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Managing Editor, *Al-Itqān*
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P.O Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Tel: +603 6196 5558
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Jesus (pbuh) as “son of God”: A Biblical Study Based on the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospel of Matthew

Ungaran@Rashid*

Abstract

This article aims to study the phrase of “Son of God” that is a common term in the Bible, both in the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament. The author focuses on the concept of ‘son of God’ and other similar terminologies in the Hebrew and Greek languages as transpired in the Bible. The research employs the biblical approach of qualitative methodology in which comparative and textual analysis is applied on some versions of the Bible. The study reveals that the term is used to refer to different things: the nation of Israel, the King of Israel, Prophet Adam a.s. or humankind in general, the Messiah (*al-Masīḥ*), and also Jesus. Nevertheless, when the term is used to refer to Jesus, there is much confusion and misunderstanding among Christians.

Keywords: son of God; gospel of Matthew; Jewish scriptures, Christianity, Religion.

Introduction

The term “son(s)” as used and clearly understood in the Jewish tradition, may not be necessarily used or understood in the same manner by other communities or traditions. The Jewish Scriptures,¹ which are written in Hebrew and have a Jewish cultural background, use the term *ben* (son) to indicate some expressions which are not used by other languages such

* Assistant Professor, Dr., Department of Fundamental and Inter-Disciplinary Studies, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak. Email: ungaran@iium.edu.my

¹ The term ‘Jewish Scriptures’ is used instead of the Old Testament in order to maintain the objectivity of the study.

as English. For example, “son of five hundred years”¹ means five hundred years old, “a son of my house”² means a servant in my household, “a son of stripes”³ means a person who deserves to be beaten, “sons of Belial”⁴ means wicked men, “a son of death”⁵ means he must die, “sons of the prophets”⁶ means a group of prophets, “son of a bow”⁷ means an arrow, “sons of a foreign land”⁸ means foreigners, “sons of oil”⁹ means anointed.

Furthermore, the New Testament, which the Gospel of John is part of it, written in Greek, but mostly from a Jewish cultural background, also uses the term *huio* (son) to portray a range of meanings. For example, “sons of the bridegroom”¹⁰ means the guests of the bridegroom, “a son of peace”¹¹ means a man of peace, “the sons of this age”¹² means people of this world, and “the sons of disobedience”¹³ means those who are disobedient.

The above examples of the term “son(s)” from the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament usually do not cause any problem for readers of various cultural backgrounds, because the term is understood to be metaphorical. A problem emerges when the term “son(s)” is combined with God as a possessive noun, since God is understood as a person by some communities or religions such as Christianity. On the other hand, God is not accepted as a person by some religions such as Islam. There are, at least three types of responses to the term *son(s) of God*. First, the term has a figurative meaning;¹⁴ second, the term is understood as having a literal meaning being that God has a biological son;¹⁵ and third,

¹ Genesis 5: 32 (Footnote 2- 10 are translated from BHS Hebrew 1990-4th Corrected Edition).

² Genesis 15:3.

³ Deuteronomy 25:2.

⁴ Judges 19:22.

⁵ I Samuel 20: 31.

⁶ I Kings 20: 35.

⁷ Job 41: 28.

⁸ Isaiah 60: 10

⁹ Zechariah 4:14.

¹⁰ Matthew 9: 15 (Footnote 11-14 are translated from Greek New Testament Fourth Rev. Edition, 1998).

¹¹ Luke 10: 6.

¹² Luke 16:8.

¹³ Ephesians 2:2.

¹⁴ For example, Genesis 6:2, the term sons of God in this verse is understood as pious men.

¹⁵ For example, Pharaoh who is believed as the son of Ammon-Re, God of Ancient Egyptian, see Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of*

the term is not considered to mean a biological “son of God”, but rather God himself in some sense.¹

The term “son of God,” however, is commonly used in both the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament. It appears in both singular and plural forms to draw attention to a person or a group of people. In Jewish Scriptures, the term “son of God” is mostly used to point to the king of Israel and the Messiah (Christ), who are human. The term was used to indicate that the king or Messiah was the representative or surrogate of God on the earth. Unfortunately, in the Hellenistic period, the term “son of God” carried a divine sense because of the influence of Egyptian mythology.² Consequently, Christianity which developed during the Hellenistic period used the term “son of God” to state that Jesus is God.

The belief that the “son of God” is God Himself who became a man is one of the most important tenets of the doctrine of Christ which was developed by the Western Church and this belief is adopted by Christians in other places in the world. Stephen Tong, an Indonesian Reformed scholar, bravely claims that the “son of God” is God Himself.³ He says that the “son of God” was begotten by God in eternity, spiritually and not physically as mentioned in Psalm 2:7, “I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’” Further, Tong explains that he who begets and he who was begotten have the same essence, so, the *son* who was begotten by God is God because he has the same essence with God who begets him.⁴

Stephen Tong’s view of the “son of God” is similar to that of Wayne Grudem’s, an American evangelical theologian, although the passages of the Bible that they base their views on are different. Wayne Grudem says that even though the title “son of God” can refer to the nation of Israel, to man as created by God, or people who are led by the Holy Spirit, there are some cases where “son of God” refers to Jesus as the heavenly or eternal son who is equal to God Himself. To support his case Grudem cites some verses from the New Testament such as Matthew 17:5, “While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love;

God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 2008), 49.

