

What Does the Hebrew Word *bēn* Mean?

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Introduction

The Hebrew word *bēn* means "son." But it is important to have a right concept of sonship because Jesus, especially in the gospel of John, is called the "Son of God." What does this mean? At issue is our ability to deal with a very important historical controversy surrounding the nature of Christ.

I emphasize the importance of having a Hebrew rather than Greek point of view in regard to this subject because the heresy of Arius, which deprives Christ of full equality with the Father, follows precisely from a failure to do this. If we start with a Greek concept of sonship, the logic of Arius is unanswerable. When we start with the corresponding Hebrew concept, Arius' otherwise devastating argument loses its force.

The Problem

In the synoptic gospels Jesus nowhere calls Himself the "Son of God." Others do, and He accepts this, but He does not. The preferred term is "Son of man." The gospel of John is widely different from the synoptics on this point. Although John is at pains to emphasize Christ's full humanity in his epistles ("Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" [1 John 4:2]), he begins his gospel by saying, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (1:34). His narrative ends as it begins, "But these [miraculous signs which are written in this book] 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).

There is a question whether John is making two points here or one. When he says, "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:14) and "Jesus Christ came in the flesh" (1 John 4:2), his intent is clear. He is asserting the full humanity of Christ. But when he then calls Jesus the "Son of God" (or simply "the Son") throughout both sources, is he asserting His deity or His humanity? I submit that John is making two different points about the nature of Christ in the above passages and is not merely saying the same thing twice. When John uses the term "Son of God" he is insisting on Christ's full divinity and equality with God, just as in his epistles he insists on Christ's full humanity and equality with us. John had a well balanced Christology.

The Greek word used by John and other New Testament writers to describe Jesus as the "Son of God" is *huios*.¹ Surprisingly, Arius, who lived and taught in Alexandria during the fourth century, made this same word his basis for taking the opposite position, that if Jesus is the "Son" of God He is therefore different from God. Being different from God He cannot also be fully equal with God, otherwise there would be two Gods. And since Jesus is God's "Son," and God "has become" Jesus' Father (Ps 2:7; Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5), it must follow that Jesus did not always exist: *kai ouk ēn prin genētai* "and before He was begotten He was not." The logic of

this argument is so clear. How can we answer it? And how can two conclusions so far removed from each other be drawn from the same word?

The Solution

While John was an Israelite of the Israelites, Arius was steeped in Greek philosophical thought. There had been a long tradition of subordinationism in Christian theology already before his time, which his own work superficially resembles, but the person who exercised the greatest influence on Arius was not a Christian thinker at all but the Platonic philosopher Plotinus.² Here is the crucial difference between Arius and John. John had a Hebrew concept of sonship and Arius had a Greek concept. Arius cannot be refuted in terms of his own premises. It is not useful to try. Instead we must choose other premises.

Hebrew *bēn* does not always mean
"male child"

In Hebrew the word *bēn* can of course be used to describe a male child in relation to his biological father or mother. But it is also frequently used to express a relationship based on shared attributes. The difference could be seen as a contrast in temporal emphasis. The idea of biological descent focuses on where a person came from--in the past. The concept of shared attributes focuses on the characteristics that a person has now--in the present.

The lexicons disagree on exactly what categories to use when dividing up the Old Testament's uses of Hebrew *bēn*. Taking only two examples, the standard lexicon of Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB) offers nine categories³ and that of Koehler-Baumgartner (KB) offers eleven.⁴ The categories differ in significance as well as number. See tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Categories of Brown, Driver, Briggs

Num	Description	KB
1	Son	1
2	Children	
3	Youth, young men	
4	Young of animals	
5	Of plant shoots	
6	Figuratively of lifeless things	
7	Member of a guild, order or class	6
8	Followed by word of quality, characteristic, etc.	7
9	Of age	8

Table 2
Categories of Koehler-Baumgartner

Num	Description	BDB
1	Son	1
2	Grandson	
3	Term of familiar address	
4	Single individual	
5	Member of a people, tribe	
6	Member of a professional society	7
7	Pertaining to a mood or fate	8
8	Belonging to a given stage of life (age)	9
9	Disdainfully (son of X rather than name)	
10	Metaphorically (arrows = sons of the quiver)	
11	Son(s) of (= devoted to) God, divine being	

That the two sources should disagree to so large an extent on the meanings they isolate for discussion is instructive. In fact categories are seldom air tight. A word can belong to one say 80 per cent and to another 20 per cent (or 60/40, or 90/10).⁵ This is a fact about human language and not a weakness on the part of those who study it.⁶ Below I combine the classifications of Brown, Driver, Briggs and Koehler-Baumgartner and add some categories of my own. See table 3.

