

A Case for Christ-Lent 2010

Jesus as Son of God

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Son of God

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Luke 4:1-12; John 14:5-11; 8:48-58

Introduction

In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered a god. To the mythical mind, the world was not neatly chopped up into compartments where a person might think about earth, sea, air, humans, animals and gods as belonging to radically different realities. Everything was embedded in everything. This led, of course, to some cosmic puzzles about how the gods could both be part of the world, yet creators of it at the same time. Explaining phenomena in such a universe meant relying on the telling of stories rather than using mathematics. Even at that, numbers played crucial roles in measuring and manipulating things. The gods got involved in those activities, as did the Pharaoh who commanded the building of gigantic burial vaults where he might spend eternity after he died. And again, another paradox, that this man who was a god could die, and that his future somehow rested with human craftsman and monumental stones shaped like pyramids.

The Greeks and the Romans had their own god-men, either the heroes or villains in the drama of their civilizations. It was no more impossible for Zeus to espouse the mortal Alcmena and father Hercules, than for ordinary mortals to have children together. Such god-men offspring were heroes in the Greek world, but they eventually died, taking their place alongside the other deities in the pantheon. Frankly, the gods who had such "sons" were not particularly godly in our sense of that word, strange as that may sound. To be called "son of Zeus" didn't guarantee holiness or truth at all. But it would mean having "power," the primary quality of being a deity. In other ways, the gods resembled human beings: they lied, stole, deceived and murdered. Given to fits of jealousy, they might curse humans or attempt to foil other gods, using humans as their pawns in a nasty game of chess.¹

The Jews were much more particular about their God, Yahweh. He was God *alone*, though not a *lonely* God.² Consistently we are reminded that "God is not a human":

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Numbers 23:19).

Yahweh's world was on a different plane from the human one:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God, in the Jewish understanding, is "the Wholly Other" in precisely the sense that He is "holy, Other." Holiness (*qodesh*) is the separateness of God from the world, His creation. God is not the world, but transcends the world. He is "One" in the sense that he is unique and without peer; He is "One" in the further sense that he is a unity. In that regard He stands apart from the factious and petty gods of the pagans:

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

¹ The 1981 motion picture, *Clash of the Titans*, dramatizes the hostile interplay among the gods. Calibos the son of Thetis, patron goddess of the sea, was a handsome young man destined to marry Princess Andromeda, the daughter of Queen Cassiopeia, thus one day becoming the eventual ruler of the rich city of Joppa and all of Phoenicia. But the rivalry and jealousy between Zeus and Thetis led to an angry curse on the young man who was transformed by Zeus into a hideous monster of a man.

² G.K. Chesterton made this important distinction when he contrasted the God of the Christian faith with Allah of Islam whom he called the lonely god of the desert (see his *Orthodoxy*, 1908, chapter 8).

Though wholly other and utterly unique, an undivided unity of being, Yahweh the God of Israel can be loved — ought to be loved. Having One God, as opposed to countless ones, simplifies theology, but it also unifies ethics. Human beings are not asked to love a myriad of gods who cannot agree on many things and who do not necessarily seek the best interests of the human race. How can we order our lives reasonably if the gods who demand our obedience each have a different plan for our lives? Monotheism — belief in One God — offers hope for an ordered life grounded in a reliable relationship. He is God alone, but not God aloof.

To this grand and majestic conception of God found in Judaism, Christianity *adds* nothing. However, the Christian Gospel *uncovers* within the unity of God a mysterious experience of personhood. New Testament writers tell the story of God "our Father," not in direct contrast to the Hebrew Scriptures who also spoke of God in such terms:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4) [Note: metaphor of the *parent* eagle carrying its young, applied here to the Exodus from Egypt, as explicitly stated in the next passage].

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).

⁵ Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. ⁶ God settles the solitary in a home (Psalm 68:5-6a).

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in (Psalm 27:10).

He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation' (Psalm 89:26).

Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever (1 Chronicles 29:10).

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Malachi 2:10).

¹⁶ For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name (Isaiah 63:16).

But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand (Isaiah 64:8).

Of special note is the unique relationship which existed between not only Yahweh and Israel as a whole, but also between Yahweh and Israel's king, the anointed one. A few texts describe that relationship:

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6).

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you (Psalm 2:7).

The New Testament explicitly takes up one or more of these passages and applies them to Jesus, emphasizing his unique relationship to Israel's God:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. ⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"? ⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." ⁷ Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire." ⁸ But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (Hebrews 1:1-9).

Notice the repeated interplay between God and Jesus, using the terms Father and Son. These associations are based solidly on the Old Testament texts we have cited above.

A common "Name" united Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the familiar text of Matthew 28:19,

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It seems evident that by using the familiar word "Name," Matthew intended to connect "the Son" with the Hebrew idea of *HaShem*, the substitute term for the name "Yahweh." Jewish people were reluctant to address God by his covenant name during the Second Temple period, fearing that this might draw them back into idolatry or cause them to commit blasphemy. Instead of saying "Yahweh" when it appeared in their sacred Scriptures, they would use the term *HaShem* ("the Name") or possibly *'Adonay* — doing so out of reverence. When Jesus gives "the Great Commission" in Matthew 28, he is doing something like that when he commands baptism "in the name of." But he was also making a statement about the supreme unity among Father, Son and Holy Spirit, including all three within the mysterious and wonderful nature of the One True God, Yahweh. Each shares "the Name."

In what sense did Jesus understand himself as "the Son of God"? Had we met him on the streets of Jerusalem during the week prior to his death and asked him, "Who are you?" would he have replied, "Oh, I'm Jesus, the second person of the Trinity!" We must be careful here on several fronts. There is plenty of evidence that Jesus referred to himself as "Son of God," certainly in no less the way David spoke about God calling him "My Son" in Psalm 2 (see above), or Israel seeing themselves collectively as God's Son. Minimally, the title "Son of God" had royal meanings in the Old Testament. Kings in Israel, from the line of David, were all seen in this way, though many of them imperfectly lived up to the designation.

If You Are the Son of God: Luke 4:1-13

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" ⁵ And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶ and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "' You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" ⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "' He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' ¹¹ and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" ¹² And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

We have already met Luke the historian in our previous week's study. Our investigations of Jesus in Luke's Gospel led us to consider the thoroughness of his historical method, especially as he introduced his work in 1:1-4. Moreover, we focused on the expectations about Jesus' coming found in the Old Testament, and how it was that Luke presented those as forms of evidence that Jesus fully satisfied when he came. Reaching back as far as the birth stories of chapters 1-2, we saw the earliest references to Jesus into terms of "Son of God" language. Later, at his baptism, the "voice from heaven" confirmed to Jesus in very personal terms, "You are My Son, Beloved, whom I have chosen," a virtual equivalent to the royal decree of Psalm 2 (see above).

