

Competing Sons of God

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Whereas Providence... has... adorned our lives with the highest good: *Augustus*... and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us [a Savior] who has made war to cease and who shall put everything [in peaceful order]... with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of Good News for the world because of him... therefore the Greeks of Asia *Decreed* that the New Year begin for all the cities on September 23... and the first month shall be observed as the Month of Caesar, beginning with 23 September, the birthday of Caesar.

Decree of calendrical change on marble stelae in the Asian temples dedicated to the Roman Empire and Augustus, its first emperor, from Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography, by J. D. Crossan

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:22-23; 2:13-16, 22b-23

This is the time of year when we often talk and sing songs about the birth of the Son of God, and for many people this is not a problem. But for many modern and progressive people of faith and would be people of faith, this can be a difficult thing to do. The language and metaphors of the biblical era are often so different from our own.

We live in an age when hardly anyone is said to be a son of God anymore. But this was not always the case. About the time that Jesus lived and died, there were lots of people who were thought to be sons of God, complete with miraculous births. Let me mention a few:

Plato

In the third century, author Diogenes Laertius recorded that Plato's family tree included ancestors including Poseidon, god of the sea. Apparently Ariston, Plato's father, stopped making love to his wife, Perictone, because she seemed unable to conceive. The god Apollo appeared to Ariston in a dream to inform him of Plato's imminent birth. According to legend, Plato was born on Apollo's birthday. Other writers reasoned that since the great philosopher Plato healed the souls of mortals with his teaching and his speech, he must have been the son of Apollo.

Alexander the Great

According to Plutarch in the first century, Alexander was a descendant of Hercules on his father's side; on his mother's side he was a descendant of Aeacus, the first king of Aegina, who himself was the son of Zeus. Alexander's mother-to-be had a dream prior to her wedding night. In her dream, a peal of thunder was followed by a bolt of lightning that struck her womb. Later, his father also had a dream. His mother was then to have been united to a higher being in conceiving Alexander. On the day he was born, his father received news of a great victory of the Illyrians and news that his horse had won at the Olympic games. This was interpreted as evidence that Alexander would be unconquerable.

Here are some others:

- in popular Greek and Roman mythology Perseus and Romulus were divinely fathered.
- In Egyptian history such stories grew up around the pharaohs.
- Caesar Augustus, ironically, was also considered to be the divine savior. (As you can see from the decree printed in your bulletin.) The decree is that the new year begins on Caesar's birthday, "the birthday of god," it says. And Gaius Octavius therefore became the son of god, the son of Augustus. By the way, later there was the ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, meaning literally, "God made manifest."

Suetonius reported about a miraculous sign in connection to the birth of Augustus:

A public portent warned the Roman people some months before Augustus' birth that Nature was making ready to provide them with a king; and this caused the Senate such consternation that they issued a decree which forbade the rearing of a male child for a whole year. However, a group of senators whose wives were expectant prevented this decree from being filed at the Treasury and thus becoming law—for each of them hope that the prophesied King would be his own.

And so these sons of God were accompanied by miraculous signs, stars, escapes from jealous leaders and divine parents.

By the way, the idea of a divine parent was a Hellenistic (Greek) idea, not a Hebrew one. The verse in Isaiah (7:14) reads, "Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son. "Young woman" was changed to "virgin" when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the Septuagint in the third century BCE.

The passage in Isaiah merely says that the mother of the expected child was a virgin *before* she conceived, not that the conception took place in some

supernatural manner. Isaiah was talking to King Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite War of 734 BCE of an event in his own near future, not seven centuries away. He wasn't talking about the birth of Jesus.

But Matthew was simply doing what was a rather common practice: citing evidence that his leader was of divine lineage. As Dominic Crossan wrote, "A marvelous life and death demands and gets, in retrospect, a marvelous conception and birth." (p. 6, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*)

Every year we celebrate the coming of the birth of Jesus, but we rarely put his birth into the context of his own history.

But I think that it is important to do so in order to see the contrast between Jesus as the son of God and all the rest. (By the way, patriarchy was part of the context of Jesus' history; no one spoke much of "daughters of God.") New Testament scholar, James Dunn, writes,

The language of divine sonship and divinity was in widespread and varied use in the ancient world and would have been familiar to the contemporaries of Jesus, Paul and John in a wide range of applications.

And so I ask, what makes that term, son of God, unique as it applies to Jesus?

The first thing that is distinct about Jesus' divinity is that he is **Jewish**. He is a son of God from an oppressed and enslaved people. His genealogy is traced back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. He is born in Bethlehem, the village of King David, himself.

It is very likely that the title "Nazarene" was also a double meaning on the Hebrew word, "Nazir," which means "holy." A Nazarite was a holy person, selected and set aside for God's service. Samson and Samuel were both Nazarites, and both, not coincidentally, has annunciation and miraculous birth stories told about them in the Hebrew Scriptures.

