

Sonship: A Motif of Obedience and Inheritance

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The Old Testament: Failed Sons

The idea of sonship comes through the pages of Scripture in diverse and unique ways. Although the theme of sonship is diverse and unique, there are two features that run through every biblical epoch, obedience and inheritance. Throughout the biblical plotline Old Testament sons did not achieve the obedience necessary to be regarded as the true son, which inevitably denied them access to the inheritance reserved for them by God. The theme of sonship is not a New Testament idea only (e.g., Jesus, the Son of God), but begins back in Genesis and develops, forms, and expands throughout the biblical storyline to eventually find its fulfillment in Jesus and his Church.

In the opening chapters of Genesis God creates the world and humanity. Adam is placed in the garden to cultivate, tend, and have dominion over the earth (Gen 1:27-30). He is charged with being fruitful and multiplying a race of sons and daughters who will live under God's rule. Made in the image of God, Adam is God's first son. He is God's chosen representative on earth to replicate God's dominion over the universe. The image of God is carried out through Adam's intellect, will, emotions, and even his physical body.¹ Although not divine, this son is like his father in every way. However, the son fails to keep the command, which is not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17). It is speculative to suggest the reward for Adam if he remained faithful to God's command; however, his continued existence in the presence of God surely was reward enough (Gen 3:8). Because Adam sinned, his privileged status as son is now tarnished and his intimate presence with God is taken away. His effort of procreation to produce a line of godly sons and daughters will be met with opposition because sin now plagues the human race. The story of Adam begins a pattern of sonship that carries all throughout the biblical storyline. A godly line and an ungodly line begin to emerge in the biblical plotline that will only be rectified in the promised seed to come (Gen 3:15).

As humanity reproduces and more people begin to live on the earth, two opposing lines continue to develop. People such as Abel, Seth, and Enoch represent the godly line. The godly line eventually produces Noah. Noah is the only righteous man in the land after the sons of God had unholy relations with the daughters of men.² Noah is a son of God who is charged to build an ark because God is going to destroy humanity. The connection between Noah and Adam can be made based on three things. First, Noah, as the head of his family, represents what Adam was to the human race—the beginning of humanity. Second, Noah is charged with the same command as Adam. Noah is to be fruitful and multiply with the hope that he will produce a race of humans who will serve and love God (Gen 9:7). Finally, Noah as God's son fails to remain obedient to God and falls into sin when he becomes drunk and exposes himself (Gen 9:20-23). Noah had failed to properly carry out the role as God's son. Both failed to remain

¹ For an excellent discussion on this topic, especially the physical aspect, see Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

² Please see *The Sons of God* at my blog under the Resources tab.

obedient to God, which consequently meant that both never received their inheritance as God's son.

The sons of God idea continues with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just like each of the previous sons, all three patriarchs fail in some respect to be the faithful and obedient son, either by their own sin or their own frail circumstances. However, each of them are commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 12:2-3; 17:2, 6-8; 22:17-18; 26:3-4, 24; 28:3-4; 35:11-12; 47:27). What we see emerge in the biblical plotline with the patriarchs is that part of the faithful son's reward is the multiplication of seed and inheritance of the land. Through a single nation God would seek to bring about a race of godly sons and daughters and their reward would be the inheritance of the land.

In the land of Goshen the sons of Israel became numerous (Exo 1:7). Threatened by the large population of Israelites, Pharaoh enslaves the children of Israel. God raises up Moses to deliver them. At the Lord's command Moses is to confront Pharaoh and demand that he let God's firstborn son go free (Exo 4:21-23). At this point in the storyline of Scripture the concept of son takes on a corporate aspect. Israel now is identified as God's son. Israel's reward for remaining faithful as God's firstborn son is multiplication (a great nation) and inheritance of the land (the Promised Land). Not only does the idea of sonship take on a corporate dimension, the promise tied to faithful obedience expands after the Israelites leave Egypt (Exo 19:4-6; cf., Hos 11:1). If the people keep God's covenant he will give them three things. First, they will be his own possession among all the peoples. Second, they will be a kingdom of priests, and finally, they will be a holy nation. The promises given to Israel recapture the intimate fellowship that Adam had with God (Exo 25:8; 29:45; Lev 26:12; cf., Jer 31:1; Ezek 37:27). However, Israel's history was plagued with idolatry and immortality and proved that they were no more faithful than their fathers.