¹ This is mostly believed by Christians, see Rick Brown, ‘Presenting the Deity of Christ from the Bible’ Vol. 19 No.1 (Spring, 2001) *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 21.

² Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 47.

³ Stephen Tong, *Allah Tritunggal* [God the Trinity], (Surabaya: Momentum, 2009), 52.

⁴ Ibid., 68.

with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” and 1 Corinthians 15:28, “When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”¹

The researcher deems that both Stephen Tong and Wayne Grudem misinterpret the passages that they use to state that the “son of God” is either God himself or at least equal with God. Tong’s explanation of Psalm 2:7 which says that this passage is about parturition of the “son of God,” appears too excessive. Because, even though Psalm 2:7 has a messianic aspect, basically this verse is talking about the enthronement ceremony,² and there is no element of parturition. The researcher considers that Grudem’s argument does not have a Biblical basis because the verses mentioned do not show equality between Jesus and God. In contrast, the researcher sees 1 Corinthians 15:28 as evidence that Jesus is under the authority of God. It is clear that the subject in this verse is the Greek word *ὑποτάσσω* which means to obey or submit to God. Furthermore, the researcher observes that, when interpreting this verse, Grudem holds to the tradition in Christianity which states that Jesus is God. Therefore, this particular verse cannot be used as a Biblical basis to prove that Jesus is equal with God.

The way to overcome the confusion of the term “son of God” is by analysing the term from the first and main source, the Jewish Scriptures, which is believed by Jewish community as the Holy Scriptures as well as by the Christians who call them as the Old Testament. Such an analysis would reveal that the term “son of God” as used in Jewish tradition does not contain an understanding of divinity. It would also show that the son is subservient to God and acts as a representative and not as a partner. This would help to return Christianity to its monotheistic roots and also help Muslims to have a better understanding on the term “son of God.”

The Term “son of God” in the Jewish Scriptures

As mentioned earlier, the term “son of God” is commonly used in the Jewish Scriptures and clearly understood in the Jewish tradition. Besides, Jesus whose name is inherent to the epithet “son of God,” was a Jew. Al-Faruqi says, “Jesus was a Jew among Jews. He was brought up

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 547.

² Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 13-14.

under the influence of their spirit, their consciousness, their ethic.”¹ Therefore, those who are interested to study on the term “son of God,” they should also go into Jewish theology and the Jewish Scriptures, otherwise, they will not understand the term “son of God” fairly and clearly, even tend to misinterpret. In this passage the researcher tries to examine the term “son of God” from the Jewish Scriptures, which also implies to analyse the Jewish theology.

Jewish Understanding of the Oneness of God

The belief system of the Jewish people cannot be separated from that of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham was a man from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans who was called by God to move to the land of Canaan.² Subsequently, the One God promised to Abraham that the One God would make Abraham into a great nation. God promised to bless Abraham and declared that through Abraham every nation would be blessed. God also promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham.³ It was important to note that this promise of God to Abraham occurred while the people in Abraham’s community, including his parents, worshiped other gods.⁴ It is very clear, as Leo Trepp says, this “...does not necessarily mean that he (Abraham) rejected the existence of other gods, but for him there was only One God, ‘the God of Abraham’ to whom he gave allegiance and in whom he put his trust.”⁵ It seems that the concept of monotheism was not an issue in Abraham’s era, but monolatry was.⁶

Jacob, a grandson of Abraham, and his twelve children migrated, but at some later time the house of Jacob was enslaved in Egypt.⁷ The Children of Israel suffered greatly under this slavery until God, because of his covenant with Abraham, sent a leader, Moses, to help them escape from their bonds. Eventually, the Children of Israel escaped from Egypt, although with hardship, and walked toward the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised Abraham to be inhabited by his descendants.⁸

¹ Ismail Ragi Al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas*, (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967), 50.

² Genesis 11: 31.

³ Genesis 12: 2, 3, and 7.

⁴ Joshua 24: 2.

⁵ Leo Trepp, *Judaism: Development and Life*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 3rd edn., 1982), 15.

⁶ Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: the Jewish Experience in History*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 35.

⁷ Exodus 1: 8.

⁸ Exodus 1:1- 2: 25.

On the way from Egypt to the land of Canaan, God gave instructions to the Children of Israel to recognize that there is only one God and to love God as written in the Jewish Scriptures, Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, which is often referred as *shema*,

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.¹

The *shema* has become the central declaration of Jewish faith, especially in Jewish liturgy.² It appears that this was the beginning of the concept of monotheism as confirmed for the Children of Israel. In addition, the *shema* is an expression of the close relationship between God and the Children of Israel. To the Children of Israel, *YHWH* is not only their God, but also their loving Father in heaven, their King, their Judge, their Sustainer and their Redeemer. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they know God perfectly; they perceive God to be beyond human understanding and comprehension. Thus, the Children of Israel see God in anthropomorphic terms, but disagree with the Christian concept of God assuming human form.³

Monotheism in the early Jewish community does not seem as simple as thought by many people. The situation faced by the Children of Israel at that time should not be confused with that faced by the modern Jewish community whose monotheism is more established having been refined over thousands of years. The situation of the early Jewish community, as ascribed by Goldenberg, is one in which the House of Israel was heading for the land promised by their God. That land, however, was occupied by other nations who deemed they had been given the land by their gods. These nations supposed their gods had the power to protect their people, although their gods could be defeated by the God of Israel. In a situation such as this, it could be said that there was a battle between the God of

¹ NIV translations. The term LORD in this translation is derived from the Hebrew word *YHWH* who becomes the name of God for the Children of Israel.