Our first reading this week immediately follows the text of 3:21-38 where the baptism of Jesus and the genealogy of Jesus both agree in declaring of Jesus, "the Son of God" (see 3:22 and 3:38). Luke "marks" Jesus with God's special identity by using the language "full of the Holy Spirit" in 4:1 as he introduces this new material (4:1-13). Likewise, after he gives us this new narrative he introduces the next one with the words, "in the power of the Spirit." This connection between Jesus and the Spirit is stronger than similar associations in the Old Testament where the Spirit's descent was occasional and temporary, usually to fulfill a certain mission or to inspire a message from God. The mission-message complex of ideas often applied to prophets, kings, or military leaders. However, in the case of Jesus the Spirit is the constant and inseparable companion of his mission-message. In John's Gospel this close union of Jesus and the Spirit is expressed this way:

³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand (John 3:34-35).

Here "Spirit without measure" and "all things" given into Jesus' hand communicate virtually the same idea. Jesus, by the Spirit, does whatever God sends him to do, including "utter the words of God."

A close bond exists between Jesus and the Spirit to such an extent that we are led to believe that the human Jesus maintains and expresses his divine Sonship in and through the Spirit. Being utterly filled by the Spirit ("without measure"), Jesus sustains a unique relationship with God uninterrupted by the fact of his humanity. Luke will offer his first evidence of this by giving us the narrative of Jesus' temptation by the Devil. In our study one year ago (*Background Notes*, March 7/8, 2009) we explored the temptation from the standpoint of Jesus' humanity, asking the question "Can We Relate to Jesus?" Our focus in 2010 is on "Jesus the Son of God" as he faces the archenemy of God.

A single conditional clause unifies Luke's account of the temptation. The Devil poses this condition twice: once before the first temptation and again before the third (and last). The condition functions like a "frame" for the temptations. "If you are the Son of God..." (*ei huios ei tou theou*) (4:3; 4:9). The words for "if" and "are" are homonyms ("sound alike") and have the effect of a "taunt" when spoken with careful emphasis. The Devil casts serious doubt on the factual claim made by the clause as it is worded. *Luke uses the temptation narrative as an opportunity to investigate the "Son of God" claim.*

We are informed that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness without food or water. "Wilderness" (*erēmos*) is a place where all things are called into question and cast into doubt. The wilderness is the place for many "if's." Using wilderness language as part of the temptation narrative is consistent with the context already established by John the Baptizer who was "the voice crying ... in the wilderness..." Because Luke sets the duration at forty days, he no doubt had in mind the linkage with the "forty years" of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness as they traveled between Egypt and Canaan. Associated with the "forty days" of the flood (Noah), the time reference also suggests the time of judgment. We find the correspondence between forty days and forty years in Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6.

Jesus enters into a Herculean task, or, better said, a *test* which a mere mortal would not successfully pass. He confronts the quintessential embodiment of Evil, and he does so with the handicap of human nature. Hungry and thirsty, Jesus faces Evil with the bare essentials of his humanity stripped away. When ancient Israel was hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, they complained to Moses and rebelled against God (Exodus 16:3; Deuteronomy 8:3; Exodus 17:3; Deuteronomy 8:15; Hebrews 3:7-11). What *will* Jesus do? We already know what ordinary human beings would do, but how is Jesus different from his ancient human forefathers whose genealogy Luke has already written into his narrative?

"Full of the Holy Spirit" and "led by the Spirit" are the twin phrases Luke uses to explain the condition of Jesus as he enters the wilderness and his temptation. He is not alone, but he enters the contest with Evil, relying on the Spirit of God. The word for "full" is *plērēs*, an indeclinable adjective having no degree. We might translate this word as "complete." The Spirit completed him in his *role* as Son of God present in human flesh. In order for Jesus to be in such complete relationship with the Spirit required that he be God's Son. Will that prove itself true in the experience Jesus has with the Devil? Once more we are following Luke's evidence as he narrates the history surrounding Jesus.

Luke uses a single Greek term to describe the nemesis of Jesus: he refers to him as "the Devil," from the Greek word *diabolos*, a term commonly referring to a "slanderer" or "injurer." What is under attack in the temptation story is the name, identity and reputation of Jesus as God's Son. That is why Luke consistently uses the same Greek word to identify the adversary of Jesus. Echoes of Eden are heard in this strategy. In that case, the *integrity of God* was in contention: "Did God say..." "God knows..." are the operative clauses in Genesis 3. The human pair were being challenged to doubt the truthfulness of God when He said certain things. God

Himself was in doubt and called in question. Here, by the same token, it is Jesus Himself who is put on the spot and called into question. To pose the conditional, "If you are the Son of God..." is itself a form of doubt and a challenge to honor.

Can Jesus be coerced to speak and act in ways which undermine the royal claims of "the voice from heaven," spoken to him at his baptism? The temptations of Jesus have no point if they are the temptations of a *mere human being*. The Devil knows all too well that human beings yield to temptation: the history of the human race began with such a temptation, and the Devil was right in the middle of it! What the Devil tests in this context is the implied claim of the conditional clause: that Jesus is the Son of God. Will Jesus be able to distinguish between "the voice from heaven" and "the voice in the wilderness"?

Our intent is not to explore the significance of each temptation (see the previous *Notes* cited above), but to determine why the Devil chose these particular temptations to challenge the validity of Jesus' claim as God's Son. On one level, will Jesus allow the Devil to "command" him *at all*? If Jesus were a mere human being, that might be possible. But if he is the Son of God, he ought to refuse even to engage the Devil in conversation. If we examine each of the three temptations, we see that Jesus does not engage in ordinary conversation with the Devil, rather he quotes from the Torah scroll of *Deuteronomy* whose Hebrew title translates as "These are the words..." (Hebrew: *'elleh hadd^ebārîm*). Coming from the mouth of the Son of God are only the Words of God. Unlike Adam and his wife, Jesus does not allow himself to be trapped into inventing human arguments to counter the demands of the Devil. When the woman, in Genesis 3, started to converse with the Serpent using her own understanding, she became vulnerable to his deception and cleverness. The Son of God is wiser than that. The Son of God speaks only the Word of God. Recall the text cited earlier in these *Notes*: "For *he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure*" (John 3:34).

1. "Command stones to become bread." The immediate background of this temptation is Jesus' hunger, having fasted for forty days in the wilderness. Will the Son of God use his supernatural powers to satisfy his human needs? Will the one who came "to serve" demand from nature that it serve him, in contravention of his purpose for coming into the world (see Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28). More importantly will the Son of God use his powers *at the insistence of the devil*? This temptation goes to the heart of God's own character, and, by implication, the character of God's Son. There may also be just the slightest hint of magic in the Devil's request: Jesus is not a magician, but the Son of God instead. All of these shades of meaning point to a single truth about the Devil's plan. He wants Jesus to see Sonship as a privilege to be exploited, and to order his own affairs and provide for his own needs rather than live in mutual relationship with his Father.

By quoting from Deuteronomy 8:36, Jesus sets the tone for all the temptations. He tells the Devil, in effect, that he will not answer him on his own terms, but only through the authoritative word of Scripture. He uses a text which says that the basis of human life is not wholly physical. Jesus refuses to be trapped by the deception of *naturalism* which wants to reduce human existence and human identity to a material foundation alone. As the Son of God, Jesus is challenging the naturalist fallacy: he shows that a human being, full of the Holy Spirit, can resist temptation in the absence of food.