The idea of sonship continues through the book of Joshua and Judges. Many leaders come and go in the history of Israel that prove to be unfaithful sons, either because of their sin or mortality. The books of Samuel reveal that the long line of failed sons continues. The sons of Eli and Samuel do not follow in the ways of the Lord, but the Lord provides a faithful son to rule over Israel (so it appears). Saul is chosen as king to rule over God's people. He is to follow the pattern of what a king is to be according to the law (Deut 17:14-20). With the selection of Saul as king over the Israelites God adds another dynamic to the son motif. The idea of sonship is expanded to include a royal dimension. Although Saul started down the right path, he soon demonstrated the same salient feature of all the other sons of Israel—disobedience (1 Sam 13-15).

Saul is removed as king and David is chosen as his successor (1 Sam 16:1-14). Although Saul and David were handsome men (1 Sam 9:2; 16:12); God looked at the heart of a man, rather than his physical features. David is a faithful and obedient king. He pleases God with his obedience and is a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). Under David's kingship Israel begins to flourish in the land. David moves the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and desires to build God a permanent home. By bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and then offering sacrifices, David was assuming the role of priest (1 Sam 6:12-19; cf., 1 Sam 2:35-36). Saul was condemned for taking on such priestly actions (1 Sam 13:5-14; cf., 2 Chro 26:1-21). David, however, was not condemned for such acts because God was going to establish a special relationship with him that helps further define the idea of sonship in the biblical plotline.

Although David desired to build a permanent house for God, it is God who will build

a house for David (2 Sam 7:8-17; cf., 1 Chro 28:1-5). God makes a covenant with David and promises that he will raise up a permanent king from his loins that will shepherd God's people. God will establish the throne of this future king forever and his lovingkindness shall never depart from him. God will be a father to this future king and this future king will be a son to God. Three things become apparent from this covenant. First, the idea of sonship being tied to kingship is reinforced. Second, the idea of sonship is also connected to priesthood because as David was the son of God who functioned as a priest, so will this future son.³ Finally, this son will be God's faithful son who will not fail because his kingdom will endure forever. In response to God's covenant favor, David offers a prayer of thanksgiving.⁴ In his prayer David makes an interesting statement (2 Sam 7:19). The "charter of man" or "law of man" seems to point to the idea that through this future son God will restore humanity. If this interpretation is correct then this faithful son will establish what Adam could not do—a race of sons submissive to God as their king.⁵ By all appearances David and his son Solomon seemed to have fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant (land, seed, and blessing) as righteous kings who established God's rule over his people. However, both sons proved to be disobedient. What followed after David and Solomon was a long line of disobedient sons. After the kingdom split into Israel and Judah, God's patience with Israel would end and he would send the people into exile.

Before, during, and after exile God reminds the people that he will still raise up a son like David to rule his people. This future king will bring peace to the land, deliver God's people from the hand of their enemies, and have an everlasting kingdom (Isa 55:3; Jer 30:8-11; Dan 2:1-45; 7:1-28; Ezek 34:23-31; 37:24-28; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11-15). In Zechariah 3:1-10 and 6:9-15 God combines the role of priest and king into one singular office. The person who will fill this role is called Branch, who will purify God's people, gather them from among the nations, and will build the house of the Lord (cf., Hagg 2:5-9). The function of this future priestly-king is reminiscent of the covenant made with David and fulfills a pattern developed throughout the biblical storyline of a future son who will rule over God's people and intercede on their behalf. The promise found in Zechariah of a future priestly-king reminds the people of Israel that God has not forgotten his covenant with Abraham and David. God not only reminds the people of these covenants, but reinforces that he will bring judgment to his people and the nations, a role reserved only for a king (Zech 14:16-19; Mal 3:1-7; 4:1-6).

New Testament: The Faithful Son

The New Testament writers identify Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus fulfills the role of son in multiple and dynamic ways that bring together in final form the Old Testament vision of God's faithful son.