² Eliezer Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 138.

³ Leo Trepp, *Judaism*, 5.

Israel and the gods of other nations, and this was a violation of the peace among the gods.¹ Furthermore, Goldenberg states that this was a polytheistic view, which was a development towards monotheism.² The condition was supported by the attitude of the Children of Israel themselves as they did not trust their God wholeheartedly. For example, they asked Aaron to make an idol while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the two tablets of testimony.³

On the one hand, the researcher agrees with Goldenberg's opinion that the understanding of monotheism in the early Jewish community was still developing according to the situations experienced by the Children of Israel, but on the other hand, the researcher is of the opinion that, from the side of God, monotheism was not being developed but was already a statute to be observed and kept in mind at all times by the Children of Israel.⁴

Jewish Understanding of Messiah (Christ)

The word messiah is derived from a verb *mashah* which means to anoint and spread a liquid; the word *mashah* occurs 140 times in the Jewish Scriptures, mostly in the Torah and historical books. The word "messiah" appears 40 times especially in 1 and 2 Samuel and the Psalms as an honorary title indicating the relationship between God and his anointed person.⁵ In pre-Christian Judaism the word messiah referred to an eschatological figure, an anointed human agent of God, whose coming as a deliverer was awaited in the end time.⁶

The term "messiah" was already known among the Jewish people before Christianity existed. Therefore, to understand the term, one must trace it from the sources of Jewish writings, especially the Jewish

¹ Robert Goldenberg, *The Origins of Judaism: From Canaan to the Rise of Islam*, (New York: Cambridge University Press., 2007), p. 26-27.

² Ibid.

³ Exodus 32: 1-35.

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).

⁵ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce K. Waltke (Editors), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), vol. 1, 530.

⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is To Come*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1.

Scriptures, their life handbook. To assume that the understanding is not sourced in the Jewish writings, the conception of the messiah will be blurred or even malformed. The understanding of the term “messiah” is quite important for those who are interested in studying Judaism and Christianity because the term has become one of the central teachings of both religions. In later Judaism the term “messiah” implies an eschatological figure, while in Christianity the Messiah is the central figure in the expectation of the last time.¹

The words *mashah* and “messiah” in the Jewish Scriptures are primarily related to the word king and priest, such as to anoint a king, to anoint a priest, an anointed king and an anointed priest. The messiah or the anointed one is generally used to address the king in the sense that he is an anointed agent of God ruling over the people of God, in this respect Israel. In a narrower sense the term is used to describe an eschatological figure in the later time of Judaism.² However, in the Jewish Scriptures the word messiah is used twice for a prophet as seen in 1 Chronicles 16: 22 and Psalm 105: 15. Interestingly, Cyrus (c. 600 or 576 – 530 B.C.E.), the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty and the King of Persia, is addressed with a term “His anointed One.” Fitzmyer calls this a tribute to a king outside of Israel because that king allowed the Jews back to their homeland (538 B.C.E.), Judah, from Babylonian captivity.³ Mowinckel, on the other hand, says that Cyrus became Yahweh’s anointed because Yahweh himself appointed him as a king to fulfil Yahweh’s plan for Israel.⁴

Another reason that king is categorized as a messiah in the traditions of Israel is because a king has a close relationship with Yahweh and the appointment of a king denotes that the king is the representative of Yahweh anointed by Yahweh himself.⁵ The Jewish Scriptures give an example which shows that a king was appointed or anointed by Yahweh himself as the story of Saul, the first king of Israel.

The pattern for anointing a priest was set through the first anointing ceremony of a priest in which Aaron was appointed as a priest by Yahweh.⁶ This anointing ceremony was performed by any priest appointed to occupy

¹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, translated from Norwegian by G.W. Anderson, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), 3.

² Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is To Come*, 10.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 6.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Exodus 29: 21; Leviticus 8: 30.

the post of priest. It seems that the position of the priest was very important as a priest was someone who represented God in giving provision to his people before the government of Israel was led by a king.¹ After the authority of the king was established, the term “the anointed One” or “an anointed One” could be applied to the chief-priests, and the term “the anointed priest” explicitly addressed only to the High-priest.²

It is important to mention that in some parts of the Jewish Scriptures the positions of king and priest as God's anointed, are united in one person such as in Psalm 110: 4; Jeremiah 33: 14-26, and Zechariah 3: 8; 4: 14; 6: 12-14. In Psalm 110: 4, the king is also called a priest forever and associated with Melchizedek. The figure of Melchizedek itself is not so obvious; he is only mentioned in the book of Genesis chapter 14 as the king of Salem and the priest of God Most High (*El Elyon*). From that picture, an implication is that Psalm 110 recognises the priestly function of the new expected King,³ namely the king who is neither a descendant of David nor a descendant of Aaron, because Melchizedek had lived before the community of Israel was established. In other words, the expected king is the king who could act as a priest, while violating neither the rules of priestly service nor the rules pertaining to the appointment of a king. In addition, Jeremiah 33 as well as the prophecy of Zechariah are promises of the restoration of the two institutions, the Davidic monarchy and the Levitical priesthood or the priesthood of Aaron.⁴

There are some important characteristics of messiah depicted in the Jewish Scriptures. Firstly, the messiah is a political and spiritual figure. It is said that a messiah has political face because he would restore Israel as a nation,⁵ will rescue Israel from its enemies,⁶ and will subject other nations under his feet.⁷ At the same time it is reported that the messiah has spiritual side because as an anointed one of Yahweh, the messiah acts or rules with righteousness and justice, which is an agreement between him and Yahweh. Besides, the messiah must also have a

¹ Leviticus 4: 3, 5, 16.

² Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 6.

³ Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is To Come*, 44.

⁴ Martin J. Selman, ‘Messianic Mysteries’, in Philip E. Satterthwaite and Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (Eds.), *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of the Old Testament Messianic Texts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 295.

⁵ Isaiah 11: 10-11, Jeremiah 33: 17-18.

⁶ Psalm 45: 3-5 (4-6 in Hebrew version).

⁷ Psalm 72: 8-11.

character approved by God and meet the standard expected by God in the kingdom of God.¹

Secondly, messiah is a present and future figure. From the many parts of the Jewish Scripture that can explain the present and future nature of messiah, 2 Samuel 7 is the most important passage to be noted, namely the oracle of the prophet Nathan to David when David wanted to make a house for God. David thought of the situation in which he, as king anointed by Yahweh, had already built a house, while the ark of the Lord, which symbolized the presence of the Lord, did not have any place. In verses 11-14, the Prophet Nathan conveyed God's message to David,

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 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.²

The meaning of the word house in this passage is very important because it is used to portray a range of meaning. The house David created for himself was his castle, while the house of the ark of the Lord was a temple, but the house referred to by Yahweh in the paragraph was an enduring dynasty in Israel.³ This prophecy to David, on one hand, was fulfilled because Yahweh established the kingdom of David past David's death and the building of a temple for God by Solomon. David's triumph continued not only until the reign of Solomon, but until his descendants were exiled to Babylon. On the other hand, the promise of Yahweh to David should be fulfilled in all its aspects. This would require that Yahweh would establish the throne of David's descendants forever. In this issue, the future aspect of messiah will be seen, which means Yahweh will send the coming messiah to fulfil his promise to David.

Thirdly, the figure of the messiah is not portrayed as just an ordinary human being, but also as divine. Two passages in the Jewish Scriptures, Isaiah 9: 6-7 and Jeremiah 23: 5-6, give the impression that the messiah also

¹ Selman, 'Messianic Mystery', 291.

² NIV translation.

³ Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is To Come*, 34.

has divine qualities because the messiah is labelled “Mighty God” and “Everlasting Father” in the book of Isaiah, and “Yahweh our righteousness” in the book of Jeremiah, but the real meaning of the epithets has been the subject of extensive argument amongst interpreters.¹ Mowinckel states that these titles were often used in the traditions of the nations surrounding Israel such as Ugaritic and Egyptian, and the epithets were used to refer to a god or the god of the nations. Therefore, he argues that the messiah is a superhuman with divine attributes and divine equipment. Although described as a divine being with divine title and faculties, he is only an instrument of God, the offspring of David, which means that he is only a human being.² On the other hand, Selman claims that the messiah has divine qualities because the aforementioned epithet, “Everlasting Father,” can only be applied to God and the appellation “Father” is an established title for the God of Israel.³

Lastly, the Jewish Scriptures, in Psalms 45: 3-5; 72: 8-11, Jeremiah 33: 17-18 and so on, give many illustrations that the messiah is a victorious figure. Interestingly, the victorious figure is not the only picture of messiah. The Jewish Scriptures also illustrate that the messiah is also a suffering and humiliated figure. The suffering or humiliation that will be borne by the messiah will be caused by three forms. Firstly, the suffering is as a consequence of the legal infraction committed by David's family, as the oracle of the Prophet Nathan declared in 2 Samuel 12: 14, “But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.” Secondly, the suffering is caused by others, as stated in Psalm 2: 1-3, “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’” Thirdly, the suffering is brought by God himself, to alleviate the sufferings of Israel, since Israel has to accept punishment for the sin and impurity which it committed, as recorded in Zechariah 12: 10 -13: 1. In other words, the suffering of the messiah is a substitute punishment for sin committed by Israel.⁴

¹ Selman, ‘Messianic Mystery’, 292.

² Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 105-107.

³ Selman, ‘Messianic Mystery’, 292-293.

⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts*, (New York: Avon, 1979), 105-106.

Jewish Understanding of King

In the community of the Children of Israel, initially the term king referred to their God,¹ and God himself “reigned” over them as a King until the nation wanted a human king, as in neighbouring countries, to rule over them. When they asked for a King to govern them, from God’s point of view, it was a rejection by the nation of their God,² because from the time they were led out of Egypt until the time of Samuel who served as judge, there was no one who acted as a king, but God alone. This does not mean that God did not prepare them to be ruled by a king, because in Deuteronomy 17: 14 God mentioned the appointment of a king. However, the king who will reign over the House of Israel must be established by God himself.

Observing the provision that it is Yahweh himself who will appoint the king, there is a relationship between the concept of messiah and the concept of the king in the idea of Israel as Yahweh’s anointed.³ However, the desire of the Children of Israel to have a king “like other nations” raises some questions: what was the nature of kingship among all the nations; how many in Israel wished to emulate their neighbours?⁴ Besides, what was significant about the role of a king that could be accepted by Israel because the role of God was being rejected by them? It was undeniable that the king of Israel, as portrayed in the Jewish Scriptures, was different from the kings among the surrounding nations. For example, the King of Israel was neither a deity nor of divine origin, whereas other kings such as the Egyptian pharaoh was referred to as a god, who acted as intermediary between humans and nature.⁵ Therefore, it seems that there was a tension between the desires of the Children of Israel, who wanted a king like the kings of other nations and the ordinance of Yahweh who would raise up an anointed king.