2. "Worship me and it will all be yours." In Luke's account, the second temptation involves offering to Jesus authority and glory over all kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshipping the Devil. Offering bread as the basis for life was a naturalistic fallacy; offering authority and glory as the prerogative of the Devil is a *supernaturalistic fallacy*. Contained in the temptation is the Devil's claim that he has the title to the world, and that this title "has been given over to me and to whomever I give it." Theologians debate whether this is a bold-faced lie, or whether the Devil is reminding Jesus that when Adam sinned in Eden, he effectively forfeited earth to the Devil. That would explain the first half of his rationalization. But the Devil does not have the right to hand over the kingdom "to whomever" he chooses. That prerogative belongs only to God who "rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will" (see Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). As before, Jesus does not enter into a verbal contest with the Devil but simply quotes the Word of God, this time a text from Deuteronomy 6:13 which commands worship only of God. As Son of God, Jesus proves

his worth as the champion for his Father's honor by refusing to give worship to a creature (the Devil) instead of God. Jesus does not on this occasion demand that the Devil worship him. We know that Jesus was worthy of such worship based on texts like this one: "And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him" (Hebrews 1:6); as a fallen angel how much more should the Devil submit to Jesus. However, in his humanity, the Son of God directs all worship to God whose nature he shares with the Father and the Spirit.

3. "Throw yourself down." The setting for the last temptation in this narrative is the Jerusalem Temple. This was the highest point of the "royal colonnade" built by Herod within the temple. Solomon's Porch, one of the "cloisters," was also located here and overlooked the Kidron Valley. The historian Josephus gives an interesting description:

This cloister deserves to be mentioned better than any other under the sun; for, while the valley was very deep, and its bottom could not be seen if you looked from above into the depth, this farther vastly high elevation of the cloister stood upon that height, insomuch that if any one looked down from the top of the battlements, or down both those altitudes, he would be giddy, while his sight could not reach to such an immense depth. *Antiquities*, Book 15, Chap.11:5

The distance was likely some seven hundred feet. From here a priest on the highest pinnacle would wait for the dawn, and then signal the beginning of services for the day. He would then command his waiting fellows below to offer the morning sacrifice.

From the Jewish Midrash (*Pesiqta Rabbati*, 162a) we read about the Jewish belief that Messiah would appear standing on the roof of the temple. Not on any roof but "the" roof, as it states in the NT using the definite article "*the* pinnacle" (Greek: *epi to pterugion tou hierou*).³ No doubt Satan enticed Jesus with this temptation in order to fulfill Malachi 3:1 ahead of God's time:

Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will **suddenly come to his temple**; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

The rabbis also believed that the person identified in Psalm 91 is none other than the Messiah. This is exactly where Satan misquoted the Scripture about the angels: "He shall give His angels charge concerning you (and) in their hands they shall bear you up...." The Devil, sensing the importance of Scripture in Jesus' life, attempts to use this Psalm (91:11) as support for the second temptation. He placed Jesus in a holy place and then quoted holy Scripture in order to influence him. Had Jesus yielded, the display would have been dramatic and spectacular.

There is yet another association with the Temple: it was a place of *safety*. The Greek word for "pinnacle" is actually based on the root *pterox* which means "wing." The rabbis had a tendency to draw parallels between the names for things and their underlying nuances. In this case, the "wing" would be the protecting care of the mother bird (probably an eagle) for her young. The Temple was God's "nest" and He hovered over His own who came there for safety (see Ruth 2:12; Psalm 61:4; 91:4). By contrast, Jesus would later connect his own desire to protect Israel with the "wing" metaphor, applying this role to himself and not to the Temple which would one day be destroyed (see Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). The Devil invites Jesus, then, to live the "safe life" within the Temple where God's angels would bear him up. Instead, Jesus will choose the dangerous life outside the Temple where he will face suffering and death, "outside" the Temple (see Hebrews 13:13), marked by suffering and shame. In fact, Matthew 26:53 would later record the words of Jesus to the effect that he "could call twelve legions of angels" to rescue him from the present trial and certain death, but he set aside that option.

Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 8:16, with its command not to put God to the test. We see a double-sense in the use of this Scripture. On the one hand, Jesus as God's Son must not put God to the test by throwing himself down into the Temple precincts; on the other hand, the Devil should not test God *by testing Jesus* in

³ Later in church history, James, brother of Jesus and leader of the Church in Jerusalem, was martyred by being thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple Mount.

an effort to subvert his mission. Perhaps this is why Luke chooses to place this temptation in the third position (contra Matthew's order): he wants to climax the three encounters with an emphatic assertion that the Devil has no right testing the Lord your God. The Greek word for "test" is an intensified form of the word used in 4:2, *peirazō*, namely, *ekpeirazō* which then means "to make a test out of." In his effort to discredit Jesus as the Son of God, the Devil has made a test out of Jesus, but by implication, he is making a test out of God.

At this juncture, the Devil breaks off the temptation process, having been unsuccessful in discrediting Jesus as God's Son. Foiled at each turn in his strategy, the text tells us that the Devil left Jesus. The Greek word for "left" is *aphistamai* which can mean "leave, stay away, go away, keep away." The departure is qualified, however, by the expression *achri kairou*, "until a season." Implied in this phrase is that the Devil *will return* to engage in further attempts to test Jesus. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he encounters direct assault by demons in their efforts to retain control of human beings. But he also experiences "testing" through the ill-intentioned questions of the religious authorities (see Luke 11:16 as a case in point). Without exception, Jesus is vindicated as God's Son by the wisdom of his answers and the wonder of his actions.

Believe in God, Believe in Me: John 14:1-11

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

This text is commonly used at funerals where it serves to comfort and console the bereaved. Taken as a whole, that is certainly a legitimate application of the passage. However, the depth of Jesus' words exceed their use as reminders of heavenly rest. They tell us that Jesus and the Father have an intimate relationship with one another. Perhaps the definitive introductory statement is this one: "Believe in God; believe also in me." Upon reflection, the connection made between belief in God and belief in Jesus is an important one. In effect, Jesus is saying that the two acts of faith are identical: to believe in God is to believe in Jesus; to believe in Jesus is to believe in God. The Greek form of the two statements looks like this:

*Pisteuete eis ton theon
kai
eis eme pisteuete*

Notice how the word for "you believe" (*pisteuete*) surrounds the saying like two bookends. Observe, also, how the phrases "into God" (*eis ton theon*) and "into me" (*eis eme*) are positioned so that they are next to each other in the text, forming a chiasmus⁴. The result of this construction is to create the identity between Jesus and God described above.