Table 3
Categories of Brown, Driver, Briggs
and Koehler-Baumgartner

Num	Description	BDB	KB
Biological Relationship			
1	Son, sons	1	1
2	Grandson (more often "son's son")		2
3	Child, children	2	
Nonbiological Relationship			
4	Showing fatherly attitude		3
5	Omit name, showing disdainful attitude		9
No Relationship			
6	Member of a people, tribe	7a	5
7	Member of a professional society	7a	6
8	Youth, young men (pl.)	3	
9	Single individual		4
10	Component of a name		
Idiomatic Meaning			
11	Quality, characteristic / mood or fate	8	7
12	Son of (=devoted to) God, divine being		11
13	Son of man (sg.)/children of men (pl.), other		
14	Age, stage of life	9	8
Extended Meaning			
15	Young of animals	4, 7b	
16	Of plant shoots	5	
17	Of lifeless things	6	10

One person's attitude toward another. Of special interest in table 3 are lines 4, 5, 7, 11, and 12. Referring to a person as one's son shows a fatherly attitude, as in 1 Sam 26:17, where "Saul recognized David's voice and said, 'Is that your voice, David my son?'" David's father was of course Jesse and not Saul. The passage says nothing that would contradict this. On the other hand, referring to a person as his father's son rather than using his own name can show a disdainful attitude.⁷ Thus, when David sent some of his men to Nabal asking for supplies,

(10) Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. (11) Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" (1 Sam 25:10-11).

The first example above illustrates line 4 in table 3, the second example illustrates line 5. Line 7 is illustrated by the expression "sons of the prophets," in 2 Kings and elsewhere. Membership in that group was not based on having a father who was a prophet but on being a prophet oneself. Thus, where KJV has "sons of the prophets" in 2 Kgs 2:3 ("And the sons of the prophets that were in Beth-el came forth to Elisha,..."), NIV translates "company of the prophets" ("The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha..."). In the same way that "sons of the prophets" means prophets, "sons (or children) of strangers" refers to persons who are themselves strangers. While KJV has "children of the strangers" in Lev 25:45, NIV has "temporary residents." Thus, the analogy of sonship can be used to show membership in a professional

group or class (line 7). On this analogy group membership is implicitly compared with family membership.

Individual characteristics. There are a number of cases, of more immediate interest here, where the idea of sonship is used to describe a person's attributes (line 11). In the following examples I use "son of" as a citation form but "child" is equivalent to "son" in these Old Testament examples and either form can be singular or plural. See table 4.

Table 4
Idioms That Describe Attributes

Literal Gloss	Idiomatic Meaning	Example
Son of Belial	Evil man	Deut 13:13
Son of bravery	Brave man	1 Sam 14:52
Son of death	Man worthy to die	1 Sam 20:31
Son of pledges	Hostage	2 Kgs 14:14
Son of rebellion	Rebel	Num 17:10
Son of strength	Strong man	2 Kgs 2:16
Son of stripes	Man worthy to be beaten	Deut 25:2
Son of wickedness	Wicked man	2 Sam 1:34

One example of the expression "son of Belial" is especially noteworthy: "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord" (1 Sam 2:12, KJV). They were sons of Eli because Eli was their father; they were sons of Belial because they would not acknowledge the Lord.

A person's relationship toward God. Our examples so far have illustrated a person's relationship toward other people (lines 4 and 5 in table 3) or the attributes that characterize him (lines 7 and 11). Another class of examples has to do with one's relationship toward God (line 12). In the following verse David is addressing all the assembled officials of his court and is explaining why he has chosen Solomon to succeed him on the throne.

"[God] said to me: 'Solomon your son is the one who will build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father.'" (1 Chr 28:6)

The above statement will sound very familiar to any student of the second Psalm (see also Judg 17:10). There we read:

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father."
(Ps 2:7)

The similarity between these two passages is extensive and significant. Mitchell Dahood argues that Ps 2 is "A royal psalm, composed for a coronation" and that its language represents an early stage in the development of Hebrew.⁸ "The genuinely archaic flavor of the language suggests a very early date (probably tenth century)."⁹ He then goes on to speculate that, "If an historical background must be sought, the El Amarna period in Syria-Palestine would be a strong candidate."¹⁰ This is the only part of his argument that I find unconvincing. When we

consider the proposed tenth century date of authorship for this psalm together with its similarity to 1 Chr 28:6 in both language and context, why could we not argue that the document in question is a royal psalm, composed for the coronation of Solomon? This will be a point to remember when we discuss the ways in which New Testament writers apply Ps 2:7 to Christ.