In some passages of the Jewish Scriptures such as Psalm 2, Psalm 89 and 2 Samuel 7 which are God’s promises to David, the king is explicitly called “son of God.” The term raises an interpretation that the king of Israel has a divine nature like that of the kings of the nations around Israel such as the kings of Egypt and Canaan who were considered to be descendants or the

¹ The Jewish Scriptures, Numbers 23: 21.

² The Jewish Scriptures, 1 Samuel 8.

³ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 21.

⁴ David Polish, *Give Us a King: Legal Religious Sources of Jewish Sovereignty*, (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1989), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

incarnations of god.¹ However, as this is a community that believes that their God is one, the term should be understood as a metaphorical term, or the term should be seen as a process of adoption by God of an anointed king.² The adoption of a king by God was not only a tradition of Israel, but it was also a part of the traditions of Babylon.³ In this regard it appears that God himself took the initiative to resolve the tension between the will of the Children of Israel and the characteristics of an anointed king by ascribing the same terms as those used for the kings of other nations but with a different understanding.

Interestingly, the image of the king in Psalm 2 is similar to an Egyptian inscription in which a king was called the son by his god. The difference is that in Egyptian kingship, the king was begotten by god to be one of the gods, whereas in Psalm 2 the term begotten refers to royal protocol, a title ascribed to the king at the time of his coronation.⁴ There are at least two possibilities why a similarity exists between the two traditions. Firstly, the tradition of Israel was deeply influenced by the Egyptian tradition because their ancestors were enslaved in Egypt for over four centuries, and their way of thought became similar to that of Egyptians, resulting in the Israelites asking for a king like the kings of other nations. Secondly, Yahweh himself called the king his son so that the king would be like the kings of other countries who were called sons by their gods. In doing so Yahweh satisfied the desires of the Children of Israel who wanted a king like those of other nations.

Ideal kingship in the tradition of ancient Israel has never been achieved in the present; therefore it is a much awaited element of Israelite eschatology.⁵ Good examples of this eschatological expectation are described in the first 39 chapters of Isaiah in which the kings and the people of Israel are forced to trust God in the middle of political crisis. There are three kings mentioned in Isaiah, namely King Ahaz (chapters 6-11), an unnamed king (chapters 28-33), and King Hezekiah (chapters 36-39), none of whom succeeded in becoming the ideal king because they all failed to do the will of God. Therefore, the image of the ideal king is ascribed back to God as is written in Isaiah 33:22,⁶ "For the

¹ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 23.

² Adela & John Collins, *Son of God*, p. 3.

³ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 37.

⁴ Adela & John Collins, *Son of God*, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 96.

⁶ Richard Schultz, 'The King in the Book of Isaiah' in Philip E. Satterthwaite and Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (Eds.), *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of the Old Testament Messianic Texts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 153-154.

LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us,” and this is a great hope for the future because the present failure that brought them into exile.

One thing that is quite important to be noted regarding God's promise to David is that God would establish the Kingdom of Israel through the descendants of David so that God would be the “Father” and the king will be the “son of God” as described in 2 Samuel 7 and the kingdom he leads will be an eternal kingdom. Therefore, even though God is depicted as the ideal king in the future, God's promise to David is something that should be fulfilled which creates some conflict in this context. On the one hand, the Kingdom built by David had already fallen because it did not have the ideal King. On the other hand, because the kings who came from David's descendants have failed, then the right to be the ideal king is relinquished to God himself. To overcome this suspense, Mowinckel suggests that God will send the Messiah, not merely a messiah, but as the eschatological realization of the ideal king.¹

Isaiah 9: 1-7 describes about the arrival of the expected King in the future as the victorious king with divine attributes such as Mighty God and Everlasting Father. A review of scriptures pertaining to the coming king presents a picture that is quite unique because titles such as “Mighty God” and “Everlasting Father” are generally not ascribed to ordinary people. This is especially true of the title “Everlasting Father” which is very similar to “Lord of Eternity” and “Father of Years,” titles of the supreme god, *El*, of ancient Canaan.² The use of such titles can lead to speculation that the king who will come has a divine nature similar to that ascribed to the kings of other nations who, as mentioned earlier, were regarded as an incarnation or at least a part of their gods. However, the very fact that these titles are used for the kings of the nations around Canaan shows that the titles themselves,³ when ascribed to a person, are not unique.

Furthermore, Fitzmyer argues that Isaiah 9: 1-7 is the activity of God in bringing victory to his people through the appointment of a king from the offspring of David as his agent.⁴ The child to be born is a future ruler in whose shoulders the authority of God is laid and he will reign with a never-ending peace on the throne of David. Furthermore,

¹ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 156.

² Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 182.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapter 1-39*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 246-247.

⁴ Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is To Come*, p. 36-37.

when the description of the future king is related to Isaiah 7: 14 that a child would be born of a virgin and would be called Immanuel, it gives an understanding that the king who will come is the king who has been especially prepared by God. This king will demonstrate God's faithfulness to his people as well as fulfil the promise to David as stated in 1 Chronicles 17: 13, that God will not take his steadfast love from the promised king who is the descendant of David.

