, 254–257) which in turn reveals the words and works of God. The focus on this obedience, says Dunn, is not subordination, but “a way of expressing the authority and validity of the Son’s revelation of the Father, the continuity between the Father and the Son (5.17; 10.28-9, 58; 14.10)” (1996, xxvii). Carson adds,

Although Son of God can serve as a rough synonym for “Messiah,” it is enriched by the unique manner in which Jesus as God’s Son relates to his Father. He is functionally subordinate to him, and does only those things that the Father gives him to say and do, but he does *everything* that the Father does, since the Father shows him everything that he himself does. The perfection of Jesus’ obedience and the unqualified nature of his dependence thereby become the loci in which Jesus discloses nothing less than the words and deeds of God (*italics his*) (1991, 96).

This provides insight into Thomas’ declaration, “my Lord and my God” (20:28). In non-Christian Jewish literature, the application of divine titles to God’s agents was not controversial and the same is true of later Jewish-Christian writings. Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 2:42 states: “The name God is applied in three ways: either because he to whom it is given is truly God, or because he is the servant of him who is truly; or for the honor of the sender, that his authority may be full, he that is sent is called by the name of him who sends” (cited in McGrath, 2010, 67). Thus, Thomas’ declaration of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, God’s ultimate agent, needs to be understood according to the Jewish monotheism of his time. Additionally, “Lord and

God” was used to refer to the emperor; what was falsely claimed for the emperor was legitimately true of Jesus of God’s Messiah (Kraus, 1990, 83).

Similarly, theologian Colin Brown’s analysis “the title ‘Son of God’ is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead” (1991, 88). He agrees with Rashid that “son of God” in the Gospels does not “mean that he himself is God.”

Indeed, to be a “Son of God” one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God’s son ... the term “Son of God” ultimately converges on the term “image of God,” which is understood as God’s representative, the one in whom God’s Spirit dwells, and who is given stewardship and authority to act on God’s behalf (1991, 88).

N.T. Wright states that during Second Temple times, “‘son of God’ functioned as a messianic title, it did not carry in and of itself the overtones of “divinity” that later Christian theology would hear in it (2015, 107). The question of whether or not he was same being as God was simply not in view:

The early Christians had quietly but definitely discovered that they could say what they felt obliged to say about Jesus (and the Spirit) by telling the Jewish story of God, Israel and the world, in the Jewish language of Spirit, Word, Torah, Presence/Glory, Wisdom, and now Messiah/Son.... It is as though they discovered Jesus within the Jewish monotheistic categories they already had. The categories seemed to have been made for him. They fitted him like a glove (Wright, 1998).

Likewise, Raymond Brown discerns, “It would be the work of later theologians to take this gospel material pertaining to the mission of the Son ad extra and draw from it a theology of the inner life of the Trinity” (1966, 407). This occurred as the gospel expanded beyond the Jewish world to the language, philosophic culture and worldview of the Greek world where Christian theologians approached the scriptures with different questions and concerns. In the Hellenistic world, followers of Christ employed concepts and categories from Greek philosophy,

such as “nature,” “substance,” “hypostasis” (“person”) to understand the inner being of God in relationship to Jesus and the Spirit of God. Unlike Semitic believers, they could not but read the term “son of God” through the lens of philosophy. Hellenistic Jews perceived the Word (of God) in terms of the Greek word *logos* and its metaphysical associations (Bruce, 1954, 304). Philo spoke of the *logos* as God’s “firstborn Word” and “firstborn Son.”¹² Athanasius called the Word the “Son” who is the “offspring of the Father,” referring “to the very first utterance of God’s creative Word” (Cardoza, 2013, 457). Greek Christians, like Justin Martyr, understood *logos* as “reason” which guided the Greek philosophers (Bruce, 1954, 305).

Christian thinking about the divinity of Christ then developed in connection with his identity as the Word of God (by which all things were created (Genesis 1; John 1:1, 3) and the Wisdom of God (with which God created (Proverbs 3:19-20). As noted, the Word and Wisdom of God were already called the Son of God in a metaphysical sense. Cardoza observes, “Because they believed that Jesus is he whom the Word of God *became*, Jewish followers of Jesus began to speak about him in ways they would formerly only speak about God’s Word.”(2013, 457). For example, the epistle to the Hebrews (1: 8-9) merged the Son as Divine Wisdom (Heb 1: 6-7) with the royal Messianic son of God from David’s line (Ps. 2:7, 2 Sam. 7:14) (Bateman, 1995, 26–27).

Similarly, the Arabic expression *bint al-shafa* (“daughter of the lips”) personifies what comes out of the mouth as the speaker’s offspring, originating from him and revealing him. In Christian theology God’s Word originates in and from him eternally as his Son (versus daughter). Thus, for four centuries, Christians referred to Jesus as the Word (*logos*) but later used Son of God in place of Word of God (R. Brown, 2000, 49) This replacement has been so

¹² For an argument of mere appropriation of the language of Hellenistic philosophy, not assimilation by it, see (Bauckham, 2009, 30–31)

complete that many Christians reading that Jesus is the son of God, see it as referring to his divinity, unaware of any reference to the anointed king of David's line.