Greek *huios* in the New Testament
conveys a Hebrew idea of sonship

The idiomatic force of some of the expressions considered in the previous section may or may not seem obvious to us in a twentieth century English speaking environment. It was certainly not obvious to Arius in a fourth century Greek speaking environment. And that was the problem. Arius lived in a thought world different from that of the writers he was attempting to exegete. He interpreted their categories in terms of his categories and by taking such an approach he missed what they were trying to say.

Spiritual descent from Abraham. If Greek *huios* always speaks of a male child in relation to his biological father or mother, what was Jesus saying when he gave James and John "the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17)? And what did He mean when he told the Pharisees, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire" (John 8:44)? The Pharisees had based their claims on physical descent from Abraham, and Jesus did not deny what they said on one level of significance ("I know you are Abraham's descendants" [John 8:37]). But He takes the discussion to a higher level, basing his argument on a type of Old Testament usage that would be immediately familiar to them and could not be misunderstood:

"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. (40) As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things." (John 8:39-40)

Here Christ denies the Pharisaic claim to descent from Abraham in one sense, having just affirmed it in another. From this I draw that two different concepts are available and He is drawing a contrast between them. He asserts that being a "son of Abraham" in the fullest sense means sharing the attributes, and not only the blood, of Abraham.

Paul makes repeated use of this same idea in regard to the church. We must understand the true force of what Paul says about Abraham and Israel if we ever wish to understand his concept of the church. Let me give just three examples.

(16) Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (17) As it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed--the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. (Rom 4:16-17)

(28) A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. (29) No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:28-29)

(6) It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. (7) Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." (8) In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. (Rom 9:6-8)

Paul makes the spiritual nature of his argument unequivocally clear by using "God's children" and "Abraham's offspring" as equivalent expressions. Otherwise, in what sense can Abraham be said to be the father of the Romans that Paul was writing to ("He is the father of us all" [Rom 4:16])? Romans are not Jews. But Romans--or Celts, or Germans, or anyone else--can have the faith of Abraham. As they share Abraham's attributes they become his children in the sense required by Scripture. And in this way they become the children of God.

Nor does this rule apply only to Gentiles. The Abrahamic promises were never at any time based solely on a law of physical descent. They have always had a spiritual component. Moses does not say, "All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you are descendants of Abraham." He says, "All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God" (Deut 27:2). The promises to Abraham were deeply spiritual and can only be inherited--by Jews or Gentiles--in a spiritual manner.

Physical descent from Adam. Paul's references to descent from Adam are in a different category altogether from his references to descent from Abraham. There is nothing spiritual in sharing the fleshly nature of Adam.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (45) So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. (46) The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. (47) The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. (48) As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. (49) And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. (1 Cor 15:44-49)

During the formative centuries leading up to the Council of Nicaea (A.D.325), Irenaeus had, after John himself and his disciple Polycarp, the clearest understanding of the nature of Christ.¹¹

Irenaeus refutes Docetism at length. Christ, he contends against the Gnostics, must be a man, like us, if he would redeem us from corruption and make us perfect. As sin and death came into the world by a man, so they could be blotted out legitimately and to our advantage only by a man; though of course not by one who should be a mere descendant of Adam, and thus himself in need of redemption, but by a second Adam, supernaturally begotten, a new progenitor of our race, as divine as he is human.... Irenaeus conceived the humanity of Christ not as a mere corporeality, though he often contends for this alone against the Gnostics, but as true humanity, embracing body, soul, and spirit. He places Christ in the same relation to the regenerate race, which Adam bears to the natural, and regards him as the absolute, universal man, the prototype and summing up of the whole race.¹²

Christ is the last Adam, not in the sense that He shares the first Adam's nature in some way, but in the sense that they both initiate a line of descent. They both have a progeny (Isa 53:11, margin). The one progeny is physical, the other spiritual.

In what sense did God "become"
Jesus' Father?

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father."
(Ps 2:7)

The words, "'today I have become your Father,'" if written for a coronation ceremony as Dahood reasonably suggests, apply to a person who is already in his mature manhood. Nothing at all is said here about how that man came into existence. But as applied to Christ this psalm does not teach adoptionism either.

Three different times New Testament writers apply Ps 2:7 to Christ. Notice what applications they make. Luke quotes Paul as using Ps 2:7 in reference to Christ's resurrection:

(32) "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers (33) 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)

In the book of Hebrews Ps 2:7 is quoted first in reference to the ascension (for the context see Heb 1:1-4):

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father"?
(Heb 1:5)

It is also applied to the beginning of Christ's high priestly ministry, which started immediately after His ascension:

So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,
"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father."
(Heb 5:5)

None of this has anything to do with Christ's birth, or baptism, or any other event in His life prior to His resurrection and it certainly does not support the notion that He was begotten at some point in the ageless past. That is not when the passage applies and that is not what it refers to. An origin concept of begetting is no more helpful than suggesting that the divine Logos was simply created. In either case there is a definite point at which His existence began, by whatever means, and as a result He is not coeternal with the Father. An acclamation concept of begetting, however, which is the one required by context in all four of the above cases, takes the discussion in an entirely different direction. Christ's existence will always be a mystery to human intelligence, but if we cannot provide the right answers unaided by the Holy Spirit at least in this case we are prevented from providing one of the wrong answers.