³ The Old Testament has already revealed on numerous occasions where the King-Priest idea is combined. Melchizedek is a priest of God and king of Salem (Gen 14:17-20). Moses functions a king (leading God's people; Exo 15:22; Psa 77:20) and priest (interceding for the people; Exo 33:12-23; Num 11:1ff) through their wilderness wanderings.

⁴ We find in the Psalms an expansion of David's thanksgiving where he writes about the faithful son who is king and priest (Psa 2:1-12; 110:1-7; cf., Psa 72, 89, 132).

⁵ See William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (UK: Paternoster, 1984), 151-152.

The Early Chapters of Matthew

Both Matthew and Luke record the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus from his adoptive father's side (Matt 1:1-17). Matthew carefully establishes how Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham and the promised king from David's royal line. Moreover, in his first few chapters, Matthew demonstrates how Jesus fulfills the promise of God dwelling with his people, how he is the savior of God's people, his kingship over the Gentiles, how he brings the end of Jewish exile, and how he is the faithful son (Matt 1:21-23; 2:1-11, 15, 17-18). What is of special importance to the present discussion is how Jesus fulfills Hosea 11:1. Jesus is identified as the son who was called out Egypt; however, in the Old Testament that son is Israel. By fulfilling the Hosea passage Jesus is identified by Matthew as the true and faithful son. Whereas Israel disobeyed God after the Exodus during their wilderness experience and subsequent life in the land; Jesus as God's true son will not fail (cf., Exo 4:22-23).

Matthew carefully shows how Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel in his life; however, without flaw or disobedience. Jesus comes out of a water experience (baptism) and is immediately driven into the wilderness to face temptation (Matt 3:13-17; 4:1-11; cf., 1 Cor 10:1-2). When Israel was in the wilderness they failed to obey the Lord. Israel's failures in the wilderness can be summed up in three acts of disobedience: grumbled against God for daily provision (Exo 16:1-7), worshiped other gods (Exo 32:1-9), and questioned the authority of God (Num 17:1-13). Interestingly, the contents of the Ark of the Covenant were reminders of God's goodness in the face of Israel's rebellion (manna, the Decalogue, and Aaron's rod that budded, Heb 9:4). Jesus faces the same temptations as Israel. He is tempted to rely on physical food, rather than the Word of God (Matt 4:3-4; cf., Deut 8:3). He is tempted to mistrust God's authority and protection (Matt 4:5-7; cf., Psa 91:11). Finally, he is tempted not to worship the Lord (Matt 4:8-10; cf., Deut 6:13). However, every way that Israel failed; the true son of God does not fail, but overcomes temptation and proves that he is unlike the previous sons. After facing temptation, Jesus enters the land, gives a new law in contrast to the Mosaic Law and begins to conquer the land by the work of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel. Jesus does not fail in the land, but brings salvation to those sitting in darkness and exposes the wickedness of God's enemies (Matt 4:12-28:20). Jesus recapitulates the life of Israel and, thus, proves to be the true Israel, the true son of God. Jesus now accomplishes for his people what they failed to do on their own; obedience to God and salvation to the nations, which results in God granting to this son all authority and power as king over the cosmos (Matt 28:18).

The Genealogy of Luke

While Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus from his adoptive father's side (establishing his kingship), Luke establishes Jesus' genealogy from his mother's side. This establishes that he is a physical descendant from the loins of David (Luke 3:23-38; cf., 2 Sam 7:12).⁶ Luke's genealogy takes on a unique form that helps demonstrate Jesus as the true son. While Matthew develops the sonship idea with direct quotations from the Old Testament and carefully draws parallels between Israel and Jesus, Luke takes a more direct approach. Luke employs the word "son" to connect each person in the genealogy. Tracing the genealogy all the

⁶ Please see *The Importance of the Two Genealogies of Jesus* at my blog under the Resources tab.

way back to Adam, Luke establishes that Adam was the son of God, as was Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and now Jesus. Luke carefully demonstrates that the sonship theme is not new, but a motif that is crucial to understanding Jesus' identity and mission. Immediately after tracing Jesus' genealogy, Luke records Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Unlike the previous sons who failed in their respective historical settings, Jesus, the true son, does not fail, but overcomes sin (Luke 4:1-13). By employing the sonship idea to describe Jesus' genealogy, Luke demonstrates that Jesus must physically identify with these previous sons if he is to overcome where they failed. In other words, the incarnation is significant to Christian Theology because it demonstrates the physical identification needed by Jesus to redeem humanity. Since Jesus has overcome sin and temptation as the true physical son, he shows what it truly means to be a son of God and; thus, paves the way for those who believe in him to become the children of God (John 1:12).