There is also a very intentional parallel between Jesus and Moses here in Matthew. Just as Pharaoh heard of the predestined child's arrival and sought to kill him by killing all the infant males, so did Herod the Great did to with Jesus. And just as Moses' father refused to accept the general decision of divorce and received a heavenly message through Miriam announcing his child's destiny, so Joseph considered but rejected divorce from Mary upon receiving an angelic message announcing his child's destiny. Moses would "save my people" from Egypt, but Jesus would "save his people from their sins." Jesus is very clearly the *Jewish* gift to the world.

Secondly, Jesus is the Son of God for **all people**. All the other sons of god served the purpose of one particular people or nation: Egypt, Greece, Rome.

Unlike Moses, Jesus did not flee from Egypt, but *to* Egypt to get away from Jewish King Herod. And it was a scandal to many Jewish people that the son of God should come from Galilee. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” they asked themselves. Even though Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, Jesus was an outsider and a border-crosser. And so in this way, Jesus was a new Abraham, who calling was not just to be a blessing for his own particular ethnic group but to be a blessing to the Gentiles, to the whole world.

A third way that Jesus was a unique son of God was that he **did not fit the description of the mighty conquering hero**. Almost all of the other sons of God were military men, kings and rulers. They made their way with violence and armies. Jesus’ way was one of tenderness and gentleness. He was the *victim* of violence, not a perpetrator. By the historical standards of his day, he was not one of the winners but a loser. He was not high and mighty, but he was vulnerable and lowly. Compared with the other sons of God, Jesus could not compete.

Matthew says that Jesus is a “carpenter’s son,” which is to say that he belonged not to the aristocracy but to the lower class peasantry. Dominic Crossan says,

If Jesus was a carpenter, therefore, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degradeds or Expendables.

A century and a half after Jesus died, when the emperor Marcus Aurelius was persecuting Christians, the philosopher Celsus did not find the claim of divinity itself absurd. What he found absurd was that the *peasant, Jesus*, was divine. What had *he* done to deserve such a birth? Celsus wrote:

First, however, I must deal with the matter of Jesus, the so-called savior, who not long ago taught new doctrines and was thought to be the son of God... Taking its root in the lower classes, the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: nay, one can even say it spreads because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents.

You know, as we gain a critical understanding and an awareness of history, we Christians should not be threatened by the fact that there were many who were given the title, “son of God.” It should not threaten us that the Bible is a human product, a testimony of human beings about their experience of God. It should not threaten us that the Bible is a combination of both history and metaphor. It should not threaten us that our ancestors injected metaphors into their stories, that they metaphorized their history. The problem comes with later generations, including ours, that have literalized their metaphors.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, calls for a “post-critical naiveté.” We are post-critical, which means that we are scientific and have a critical

understanding. Borg is not suggesting that we go back, that we forget all we have learned and reject science. But he is suggesting that we recover a certain naiveté we have lost. He says this naiveté is “the ability to hear these stories once again as true stories, even as you know that they may not be factually true.” It calls for an understanding that truth is much larger than mere fact. Borg quotes a Native American storyteller, who each time begins telling his tribe’s story of creation, says, “Now I don’t know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true.”

As post-critical people we know the Bible was not written by God; it was written by people. But that’s not to say that it’s not something special. For it affirms the life and teaching of Jesus as marvelous and true.

David Dyson, a friend of mine, has said “too many Christians view Jesus not as a man with a history and a message, but as a fetish, an object of superstition with magical powers.” In our worse moments, he says, “we want to keep him six inches off the ground and a million miles away.”

As others have said, the danger is that Christianity becomes a faith *about* Jesus instead of following the faith *of* Jesus. Jesus, according to New Testament scholars, never claimed the title, “son of God” exclusively for himself. The historical Jesus did not want to be adulated. He said, “Do not call me good. Only God is good.” (Mt. 10:18) In fact, Jesus saw that **every person** was a son or a daughter of God, deserving care and respect. He called people to claim the divine image this is within them and to live, to become, and to grow into this realization. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” he said, “for they shall be called *sons of God (daughters of God).*” (Mt. 5:9)

And so when we celebrate Jesus as son of God, we are choosing him as our *leader*, a leader who claims nothing for himself but claims everything for God’s reign; who calls us to a relationship with God that would change the world. We choose him as our *teacher*, a teacher who calls us beyond our family to include all, including those who are forgotten, excluded and pushed to the margins, to see that all people are sons of God or daughters of God. And we choose him as our *hero*, a hero not of violent means but one who was killed because he refused to compromise the radical vision of God’s loving domain.

Friends, at Advent and Christmas, even as modern people, we can claim Jesus as *our* son of God. Someone who, for us, embodies God’s wisdom and way and who helps us be aware of the Divine Reality in our lives.