Further, Jesus enhances his identity with God by referring to God as "my Father." In particular, Jesus administers the affairs of his Father's "house" (*oikos*) in much the same way that a royal sovereign might oversee the realm of the king. He knows that the Father's house can accommodate many persons, and he undertakes the role as "preparer" of a place for his followers to which he confidently promises to take them at some time in the future. While the idea of "heaven" is included in this "realm," the concept is actually broader,

⁴ Chiasmus (or simply, chiasm) is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point; that is, the clauses display inverted parallelism. Some prefer calling this a criss-cross structure, following the form A B B A.

suggesting that Jesus has authority to administer the kingdom of God. This is consistent with the royal significance of the title "Son of God." Jesus functions as vice-regent within the "house of God," having full inheritance rights and the ability to designate others (his disciples) as beneficiaries within the kingdom.

The subject of "the way" (Greek: *hodos*) to the Father's house leads Jesus to say that the disciples "know the way" to the place where he is going. Thomas, one of his disciples, questions whether they actually do know the way. Here is an instance of "not knowing what you know"! That is, the way, as it turns out, is Jesus himself (14:6), and the disciples surely "know" Jesus by first-hand experience. The biblical concept of "know" is more than an intellectual grasp of a concept, or even an understanding of something. A certain intimacy is involved, approaching the experience of "love." To know the "way" in the sense Jesus intends, is less about the mechanics of reading a map and more about a relationship with Jesus who assures his followers of a place in God's kingdom. Thomas seems caught up in the "where" and the "how" (Greek: *pou* and *pōs*), and misses the "who"! Jesus immediately corrects his fixation on mechanics with his words "I am the way" (*egō eimi hē ho hodos*). He then explains what that means for his followers: "truth" and "life," the two essential results of knowing Jesus, and the two indispensable requirements for "coming to the Father." Much is implied here.

For Jesus, *truth* comes from the Hebrew idea of *'emeth*, that on which a person leans, the reliable object of trust when one takes a journey. The word is closely connected to *'emūnah*, the traveler's walking stick along the uneven ground and across the eroded highway. As truth, Jesus bears the weight and steadies the feet on the path which leads home to God. This reminds us of John the Baptizer's instructions, based on Isaiah 40, that the road must be made ready for the coming kingdom of God. Why is Jesus the reliable walking stick for the would-be traveler to God's kingdom? It is because he knows the way, having already come from God, he knows the way back to God. That is precisely how *John* describes him in 13:3,

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God...

This, too, belongs to the rich universe of meaning for the phrase "Son of God."

An even greater mystery, moreover, lies within this journey back to God. How will Jesus go back home? Under what circumstances will he return to God in order to prepare the kingdom for his followers? *John* has already told us in his earlier chapters that Jesus, the Word, "became flesh" in order to pitch his tent among the human race as a human being. Returning to God involves a dramatic transition once again, this time through death and resurrection, or as Jesus puts it in 14:6, "I am...the *life*." As the truth, Jesus confidently made his way to the cross where he bore the weight of sin and death (proved himself *true and reliable*); as the life, he rose from the dead, bringing about a restored humanity — a new humanity.

As way, truth and life, Jesus proves himself the reliable guide to knowing God. For him to be the "Son of God" meant that he provided a credible answer to the question, "Who is God?" The concept of deity was sufficiently muddled within paganism, to be sure, in light of the bewildering number of gods and goddesses who ran the world. For Judaism, the problem was even more of a puzzle. On the one hand, Israel declared themselves to be the covenant partners of the One True God, whose covenant with Abraham and his descendents secured the promise of God's blessing. But, on the other hand, judging from the last five hundred years of Jewish history, the reputation of this God had sustained serious damage. How could He be the true God if His people remained in exile to their Gentile overlords, the Romans? Where was the blessing for *most* of Israel, since it appeared that only a small percentage of Israel truly experienced it? God — whatever that word really meant — seemed distant, uninvolved and unreal. His "handlers" were largely the official teachers of Israel who crafted a portrait of this God by explaining His will from the ancient Scriptures. Their interpretations of those texts were, at times, tortured and technical; in Jesus' words, they "strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel" (Matthew 23:24), and became, effectively, "blind guides" — hardly the sort of persons to lead people along the way to God!

Something of this tenuous knowledge of God surfaces in 14:7 where Jesus tentatively wonders aloud, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well." This parallels the idea we saw in 14:1, "Believe in God; believe in me." The Greek text helps us see this through Luke's use of the verb tenses for "know." In the first instance, "you knew" is in the perfect tense (*egnōkate*) which suggests a previous "knowing" in the past which has led to a continuing knowing in the present. Since Jesus uses the word "if" with this tense form, he strongly implies that prior to his arrival, the disciples had not yet achieved that sort of knowledge. The question of God remained a puzzle to them *before Jesus came as the way, truth and life*. Through familiarity with Jesus — his words, deeds, and coming death/resurrection — his followers truly "know" him, and, in knowing him they will know God as well. This was the crucial issue in Israel: knowing the One True God. Who can give Israel reliable knowledge of the One True God? The answer lies with Jesus, "the Son of God."

Jesus presses the implication of his previous "if...then" statement by affirming that "From now on, you know him and have seen him." The temporal phrase, "from now on," comes from the Greek *ap' arti*, which starts in the present and goes beyond into the future. A dramatic shift in the disciples' experience of God is about to take place. Whatever present and future knowledge of God (and of Jesus) they presently imagine will be enhanced by what is about to happen to Jesus. When Jesus "goes away," he does so in death; when Jesus "comes again," he does so in the resurrection. By seeing Jesus go away and come again, the disciples will at last "see God" in a way they have not until now. Indeed, the whole span of Jesus' earthly life, starting with his baptism, including his words and actions, are a revelation of the true nature of God. The disciples "have seen him," Jesus tells them, and *John* uses the perfect tense to communicate this vision of God.

What, then, are we to make of Philip's question: "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (14:8)? The Greek word for "show" is *deiknumi* meaning "to bring to light, display, exhibit, point out, explain." The emphasis falls on making known "the character or significance of something by visual, auditory, gestural or linguistic means." We get the impression that Philip looks right past Jesus and wants what Moses wanted when he was on Mount Sinai: "Show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18). From our earliest introduction to Philip in John 1:43-36, we get the impression that he enjoys "seeing" things. When questioned by Nathaniel about the likelihood that a prophet could come from Nazareth, Philip responds, "Come and see." But in John 14, Jesus raises the bar considerably higher for Philip by asking him to "see the Father" by seeing him (Jesus). Still, Philip has settled on the "sufficient" and "satisfactory" nature of "seeing the Father." The Greek word for these ideas is *arkeō* which essentially has to do with being "content" and "warding off" anything which might take that contentment away. Philip wants what many human beings want: a short-cut to God which makes no serious demands on them. He wants contentment and satisfaction from having the experience of seeing God. It's a bit like the *Bucket List*: doing certain things before we die so that we can finally say, "I did that!" Seeing God falls into the same category for Philip.