The Son of Man / The Fruitful Son

Throughout the gospels Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man; a title that is unique and difficult to understand. The phrase, "son of man" is used throughout the Old Testament to speak of an individual man or humanity (Num 23:19; Job 25:6; Psa 8:4; 80:17; 144:3; Isa 51:12; 56:2; Jer 49:18; 50:40; 51:43; Ezek 2:1ff; Dan 8:17).⁷ In the book of Daniel the Son of Man title is used in an exclusive sense to speak of a future ruler who will be endowed with majesty and authority from God (Dan 7:13). This future man will be given dominion and power so as to rule all the nations. Jesus takes this title Son of Man and applies it to himself. He uses the title to speak of his death, his glorification, and his future return. Clearly, Jesus identifies himself as that future king who receives a kingdom from the Father. The connections to the Davidic covenant are plain, but the Son of Man title also has another facet that is important. Jesus, as the true Son of Man, demonstrates that where all other sons of men have failed he does not fail. In other words, Jesus proves to be the man par-excellence—the true man.

The writer of Hebrews (2:5-18) is clear to distinguish between Jesus and every other man that came before him. Because of sin man was unable to subdue all things to himself; thus, Jesus as the true man comes and subdues all things unto himself (Heb 2:5-8; cf., Psa 8:4-6). In order for Jesus to subject all things to himself it was necessary for him to take on human flesh (Heb 2:9-10). By taking on human flesh, Jesus not only brought all things into subjugation to himself, but secured salvation for the elect (Heb 2:11-18). Quoting from Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:17-18 the writer of Hebrews states that what David proclaimed to the sons of Jacob and what Isaiah wrote about himself and a believing remnant, Jesus has done as the true son for the true Israel.

Two things have taken place because Jesus is the true man. First, Jesus has received all power and authority. This power and authority was authenticated by the resurrection. By raising Jesus from the dead God was declaring him as the man who is appointed to judge the

⁷ It is interesting to note that God's reference to Ezekiel as 'son of man' shows him as a type of Christ. Ezekiel was a priest who took on the role of a prophet. Jesus as the true 'son of man' takes on the role of prophet and priest. For further study see Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*, Vol 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

nations (Matt 28:18; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom 1:1-4; 2:16; 14:9; 2 Tim 4:1; Rev 19:1-19). Furthermore, as the true man Jesus is the inheritor of all God provided and promised to Adam. Adam was given eternal communion with God and given dominion over all of God's creation; however, Adam sinned. Jesus, as the last Adam and the true son, inherits all of God's creation as Lord (Eph 1:9-10, 20-23; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-18; Heb 1:2). Jesus perfectly does the Father's will, unlike previous sons. Therefore, this son recognizes that at the right hand of God are pleasures forever (Psa 16:1-11; 40:1-9; Heb 10:1-10). Second, Jesus not only secured salvation for the elect at the cross, but as the firstborn from the dead (or the first man back from the dead), he insures the future renewal of his offspring with his resurrection (Rom 8:23, 29; Col 1:18; 1 Cor 15:20, 23; Rev 1:5; 14:4). Jesus is producing a new race of humans who are born of the Spirit (John 3:3; Gal 4:29). He is accomplishing what Adam, Noah, Abraham, and others failed to do—he is fruitful and multiplying a race of God-loving sons (Rom 5:14-16; 1 Cor 15:22, 45; cf., Isa 53:10; Matt 12:46-50). Day by day these redeemed sons are being renewed in the image of the one who created them (Col 3:10). In other words, these sons of God are discovering what it means to live as a true human being created in the image of God. The Holy Spirit is accomplishing this work of renewal in the life of believers and the example he points us to is Jesus (John 14:16-21; 16:12-15; Gal 5:16; Eph 5:18; Heb 12:1-12; cf., 1 Cor 11:1). Jesus not only provides us an example to follow, but makes us sharers in his inheritance, which includes dominion over the whole world and judgment of the wicked (Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13; 8:17, 32; Gal 3:29; Eph 3:6; 1 Cor 6:3; Titus 3:7; Rev 2:26-27; 21:1-2). Jesus is the true Son of Man who is producing a new race of human beings who call God their Father, obey him from the heart, and will one day share in his presence for all eternity (2 Cor 6:16-7:1).