When Paul speaks of Jesus' birth he says, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal 4:4-5). Notice that in this passage, when God sends His Son into the world, He is already His Son. It is His Son that He sends.

What the psalm has in view is the acceptance by the Father of His Son's completed work of redemption on our behalf. It is the completeness of His work that calls forth the acclamation. Christ is not accepted in this way as a precondition for becoming our Savior but in recognition of the fact that He has performed the task so admirably. He did not shrink back and the Father was pleased with Him (Heb 10:38, quoting Hab 2:3-4; cf. Isa 50:7-9). Ps 2 should be studied together with such other passages as John 20:17 and Ps 24:7-10. Here also is the meaning of Matt 5:17.

I should point out two more things in regard to Ps 2:7. First, the fulfillments we have seen so far (in connection with the resurrection, ascension, and high priestly ministry of Christ) are only a foretaste of what is in store. There is more to come. And second, none of the acclamation He has yet received is any innovation on the Father's part. The Son is merely being received back into the glory that He had with the Father before the world began (see John 17:5). In this way the universe is brought back to a state of normalcy.

The expression "Son of God" refers to the deity rather than the humanity of Christ. At His birth He did not take on divine attributes but laid the outer evidences of them aside.

- (6) Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something
to be grasped,
- (7) but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
- (8) And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross!
- (9) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
- (10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- (11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is
Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:10-11)

Christ becomes the Son of God in the sense of Ps 2:7 by triumphal acknowledgement of His completed work on our behalf, and not only for us but preemptively for all the worlds which by His sacrifice were spared what we went through.

Conclusion

I have argued for an attribute concept of sonship and an acclamation concept of begetting. Once Arius gets us to ask when, it does not matter how we answer. We have already conceded the essential point. In the proposed model, however, Christ is the Son of God because He has all the divine attributes (John 14:8-14). He and the Father are one (John 10:30). Thus, the Sonship of Christ emphasizes His equality, rather than inequality, with the Father. The actual case is the reverse of what Arius claimed.

But do we not weaken the genetic link, as it were, between the Father and the Son by this argument? If the passages discussed are silent on the matter of Christ's origins, what can we say concerning them? Nothing. He has none. He became the Son of man by reason of human birth, but has always been the Son of God.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹ John is careful to distinguish between *huios* "son" and *teknon* "child." We are *ta tekna tou theou* "the children of God," but only Jesus is *ho huios tou theou* "the Son of God."

² See Charles Kannengiesser, *Holy Scripture and Hellenistic Hermeneutics in Alexandrian Christology: The Arian Crisis*, Colloquy 41 (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1982), pp.20-40.

³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic Based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976; first printed 1907), s.v. *bēn*.

⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), s.v. *bēn*.

⁵ For the theoretical framework underlying this observation see Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp.164-69.

⁶ Systems of classification derive their value from the fact that they simplify the realities we study by means of them. Choosing a word to name a class of objects or facts transforms many things (the objects or facts) into one thing (the class named by the word). Doing this can be useful but the very thing that makes it useful also makes it artificial. We can use classifications to good effect but should realize the nature of their limitations.

⁷ In his second oracle, however, Balaam began by saying, "Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor" (Num 23:18). Balaam was not speaking disdainfully here but poetically.

⁸ *Psalms I: 1-50*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p.7.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "In the long and rambling treatise *Against Heresies* we sense a man blessed and permeated with a rare vision. The disciple of Polycarp, who was himself the disciple of St John the Evangelist, he is still within the circle of light whose center is the love between John and Christ.... Of this tradition, he is the last representative (John Coulson, ed., *The Saints: A Concise Biographical Dictionary* [New York: Guild Press, 1957], s.v. Irenaeus). "Irenaeus, after Polycarp, the most faithful representative of the Johannean school, keeps more within the limits of the simple biblical statements, and ventures no such bold speculations as the Alexandrians, but is more sound and much nearer the Nicene standard.... He discriminates most rigidly the conceptions of generation and of creation. The Son, though begotten of the Father, is still like him, distinguished from the created world, as increate, without beginning, and eternal. All this

plainly shows that Irenaeus is much nearer the Nicene dogma of the substantial identity of the Son with the Father, than Justin and the Alexandrians" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1910; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], vol.2: *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, A.D.100-325, pp.553-54).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.556-57.