"Honestly, Philip," we might be inclined to say, "How could you ever be satisfied with a one-time experience of seeing God?" Jesus presses the envelope with Philip by reminding him of their "long-time" relationship (14:9). The sort of "seeing" Philip has experienced with Jesus has been continuous and ongoing, as the Greek verb tense (perfect) suggests. Already, the disciples "have known" (*egnōkas*) and "have seen" (*heōrakōs, heōraken*), Jesus reminds them. That is, this has been their experience of Jesus "from the beginning" (see 1 John 1:1), and that experience continues into the present. The disciples could hardly disagree with Jesus. What Jesus wants them to do is make the connection between their long-standing relationship with him and the consequential "seeing of the Father." Of course, the unspoken premise of Jesus' argument is that he is the Son of God — since God is his Father! It is the unique and privileged role of the Son to reflect the image of the Father, something *John* affirmed from the beginning (see John 1:14, 18).

In 14:10-11, Jesus further unpacks the special connection Jesus has with God. The following statements express that connection:

"I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (14:10a). Greek: *egō en tō patri kai ho patēr en emoi estin*. For Jesus to claim this sort of unity with the Father is more than just the ordinary relationship Israel might have had with Yahweh, or even that David might have had as king of Israel. Jesus claims to have his very *being* in the Father, while the Father has his very *being* in Jesus, the Son of God. From the standpoint of philosophy, we are led to conclude that Jesus claims *metaphysical* unity with God: he and God are of the same nature (*ōntos*). Jesus illustrates what he means by referring to "The words I say to you" (14:10b) Among the notable aspects of Jesus' ministry were the *words* he spoke. Recall how his townsfolk remarked about his "gracious *words*" (Luke 4:22). Elsewhere in the Gospels we overhear the crowds saying about Jesus' teaching: "He *speaks* as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22; Matthew 7:29). Throughout *John*, we find these descriptions of Jesus' *words*:

"He whom God sent utters the *words* of God" (3:34).

"Many more believed because of his *word*" (4:41).

"The *words* I have spoken to you are Spirit and life" (6:63).

The officers of the Temple, sent to spy on Jesus, return, saying, "No one ever spoke like this man!" (7:46).

*Peter tells Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the *words* of eternal life."*

"The word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (14:24).

Praying to the Father, Jesus says, "I have given them the words you have given me" (17:8).

Recall that in John 1:1 Jesus is called "the Word" (*logos*), and in these texts the Word speaks the Words from God as the Son of God.

Further, the idea of Jesus being "in the Father" means that "the Father is living in me, doing his work" (14:10c). The Greek word for "living" refers not so much to what we would call "animation," but to the continuous and abiding presence of the Father in Jesus. The Greek expresses this through the word *menō* which simply means "to remain, abide, stay, last." *John* uses the present participle to communicate the ongoing action. Also, Jesus combines the "remaining" *presence* of the Father with the "continuous" *work* of the Father. We now have a full statement of what it means for Jesus to be God's Son: God remains in Jesus, speaks through Jesus, and works through Jesus. No other human being can claim such a relationship with God, though the followers of Jesus enjoy his presence, hear his word and see his actions.

The case for Jesus as God's Son is not, however, not merely a theological fine point. Jesus did not tell his disciples all of these things so that Christians could recite them in one of the creeds — though it is a good thing to do so. Wrapping up his instruction in 14:11, Jesus begins with the word "Believe" (*pisteuete*) just as he began this section in 14:1 ("Believe in God; believe in me"). What is it that the disciples are to *believe*? They are to believe in Jesus (*moi* — the simple dative form of the pronoun). That is, they are to fasten their trust, place the full weight of their lives, and commit themselves wholly to Jesus. There is to be no difference between their faith in Jesus than their faith in God. He reminds them why these two acts of faith should be identical:

"I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (14:11b).

Faith is always in the *person of God* as expressed in the *Son of God*, Jesus the Christ. Such faith transfers from Son to Father, since the two are in perfect unity as the One True God. And if the metaphysical claim seems hard to grasp, Jesus reminds them that "the works" (Greek: *ta erga*) he has done offer sufficient evidence that this theological statement is true.

I Am: John 8:48-58

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." ⁵² The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.'" ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.'" ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

One of the reasons Jesus, God's Son, became a human being was to restore the honor of God in the world. As we have noted, the word "God" had been diluted religious distortions, whether pagan or Jewish. It was simply not sufficient to say "I believe in God." Nor should a person of faith necessarily be offended by someone who said, "I don't believe in God." A reasonable question in both cases would have been: "Who is this *God* you do or do not believe in?" This passage begins with an affirmation by Jesus, "I honor my Father" (Greek: *timō ton patera mou*). The verb for *honor* means "to regard, reverence, esteem, value." Often used in both financial and judicial contexts, the term meant to "estimate" the price, value, or penalty of something/someone. Applied to God, how did Jesus "esteem" his Father? As we weigh the evidence for Jesus as God's Son, this passage helps us understand how Jesus demonstrated his Sonship by the honor he paid to God as His Father.

Exploring the Context: 8:12-47

Jesus is embroiled in a serious controversy about his *identity*, a three year old conflict between himself and the official interpreters of Second Temple Judaism (Pharisees, etc.). The context of this passage is 8:12-47 in which Jesus makes a number of critically important statements about himself:

1. "I am the light of the world" (12).
2. "I know where I came from and where I am going" (14).
3. "I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me" (16).
4. "My witness is the Father who sent me" (18).
5. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (19).
6. "I am from above...I am not of this world" (23).
7. "I am the one I claim to be" (24).

Following this series of succinct affirmations, Jesus' detractors pose the quintessential question:

"Who are you?" (25)

He then proceeds to call himself "Son of Man" (28), an intentional reference to the figure appearing in the prophecy of Daniel 7, a being who approaches God's throne and receives the kingdom from Him. Again, Jesus proceeds with a series of poignant statements about his identity:

1. "I am the one I claim to be" (28).
2. "I do what the Father has taught me" (29)
3. "I do what pleases the Father" (29)

At this point in John's Gospel, the writer records the response of certain members of his audience:

"Even as he spoke, many put their trust in him" (30)

The subsequent exchanges between Jesus and his opponents galvanize around a single question: "Who is your father?" Of course, the corollary to this inquiry is "Whose son are you?" Jesus wants to be clear that *what he tells people* is "what I have seen in the Father's presence" (8:38a). By contrast, he observes that his opponents *do things* which look more like the actions of children who have a completely different father (8:38b).

1. The argument formed by Jesus' opponents makes the statement "We are Abraham's children" (8:39a) equivalent to the statement "The only Father we have is God himself" (8:41b). They suggest that Jesus is, in fact, an illegitimate son (8:41b), no doubt a slur based on the rumor mill which suggested Mary had conceived Jesus out of wedlock, perhaps by a Roman soldier in Nazareth. The virginal conception of Jesus was frequently disallowed through such slander.
2. Jesus counters that technically they may be children of Abraham, but practically they say and do things which Abraham never said or did.
 - a. Once more, he implies that his opponents have a very different father (39b-41c). The proof of being God's children was loving God's Son, which the opponents of Jesus were plainly not doing.