The Priestly-King Building God's House

If Jesus is the true son, then he is also the promised priestly-king in accordance with the covenant made with David. Jesus is presented throughout the New Testament as the promised king of Israel. In the Gospels Jesus calls himself the son of David, which connects him to the royal promises (Matt 22:42-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:42-44). In the book of Acts Peter and Paul declare that Jesus is Israel's promised king; thus, fulfilling the Davidic covenant (Acts 2:22-36; 13:34-36; cf., Rom 1:3; 1 Cor 15:25; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 1:13; Rev 5:5; 22:16). Perhaps the most potent picture of Jesus' present reign on David's throne is found in Acts 15:1-18. In this passage James and the elders at Jerusalem are seeking to understand the place of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. Understanding that God was now including the Gentiles as demonstrated from Peter's encounter at the house of Cornelius, the apostles agree not to place unnecessary stipulations on them from the Mosaic Law. To further support their conclusion James cites Amos 9:11-12. Amos 9:11-12 foretells that the coming of Messiah means the reestablishment of the Davidic throne and the inclusion of foreign nations into the covenant promises. James understands that Jesus has fulfilled the Davidic promises; thus, he is presently ruling and building God's house.

The promise of rebuilding the house of God is transformed through Jesus to signify the inclusion of God's elect, both Jew and Gentile. Peter and Paul pick up on Amos 9:11-12 and argue that Jesus is the promised king who is building the house of God (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10; cf., Rev 21:1-22:5). The promise to David that his descendant would be a son of God and a

king forever is clearly fulfilled by Christ. However, Jesus not only fulfills this dual role, but also provides the atonement necessary to build God's house. The writer of Hebrews repeatedly makes this point, connecting Jesus as both king and priest to David and Melchizedek (Heb 3:1-11; 5:1-10; 7:1-28; 10:11-18). The dual role that both David and Melchizedek played is complete in Jesus; however, Jesus goes beyond the historical role of a priest and offers himself as the only sufficient sacrifice. As the priest in the Old Testament cleansed the people and the temple instruments, Jesus, as the final priest, cleanses God's people (the true temple and instruments) with his own blood (Heb 9:23-28; 10:19-25). Jesus continues his priestly work by making intercession for God's people (Rom 8:34). Jesus as the promised priestly-king becomes the meeting place for God and men and the new temple is God's people that have been sanctified by the blood of Jesus (John 2:13-25; cf., Luke 2:41-51). Jesus as God's forever king, not only rules on David's throne, but also provides atonement for the people. He makes those he has cleansed to be like him, as kings and priests unto God; thus, building a house of people as God's eternal habitation (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 21:10-22:5). Jesus not only fulfills the promise of sonship, but makes the promise available to those who trust in him by his own blood and sacrifice.

God's intention for his creation and for humanity is perfect communion with him. God's purpose to make a race of humans who would obey him from the heart was not just for Israel, but for all peoples of the earth. What previous sons failed to do, Jesus accomplishes by his obedience to the Father. Jesus as the true son fulfills the promises given to these past sons (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, et al). Jesus is not just the fulfillment of the promises, but is the rightful recipient of these promises (Gal 3:16). He provides the atonement for this new race of humans so that they might stand pure and spotless before God. Jesus has purchased with his blood sons and daughters from every tongue, tribe, nation, and people (Rev 5:9). These people comprise a new nation of holy people; the church of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, who share in Jesus' inheritance (Heb 12:23). As God's holy nation, these renewed sons are to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet 1:16). The process of holiness is conformity to God's perfect son—the true man, who will return one day to rescue God's children (Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:1-3).