The term “son of God” in The Jewish Scriptures

In Hebrew, the term son (*ben*) basically means a male offspring of human parents.¹ In the Jewish Scriptures, however, the term is used idiomatically to express a number of different ideas. Firstly, the term is employed to denote one's profession, for example, *ben hasarpi*, literally, son of a goldsmith,² which means a goldsmith. Secondly, it is used to show a state or condition, for example, *ben nekar*, son of a foreign country,³ which means foreigner. Thirdly, *ben* is employed to expose a certain character such as in *ben hayil*, son of valor,⁴ which denotes a brave man. Lastly, it is used to explain a certain nature, for example, *ben adam*, son of man,⁵ which implies humankind.

The term “sons of God” itself (in plural) occurs several times in the Jewish Scriptures and the title refers to individuals, nations and angels who belong to God and have a close relationship with God and accept the goodness of God.⁶ The term “son of God” (in its singular form) does not appear as a phrase directly, but as an appellation from God to a nation, in this respect God calls “son” only to Israel, a king, and messiah. For example, in Exodus 4:22 God says, “Israel is my firstborn son,” whereas in Psalm 2:7 God speaks to a king who is also messiah, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” What is interesting regarding God's use of the term “son of God” is that, on one hand, it is clearly an appellation to a human, but, on the other hand, some passages in the Jewish Scriptures are written as if the “son of God” is not an ordinary person but has a divine element, as mentioned above.

¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce K. Waltke (Editors), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* vol. 1, p. 114.

² Nehemiah 3: 31.

³ Genesis 17: 12.

⁴ 1 Samuel 14: 52.

⁵ Job 25: 6.

⁶ Rick Brown, ‘The ‘Son of God’: Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus,’ p. 42.

Psalm 2 is a part of the Jewish Scriptures which is the clearest in explaining the king as the “son of God,” because in that passage, God explicitly calls the anointed king (messiah king) as 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,¹ although it could also be understood as just a figurative expression. Adam Clarke in his commentary states that this is a wonderful and supernatural birth and that through that birth all the fullness of God dwells bodily in the child.² In other words, “begotten” in this regard is a process of supernatural birth. It seems that Clarke implicitly says that the “son of God” is the Incarnation of God. On the contrary, the Interpreter's Bible states that the word “begotten” in this section should be understood as the legal process of adoption which also reveals a special relationship between the king and his Lord,³ an argument supported by Mowinckel who explains that any expression of a metaphysical conception of the king's divinity and his relation to Yahweh has not been in Israel. The phrase “You are my son; I have begotten you today” is only the ordinary formula of adoption.⁴

As mentioned above, this Psalm is interesting because it has similarities with the Egyptian tradition of the king as the “son of God,” since the same formula “You are my son, today I have begotten you” is found also in an inscription at the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut.⁵ Seeing the similarity, there is a possibility that the ritual appointment of the king in the kingdom of Israel or Judah was directly or indirectly 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).⁶

Another passage in the Jewish Scriptures that directly mentions the “son of God” is 2 Samuel 7: 14. This verse describes that God would become the father of a king, a descendant of David, “I will be his father,

¹ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 23.

² Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary: Psalm*, http://jcsn.org/StudyCenter/Adam_Clarke_Commentary/clarkepsa2.htm, viewed on 31st of July 2011

³ George A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Bible vol IV: Book of Psalm*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 25.

⁴ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, p. 78.

⁵ Adela & John Collins, *Son of God*, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

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 of God” made a mistake. Therefore, there is a difference between 2 Samuel 7: 14 and Psalm 2:7 in which 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, even though the agreement is settled upon a descendant of David.

God's covenant written in 2 Samuel 7: 14 and 15 are repeated in 1 Chronicles 17: 13 as, “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,” but with slight differences in that the latter written that God promised that he would not take his steadfast love as he had taken from the predecessor of David, in this respect was Saul.

In conclusion, the term “son of God” in the Jewish understanding is God's appellation to whomever he loves, and is in this regard primarily addressed to the anointed king (messiah king) to show that this king has a special relationship with God, but certainly not parity with God.¹ The king was promised by God as the successor of the Davidic kingdom whose reign would last forever. Although the king received a divine title, this does not mean the king has a divine nature. The divine title implies that the king is empowered to act as God's surrogate on the earth.² In addition, the divine label shows that God is always with him. Thus, in the Jewish understanding there is no perception that the “son of God” is a part of God or an incarnation of God.

Jesus as the Son of God According to the Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that relates Jesus to David and Abraham, in which Jesus is called the son of David, the son of Abraham. The mention of Abraham in this genealogy placed in the opening of the letter implies that Matthew is introducing Jesus as a Jew because Abraham was their ancestor.³ The appellation of the son of David indicates that Matthew understood the epithet “Christ” for Jesus was related to the Messiah of Israel who is the descendant of David.⁴ Besides, the

¹ Adela & John Collins, *Son of God*, p. 22.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴ Ibid.

mention of David, the use of title King for David in the genealogy seems to be an important point to emphasize the notion of the Messiah of Israel,¹ because only David is named with the title king, while his successors, although also kings, are not. Thus, the idea of the “son of God” or the King Messiah or the Messiah of Israel in the Jewish Scriptures has been introduced by Matthew in the beginning of his writing.