- b. He elaborates further, this time wondering aloud why his plain speech was not understood by so learned a group of people (43).
- c. But the problem for Jesus' opponents was not the lack of mental capacity, but something deeper and more sinister. He says: "You are unable to hear what I say" (8:43) The word "unable", from the Greek *ou dunasthe*, refers to a genuine inability to do something. Jesus explains the cause: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (8:44).
- d. In this lengthy response, Jesus demarcates the world into those who are children of God and those who are children of the devil. The word for "devil" is *diabolos*, literally, to "throw across (or against)", "oppose", "slander", "accuse falsely". Appropriately named here by Jesus, *diabolos* personifies the conduct of Jesus' *opponents* in more than one sense. In fact, two clear actions mark them out as "children of the *diabolos*", namely, "murder" and "lying".
- e. Jesus continues his argument that they are not God's children, but the devils, by reminding them of their refusal to believe the truth he tells them (8:45). He rejects the charge that he is a "sinner" (8:46) and makes a strong connection between their refusal to accept the truth and the fact that they "don't belong to God" (8:47).

Now we come to this week's reading.

Unwilling to give ground to Jesus' claim about being God's Son, his opponents, ironically, fall into his trap. They show their true colors by resorting to the kind of "slander" that marks them out as children of the devil, just as Jesus alleged. They do this by lapsing into name-calling, a common logical fallacy when an opponent cannot find a solid argument. "Samaritan" and "demon-possessed" (8:48) would be appellatives designed to stir strong emotion in the audience. The Samaritan was part of an ethnic group, north of Judea, regarded by Israel as compromised both racially and religiously. You will recall Jesus' encounter with the "woman of Samaria" in John 4, and also the subversive story of the "Good Samaritan" told by Jesus when answering the question "who is my neighbor?" Jesus reached across the aisle in an effort to "seek and save the lost", and if that meant Samaritans and demon-possessed persons, so be it. No doubt this name-calling also included an implied argument of "guilt by association", since Jesus regularly spent time with such persons, much to the chagrin of the religious leaders.

The society in which Jesus lived placed high value on the twin reputations of "honor" and "shame". What the opponents of Jesus were trying to do was "shame" him in a number of ways, so as to diminish the confidence people would have in him. They were undermining trust in Jesus by doing so. But Jesus won't take the bait, and instead ignores the Samaritan charge, denies the demon-possession charge, and then proceeds to talk about *a higher kind of honor* than that which his opponents are trying to tarnish by their slanders of him. This supreme honor is the honor Jesus gives to his Father, while, maliciously, his opponents seek to dishonor him (8:49). By implication, the appropriate response to a person who honors the Father, is to honor that person. Here is the highest form of trust: to honor Jesus, as God's Son. The role of God's Son is, says Jesus, not to bring honor to himself, and so the slander his opponents fling at him in no way phases him. Jesus will leave the judgment of his opponents to the one Person worthy of supreme honor, his Father, God (8:50).

Then Jesus raises the bar still higher. Being God's Son in the sense Jesus intends also means to be *the giver of everlasting life* (8:51). Jesus tells his audience, seemingly dismissing his opponents for the moment, that the reward for trusting in him will be this new kind of life. The theme of "eternal life" is prominent in the Gospel of John (John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2, 3). The idea that a person "will never see death" is not just about the prolongation of *this life*. For many human beings the mere extension of human life would not be a blessing but a curse. Human imperfections magnified into eternity would hardly qualify as a blessing. No, when the Bible speaks about "eternal life", it uses language which suggests that we are called to share *the life of God Himself*. Much would need to change in human nature for

that to be true, and Jesus comes to bring about that transformation. Shortly after this conversation between Jesus and his opponents, two important events will transpire which underscore the meaning of his words, "never see death". The first is the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and the second is Jesus' own resurrection. The Greek language literally says, "He shall not finally experience death for an age", that is to say, "Death will not be his permanent condition." That Jesus would offer such a promise to people trusting in him is taken by his opponents as a fresh sign that Jesus is demon-possessed, that he is, in fact, out of his mind. Their argument is based on the fact that Abraham and all the holy men of Israel's history have always died. How can Jesus be an exception to that rule? Everybody must die. Jesus must die. And they must stay dead until God commands otherwise. Then, to once more reaffirm their original question to Jesus, they ask the key question:

Who do you think you are? (8:53b)

The Greek wording is more interesting: "What are you making of yourself?" (*tina seauton poeis*). We might say "Into what are you re-inventing yourself?" They want to charge Jesus with staging a charade and perpetrating a farce. In their estimation, Jesus is a nobody, an illegitimate son of a poor peasant woman who is a Messiah wannabe. They claim he is making up things about himself in order to overcome the shame of his station in life and create a form of false honor in its place. The opponents of Jesus try to discredit him so that people will not put their trust in him, and so that those who have already trusted him would now turn away from him in shame (8:52-53).

But Jesus knows their strategy and he counters with a denial that he is, in fact, trying to "glorify himself", that is, fabricate a false honor. Anything he might claim for himself amounts to nothing (8:54). What does matter to Jesus is that his Father, the one his opponents claim is their God, is the only one who has the right to confer honor on Jesus. And, says Jesus, He has already done so. Jesus, by God the Father's own choice, is the human expression of the honor of God. The reason why Jesus' opponents do not accept the honorable status of Jesus is because they do not know God as their Father, and so they fail to recognize His honor in the life of Jesus (8:55).

At this point, Jesus feels compelled to address the repeated claims by his opponents about Abraham's role in their history. Jesus willingly refers to Abraham as "your father", a fact he hopes to exploit in what he will say next. So what was true of Abraham? Jesus says that

**"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day;
he saw it and was glad" (8:56b)**

This saying is, at the very least, enigmatic and mysterious. Any informed Jew standing in Jesus' audience that day would have known most of the stories about Abraham as told in the *Torah*. What could Jesus possibly mean by suggesting that Abraham anticipated Jesus and actually saw him? To answer that question fully would require a careful reading of Genesis 12-25, looking for hints and allusions to the coming Messiah. Among the likely candidates is this one:

The *akedah* or "binding" of Isaac by Abraham in preparation for an offering to Yahweh (Genesis 22:1-19). When Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?", he hears the reply, "Yahweh will provide himself a lamb". And, as it turned out, mysteriously a ram appeared at the crucial moment Abraham was about to slit his son's throat on the sacrificial altar. Scholars would call this a "type of the Messiah". Jesus was the lamb whom God provided, and, some might even suggest, the "ram caught in the thicket" was a Christophany--the appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. Abraham named the site of these events: *Yahweh will be seen (will provide)* (Genesis 22:14). This is a likely choice, since Jesus uses the language of "seeing" when he makes reference to Abraham. What Abraham "saw" on Mount Moriah was an appearance of the coming Messiah, if not in form, at least in type.

The opponents of Jesus stumble over this attempt to place Jesus in Abraham's earthly life. Instead, they mock Jesus' youth and simply argue that a man less than fifty years could hardly have been around to see Abraham. Of course, Jesus was not making the case for *his seeing Abraham, but rather, for Abraham seeing him*. His

opponents knock for distorting his words give support to his previous claim that they are liars like their father the devil, the father of lies.