James Dunn explains that the meaning of "Son of God" in John's Gospel is not the same as in Christian creeds (e.g., the Nicene Creed); rather it expresses "Word Christology":

It was only at Nicea that the hitherto dominant Logos-Christology gave way to the dominance of Son of God language. With Logos-Christology the emphasis is essentially the same as that in John's Gospel – on the *continuity* between Father and the Son, since the Son is the Word, the self-expression of God.... an emphasis on Christ as the Son, independent of that earlier Logos Christology, can easily become in effect an expression of the very bithenism or tritheism of which Judaism and Islam accuse Christianity. ... If the credal Son of God language is not understood as an expression of Logos-Christology it is misunderstood (1996, xxxi).

Christians commonly see these later developed conceptions as the meaning of "son of God" when they read the Bible. But Colin Brown warns against taking statements about the Son and his relationship with the Father as expressions of relationships within the Trinity. Instead, they speak about "Jesus' relationship with the Father on earth." We must not read John 1:1 as "In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son* was with God, and the Son was God" (2000, 89).

Krauss maintains that passages such as John 17:5, 21, 24 speak of "intimate communion rather than substantial union" (1990, 81); the eight signs in John that validate Jesus as God's Son "do not glorify Jesus as a supernatural being; rather they glorify God his Father . . . and establish the genuineness of his relationship to that one" (1990, 87–88). Nor do statements of Jesus' oneness with God (John 10:30, 38) refer to essential equality with God, for the same language is applied to believers (14:20: "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" and 17:21: "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me"). As Dodd observes, "At every point the unity of the Father and Son is reproduced in the unity of Christ and believers. ... The triangle of relations is complete: the Father, the Son, and the disciples dwell in

one another by virtue of a love which is the very life and the activity of God” (1963, 195–196).

This is a primary aspect of Jesus’ sonship, as Bauckham states, “Jesus understood the Fatherhood of God as the eschatological relationship of God to men” and “It is the imperative of his filial mission (and therefore essential to his sonship) to mediate to others his own filial relation to God. His sonship means this” (1978, 248, 259.)

In conclusion, although many Christians derive their belief in the deity of Christ from John’s Gospel, this study has argued that his being the “son of God” is not the proof that he shares the divine nature or essence, nor is it necessarily a reference to the second person of the Trinity. This is evident in the three centuries before Nicaea, whereby diverse interpretations of the phrase, though hotly contested by some, did not disqualify Adoptionists and Arians from membership in the spiritual body of Christ. Credal formulations like Nicaea were the product of theologizing by monotheists who did not share the worldview of first century Jews and Christians. McGrath insists that development of trinitarian thinking indicates neither proof of faithfulness to nor departure from the earlier theological heritage. Instead, it is an evidence of life. A religious tradition must adapt in order to manifest its life. He maintains that the idea of the Trinity was a “spectacularly helpful and inspiring development” that helps to explain how God’s nature is both eternal and one of love. But this was not part of either first century Judaism or Christianity (2010, 101).

Yet this does not mean that erect an insurmountable barrier between Christian and Islamic thinking about God. Some Muslim scholars see the Qur’an as interpreting the Bible in ways that may be compatible with such views (e.g., Galadari, 2016). Moreover, Christian Trinitarian theology actually has a great deal in common with Islamic scholastic discussion of God (*kalam*). This is an immense issue that is beyond the scope of our article, so I refer readers to Joseph Cumming’s recent study (2020) which found a variety of views among Muslims and

Christians over the centuries. Notwithstanding, Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars have observed much commonality between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and Islamic discussion of the *sifāt al-dhāt* (“qualities of the divine Essence”). Some see no difference between them; most see them as not identical, but with smaller differences than is commonly thought (Cumming, 2020, iii). Another observer may be near the mark when he asserts, “the only difference between the Christian doctrine and the orthodox Muslim one is that Christians call these distinct persons or things God, while Muslims refuse to call God's distinct attributes by that name” (Kaster, 2001).

1.3. Implications

We believe our joint study provides a model for constructive dialog and offer these implications.

First, sacred scriptures are not the possession of any one religion, but our reading of scripture is colored by the teachings of our religious traditions. Others will read scripture through different lenses, sometimes questioning our community’s interpretations. Rashid’s respectful engagement with John’s Gospel enables Muslims to understand that the pagan notion of biological procreation is not what the term “son of God” means. The term does not contradict Muslim belief regarding Jesus' messiahship; it means that he is al-Masih sent by God.

Second, appropriate dialog can benefit both faith communities. Harlan embraces Rashid’s critique and evaluates his Christian tradition, learning, evaluating, explaining, defending and correcting it as appropriate.

Third, we need not rebuff scriptures because we dislike another community’s doctrines that arise from their interpretations of those scriptures. Jews and Christians revere and read the same Tanakh/Old Testament yet diverge in their interpretations in important areas. Jewish

interpretations which conflict with Christian teaching do not compel Christians to shun the Hebrew scriptures. Unfortunately, most Muslims ignore or reject the Bible. Yet according to Abdullah Saeed: “The wholesale dismissive attitude held by many Muslims in the modern period towards the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity does not seem have the support of either the Qur'an or the major figures of *tafsir*. ” He declares, “If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qur'an has shown them at the time should be retained even today”(Saeed, 2002, 434–435). But such reverence does not require Muslims to accept all Jewish and Christian interpretations of the scriptures.

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