In Matthew, the term “son of God” is applied to Jesus through three expressions, namely “Son” or “the Son,” “the Son of God,” and “Son of the living God”; none of these three is a claim of Jesus about himself directly. The term “the Son” is used indirectly to explain the relationship between Jesus and God, who, in this respect is called the Father², and when Jesus gave a commission to his disciples to make all ethnic groups to become his disciples. The epithets accorded to Jesus were used by God himself when he declared that Jesus is his Son³, by Satan who quoted the word of God when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness⁴, by demons who were powerfully possessing two men⁵, by one of Jesus’ followers when he calmed the storm⁶, by Peter who confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah⁷, by the Jews as a confrontation and a mockery of Jesus⁸, and by gentile soldiers who felt scared at natural events following the death of Jesus.⁹

The declaration by God at Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3: 17, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,” was preceded by the descent of the Spirit of God, has the same formula as Psalm 2: 7, even though with different wording. This statement implies that the use of “son of God” in this context is an endorsement that Jesus is the promised king and understood as the Messiah, a descendant of David.¹⁰ In addition, this passage is an introduction of Jesus as the chosen servant of God on whom he put his Spirit, as prophesied in Isaiah 42: 1, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put

¹ Matthew 1: 6.

² Matthew 11: 27.

³ Matthew 3: 17; 17: 5.

⁴ Matthew 4: 3, 6.

⁵ Matthew 8: 29.

⁶ Matthew 14: 33.

⁷ Matthew 16: 16.

⁸ Matthew 26: 63; 27: 40, 43.

⁹ Matthew 27: 54.

¹⁰ R.T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press and Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), p. 96.

my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”¹ Moreover, the event of baptism itself was an act of obedience on the part of Jesus as the “son of God” to God who sent him², and at that time Jesus was empowered by the Spirit to fulfil his difficult mission.³

At the time Jesus was transfigured on the mountain and three of his disciples, Peter, James and John the brother of James, saw him with Moses and Elijah, God said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”⁴ This statement is almost exactly the same as God’s declaration when Jesus was baptized, but contains an additional phrase “Listen to him,” which is an echo of Deuteronomy 18: 15, the prediction of the coming of a prophet like Moses.⁵ In addition, the expression “listen to him” itself emphasizes that Jesus’ disciples must obey and learn to understand the teachings of Jesus.⁶

The epithet “son of God” was used twice by Satan while he was tempting Jesus. It is interesting that the initiative of the temptation came from God as the spirit of God led Jesus into the desert to be tempted. Moreover, the situation brings to mind the event in which God led the Israelites into the wilderness and tempted them as a form of discipline, but Israel failed⁷ to obey God.⁸ In the case of Jesus, Satan tempted Jesus to disobey God in the hope of sabotaging his mission⁹, but Jesus was able to overcome Satan's temptations by quoting some words of God from Deuteronomy which related the events of Israel during its journey in the wilderness. Hence, the term “son of God” used by Satan to provoke Jesus should be understood as a comparison between Jesus and Israel because Israel was also called “son of God.”¹⁰ The difference is that Israel is the “son of God” who failed in the face of the temptation in the wilderness, while Jesus is the “son of God” who succeeded.

¹ Ibid.

² Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earlier Followers*, (Edinburgh: University Press, 2001), p. 121.

³ Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 6th edn., 2004), p. 19.

⁴ Matthew 17: 15.

⁵ Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament*, p. 122.

⁶ Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, p. 211.

⁷ R.T. France, *Matthew*, p. 97.

⁸ Deuteronomy 8.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, “Jesus as Messiah in Mark and Matthew” in Stanley E. Porter (Ed.), *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 137.

¹⁰ Exodus 4: 22.

The next point, Peter’s confession in Matthew 16: 16, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” is the clearest statement in the Gospel of Matthew which equates the terms “the son of God” and “the Christ” or “the Messiah,”¹ and becomes a climax of the good news (Gospel).² Whether Peter was aware of the significance of this statement or not, this statement is very important because Jesus said that upon this confession he would establish *ecclesia* (congregation)³, or in other words, *ecclesia* is built on the foundation of confession that Jesus is the Christ.

In a similar vein to Peter’s confession is the interrogation by the high priest in Matthew 26: 63, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” This statement indicates that the high priest understood the term “son of God” to mean “Christ” or “Messiah,” because as high priest, he at least recognized Jewish tradition. Jesus’ answer is interesting, that in addition to confirming the statement, he added, “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven,” thereby making the high priest upset. Two points that could be the cause of the high priest’s anger are, first, Jesus confirmed that he is the Christ and therefore the king who was promised by God to David⁴, in fact, he was not the king who would rule in the political arena. Second, sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One is a quotation from Psalm 110: 1 which means Jesus placed himself as person given full authority by the Mighty One⁵, a position considered as blasphemy by the high priest.

Finally, Jesus was declared to be the “son of God” by gentile Roman soldiers when they saw the supernatural events immediately following the death of Jesus. The meaning of “son of God” is not clear in this situation, whether they understood what they said or not. Assuming that they knew the meaning of the “son of God”, it raises the question; either they recognized the meaning in a Jewish or Roman context. Whatever the case, the utterance came after they experienced fear in facing a divine power.⁶

The term “the son of God” as applied to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew has three meanings. First, Jesus is the one who is appointed by

¹ Adela and John Collins, *Son of God*, p. 142.

² R.T. France, *Matthew*, p. 251.