Now comes the climactic claim of Jesus:

"Before Abraham was I am" (8:58).

This is not a cute literary device or poetic sleight of hand. By phrasing his words in this fashion, Jesus intentionally casts himself as one with his Father, God. In the Greek, the clause, "I am", is simply *egō eimi*, the personal pronoun "I", followed by the present tense form of the verb "to be" used in the first person singular. The irony of the whole sentence is precisely its genius. A word like "before", used in conjunction with Abraham, would place the setting in the distant past, calling for a verb in the past tense, either aorist, perfect or imperfect. But that's not what we find. Instead, Jesus connects the distant past, filled with the richness of Abraham's life, to his, Jesus', own existence. To put it simply, Jesus is saying, "I am here, but I was there, too". This wordplay comes very close to the formulaic expression: "He who is, was, and is to come" (Revelation 1:4, 8; 4:8). But, more importantly, it has a direct parallel to the conversation between Moses and Yahweh at the site of the "burning bush". Fearing rejection at the hands of Pharaoh the king of Egypt who worshipped many gods and who considered himself to be a god, Moses asks Yahweh "Who shall I say sent me?" In reply, we hear these words:

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations (Exodus 3:14-15).

Notice how the expression "I am" is taken to be a personal name for God. A careful reading of this passage reveals there is a subtle equation of the clause "I am" and Israel's covenant name for God "Yahweh". That is, "I am" = "Yahweh". Hebrew scholars have long noted that the name "Yahweh" is actually derived from the Hebrew verb "to be". In the case of Exodus 3:14-15, the Hebrew form *'eyeh* ("I am") occurs in the imperfect tense, implying that the action is not complete. That could mean a future occurrence or it could mean a past occurrence continuing into the present. This overlapping of these temporal phases allows for the wider meaning of "present continuous action": action breaking forth from the past and thrust into the future. What does Jesus intend by associated himself with this "I am" statement?

On the face of it, Jesus is connecting himself with Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel: the God who appeared to Abraham and to Moses. For those ancient worthies, Jesus appeared in type, symbol and Christophany. Nonetheless, says Jesus, their awareness of him was also a source of incredible joy (8:56). Though Jesus' coming lay out in the future, Abraham was able, by faith and trust, to reach across the historical divide and delight in the One who would one day fulfill the promises made to him and his descendents. "In you are your family will all nations be blessed" (Genesis 12-13). By using this sacred name of himself, Jesus showed himself as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. And it is in this sense, that Jesus discloses himself as the Son of God.

Concluding Thoughts

Historically, the Christian church *grew* in its understanding of Jesus as God's Son. However, based on our study of the three main readings this week, we reject as unhistorical the claim that only *later* did the Church *begin* to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. It is simply not true that the Church councils (and their creeds) *invented* the notion that Jesus was God's Son. Nor can we find any basis in the Gospels for asserting that Jesus never referred to himself as the Son of God. Only a piecemeal and highly selective interpretation of the relevant texts could lead us to the false conclusion that the Jesus who is God's Son is the Jesus of Christianity but not the Jesus of history.

Paul's letters freely use the phrase "Son of God" or its equivalents ("Son, His Son") (Romans 1:3-4, 9; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 15:28; 2 Corinthians 1:19; Galatians 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

In the *Acts*, Paul's first sermon is simply: "He is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). His ministry in Antioch included preaching from the Psalms, "You are my Son..." and applying this text to Jesus (Acts 13:33).

From the letter to the Hebrews, we have extensive references to Jesus as God's Son, drawn from Old Testament texts which have been interpreted as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29).

The balance of the New Testament letters echo this usage (2 Peter 1:17; 1 John 1:3, 7; 2:22-24; 3:8, 12; 4:9-10, 14-15; 5:5, 9-13, 20; 2 John 1:3, 9), as does Revelation 2:18.

In Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ*, he raises the question considered in this week's study: "Was Jesus really convinced that he was the Son of God?" His conversation partner in responding to it is Dr. Ben Witherington III from Asbury Seminary. He says, among other things, "I don't think it's accidental that his [Jesus] ministry does not begin in earnest until after his baptism, when he hears the voice saying, 'You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"⁵ He proceeds to refute the idea that the Church *later invented* the idea of Jesus' Sonship, basing his arguments, in part, on the unlikely possibility that the disciples forgot everything they knew of the historical Jesus. To the question of Jesus' identity, Witherington adds:

Jesus thought he was the person appointed by God to bring in the climactic saving act of God in human history. He believed he was the agent of God to carry that out — that he had been authorized by God, empowered by God, he spoke for God, and he was directed by God to do this task. So what Jesus said, God said. What Jesus did was the work of God.

Under the Jewish concept of agency, 'a man's agent is as himself.' Remember how Jesus sent out his apostles and said, 'Whatever they do to you, they've done to me'? There was a strong connection between a man and his agent whom he sends on a mission.

Well, Jesus believed he was on a divine mission, and the mission was to redeem the people of God. The implication is that the people of God were lost and that God had to do something — as he had always done — to intervene and set them back on the right track. But there was a difference this time. This was the last time. The was the last chance.

Did Jesus believe he was the Son of God, the anointed one of God? The answer is yes. Did he see himself as the Son of Man? The answer is yes. Did he see himself as the final Messiah? Yes, that's the way he viewed himself. Did he believe that anybody less than God could save the world? No, I don't believe he did.

And here's where the paradox gets as quizzical as it can possibly get: the way God was going to save the world was by his Son dying. The most human of all human acts-to die.

Now, God, in his divine nature, doesn't die. So how was God going to get this done? How was God going to be the Savior of the human race? He had to come as a human being to accomplish that task. And Jesus believed he was the one to do it.

Jesus said in Mark 10:45, 'I did not come to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom in place of the many.' This is either the highest form of megalomania or it's the example of somebody who really believes, as he said, 'I and the Father are one.' In other words, 'I have the authority to speak for the Father; I have the power to act for the Father, if you reject me, you've rejected the Father.'

⁵ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 186.

Even if you eliminated the fourth gospel and just read the synoptics, this would still be the conclusion you would come to. And it is the conclusion that Jesus would have led us to if we had a Bible study and asked him this question.

We have to ask, Why is there no other first-century Jew who has millions of followers today? Why isn't there a John the Baptist movement? Why, of all first-century figures, including the Roman emperors, is Jesus still worshiped today, while the others have crumbled into the dust of history?

It's because this Jesus—the historical Jesus—is also the living Lord. That's why. It's because he's still around, while the others are long gone.⁶

Of course, many have challenged Jesus' claim — one which they agree he made. What if we accept as historical fact that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God? Might it not be possible that he was simply *mad*? C.S. Lewis once posed the trilemma about Jesus and his claims: he was either, "Liar, Lunatic or Lord."⁷ Logically speaking, we can't press this distinction too far, since it lands us right in the middle of the fallacy known as the *false dilemma* which reminds us that there may be more choices than those three! Lewis takes a "tighter" viewer which excludes those options. However, he at least forces us to examine the three, and, in this case, the *lunatic* choice. Strobel asks, "Was Jesus crazy when he claimed to be the Son of God?"

Exploring this issue, he spoke with Dr. Gary Collins. A few thoughts from that interview include these:

Well, it's true that people with psychological difficulties will often claim to be somebody they're not. They'll sometimes claim to be Jesus himself or the president of the United States or someone else famous ... However psychologists don't just look at what a person says. They'll go much deeper than that. They'll look at a person's emotions, because disturbed individuals frequently show inappropriate depression, or they might be vehemently angry, or perhaps they're plagued with anxiety. But look at Jesus: he never demonstrated inappropriate emotions. For instance, he cried at the death of his friend Lazarus—that's natural for an emotionally healthy individual.

He certainly got angry at times ... but it was a healthy kind of anger at people taking advantage of the downtrodden by lining their pockets at the temple. He wasn't just irrationally ticked off because someone was annoying him; this was a righteous reaction against injustice and the blatant mistreatment of people. Other deluded people will have misperceptions. They think people are watching them or are trying to get them when they're not. They're out of contact with reality. They misperceive the actions of other people and accuse them of doing things they have no intention of ever doing. Again, we don't see this in Jesus. He was obviously in contact with reality. He wasn't paranoid, although he rightfully understood that there were some very real dangers around him.

Or people with psychological difficulties may have thinking disorders—they can't carry on a logical conversation, they'll jump to faulty conclusions, they're irrational. We don't see this in Jesus. He spoke clearly, powerfully, and eloquently. He was brilliant and had absolutely amazing insights into human nature. Another sign of mental disturbances is unsuitable behavior, such as dressing oddly or being unable to relate socially to others. Jesus' behavior was quite in line with what would be expected, and he had deep and abiding relationships with a wide variety of people from different walks of life.

He was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren't seen as being important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; he responded to individuals based on where they were and what they uniquely needed.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 188-189.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, London: Collins, 1952, pp.54-56. We also find a similar line of reasoning in G. K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), but applied to a character in the story: "He may be God. He may be the Devil. But we think it more likely as a matter of human probability that he is mad."

...if I claimed to be the president of the United States, that would be crazy. You'd look at me and see none of the trappings of the office of president. I wouldn't look like the president. People wouldn't accept my authority as president. No Secret Service agents would be guarding me. But if the real president claimed to be president, that wouldn't be crazy, because he is president and there would be plenty of confirming evidence of that.

In an analogous way, Jesus didn't just claim to be God—he backed it up with amazing feats of healing, with astounding demonstrations of power over nature, with transcendent and unprecedented teaching, with divine insights into people, and ultimately with his own resurrection from the dead, which absolutely nobody else has been able to duplicate. So when Jesus claimed to be God, it wasn't crazy. It was the truth.⁸

The Greeks tell a tale about Procrustes who was a son of the sea god, Poseidon, and who had a house along the road between Athens and Megara. In his house he had an iron bed to which he invited every passer-by to spend the night. He was obsessive compulsive, and if the guests were too short, he stretched them to fit. If the guests proved too tall, he would cut off the excess length. To make matters worse, he had two beds (one short, one long), and so no one ever quite fit exactly! Eventually he was arrested and somebody fitted him to his own bed! This tale has led to a famous expression: a **Procrustean bed**, an arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced. A **Procrustean solution** is the undesirable practice of tailoring data to fit its container or some other preconceived stricture.

Likewise, some, uncomfortable with Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, choose instead to "cut him to fit" their own Procrustean bed, domesticating him so that he fits comfortably into their lives. But Jesus will not allow such tampering with his identity. He came to make God known, and to sacrifice his Sonship is to compromise that mission. In a generation crying out for fresh identity and a new sense of reality, Jesus comes as he did in the first century: "I am the way, the truth and the life..." Jesus brings us home to God precisely because he is God's Son.

Jesus often faced skeptical minds who were doubtful of his claim to be God's Son. To them he issued this challenge:

¹⁷ If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority (John 7:17).

Knowing that Jesus is God's Son comes by participation in God's will. We do not have the luxury of standing on the sidelines and poking at Jesus as if he were a specimen in a laboratory. He invites to step inside the circle he has drawn around himself and God, and then place the full weight of our lives on him.

Glory to God! Amen.

⁸ Strobel, *The Case*, pp. 195-198.

Digger Deeper: A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Son of God
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Son of God*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. What does the central tenet of Judaism tell us about God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)? How do you interpret the statement, "The LORD our God, the LORD is one," and what significance does it have for our belief that Jesus is God's Son? Compare this with 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 and explain Paul's use of the central tenet.
2. Discuss Israel's understanding of God as "Father" and Israel as His "son" based on the following texts: Exodus 19:4; Hosea 11:1; Psalm 27:10; 68:5-6a; 89:26; 1 Chronicles 29:10; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Malachi 2:10.
3. In what ways does Jesus more completely fulfill the role as God's Son? Read Hebrews 1:1-9 and Psalm 2:7 as you consider your answer.
4. What unites Jesus with the Father and the Spirit in Matthew 28:19? Explain what "the name" means in this context.
5. This week's first reading is Luke 4:1-13. What claim about Jesus is the Devil trying to disprove in his testing of Jesus? How does Jesus establish that claim by the way he responds to the Devil's temptations? What function does the Word of God have in Jesus' response, and what does this tell us about the relationship of Jesus to God?
6. Please read John 14:1-11. How does Jesus speak about God in this passage? What is the significance of the unique relationship that Jesus has with the God? To what important purpose does Jesus put that relationship? Discuss the questions raised by Thomas and Philip.
7. How do the following statements support the case that Jesus is God's Son: "Believe in God; believe also in me" (14:1); "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:10-11, used twice)?
8. Study John 8:48-58 in the larger context of John 8:12-58. What key question is put to Jesus in 8:25 and 8:53? Skim through 8:12-58 and list the different ways Jesus answers that question. Pay special attention to statements which begin "I am..." How do each of these statements support the view that Jesus is the Son of God? How do they contribute to a deeper understanding of what "Son of God" actually means?
9. What do you think Jesus meant when he said "Abraham saw my day and was glad" (8:56b)? Read Genesis 22:1-19 as background, and then suggest possible connections to Jesus' statement about Abraham.
10. The statement "Before Abraham was I am" (8:58) climaxes this passage. How do you interpret it? Compare Exodus 3:14-15 as you think about your answer.
11. Consider the ways other New Testament writers use the phrase "Son of God": 1) Paul (Romans 1:3-4, 9; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 15:28; 2 Corinthians 1:19; Galatians 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:10); 2) the book of *Hebrews* (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29); and, 3) the letters of *John* (1 John 1:3, 7; 2:22-24; 3:8, 12; 4:9-10, 14-15; 5:5, 9-13, 20; 2 John 1:3, 9).
12. What does Jesus require from anyone who wants to "know" that he is God's Son (John 7:17)