³ Matthew 16: 18.

⁴ 2 Samuel 7.

⁵ R.T. France, *Matthew*, p. 381.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 402

God and strengthened by the spirit of God to carry out God's mission. Second, Jesus is the Christ or the Messiah, determined by God to be a king and priest. Third, Jesus is the true Israel who could overcome every temptation of Satan who tried to foil his efforts to carry out God's mission. It is significant to note that in the Gospel of Matthew there is no impression given that the "son of God" is the offspring of God or even God himself who became man.

Muslim's Perspective

Jesus is one of the many prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. Not only is he mentioned often, but the Qur'an honours him as a word (*kalimat*) and spirit of God¹, a holy son², a sign unto men and mercy from God³, one who is honoured in this and next world⁴, the sign of the last day⁵, the one who will witness against those who did not believe in him before their death⁶, the one who performed miracles⁷, and he is also called *al-Masīh* (the Messiah).⁸ Furthermore, in Islamic theology, Jesus is a special creation like Adam, but unlike Adam, he is free from transgression.⁹

Almost all the descriptions of Jesus mentioned above have parallels with the New Testament, especially the Gospels. Nevertheless, it does not mean that all the information or stories about Jesus in the New Testament are in agreement with present-day Islamic theology. The term "son of God" is one such matter that is not accepted, by the theology of Islam, albeit a term that cannot be separated from the figure of Jesus. For example, at-Tawbah explicitly says that Allah's curse be upon the Jews who call Uzayr a son of Allah and the Christians who call the Christ the son of Allah.¹⁰ Some Muslim scholars, both either early and modern, who have concerned themselves about other religions, such as Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (d.994) has contributed to the discussion of "the son of God."

Abū 'Īsā whose full name was Abū 'Īsā Muhammad b. Hārūn b. Muhammad al-Warrāq, a remarkable scholar in the early ninth century,

¹ The Qur'an, Al-Nisa (4): 171.

² The Qur'an, Maryam(19): 19.

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ The Qur'an, Al-Imran (3): 45.

⁵ The Qur'an, Al-Zukhruf (43): 61.

⁶ The Qur'an, Al-Nisa (4):159.

⁷ The Qur'an, Al-Imran (3): 46,49; Al-Maidah (5): 115.

⁸ The Qur'an, Al-Nisa (4): 171.

⁹ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, edited by Irfan A. Omar, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), p. 117.

¹⁰ The Qur'an, At-Taubat (9): 30.

wrote a book entitled *al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā*, which was translated into English and divided into two books by David Thomas.¹ In this book Abū ‘Isā examines two important doctrines in Christianity, namely the trinity and incarnation.

Abū ‘Isā criticized three groups that represented Christianity of that time i.e. Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians. The three groups held the doctrine of Trinity as the foundation of the doctrine of God. These groups defined the Trinity as consisting of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, with the meaning of “the Son” being derived from the Word (*Logos*) as developed by Origen,² instead of the son as part of the full biblical epithet, the “son of God.”

Abū ‘Isā’s criticism against Christianity is basically very sound, in that he was able to explain and refute the doctrine of the Trinity and Incarnation as Christian’s explanation. Unfortunately, when he quoted and interpreted the term, “son of God,” he actually described the philosophical son (*Logos*), rather than the biblical “son of God.”³ If Abū ‘Isā had not mentioned the term, “son of God,” but rather merely, “the Son,” then his refutation would be almost flawless.⁴ The researcher observes that Abū ‘Isā was drawn into the Christian mindset about “the Son,” so he did not distinguish the epithet “son of God” which is written in the Scriptures from the teaching about “the Son” which was developed by the church fathers.

Conclusion

In the Gospel of Matthew, the epithet “son of God” is a term which is often referred to Jesus, as a title. This term has a background in the Jewish Scriptures which means the Messiah (Christ) or the king of the descendant of David who will restore the Kingdom of Israel. When someone applies the epithet to Jesus, he or she, whether consciously or not, perceives that Jesus has a capability to be the Messiah who is appointed by God and strengthen by Holy Spirit to carry God’s mission

¹ Abū ‘Isā al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam*, translated from Arabic and edited by David Thomas, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Abu ‘Isa al-Warraḡ, *Early Muslim Polemic Against Christianity*, translated from Arabic and edited by David Thomas, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² See footnote 170.

³ Abū ‘Isā al-Warrāq, *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity*, 127.

⁴ Abū ‘Isā was not presenting the Islamic or biblical understanding but only refuting the Christians belief, philosophically. His work was in the debate mode.

in the world. Interestingly, the term is never used by Jesus to refer to himself, yet he also did not deny the term when it was addressed to him.

Subsequently, the title the “son of God” was used by the church fathers, many of whom were not from a Jewish background, to refer to the divinity of Jesus. From this time forth, the epithet “son of God” was understood as “God the Son,” in other words, the meaning of biblical “son of God” changed to philosophical “son of God.”¹ This alteration, whether intentional or not, lifted Jesus out of his Jewish tradition and put him in another environment. Unfortunately, this philosophical notion of “son of God” is frequently targeted by Muslim scholars or theologians to criticize Christian theology or even to evaluate the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament in general Indonesian. The criticism is quite appropriate when addressed to the Christian theology of attributing Jesus as God, but are not proper when referred to the Scriptures, since the Scriptures have never attributed the “son of God” as God or a component of God.

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