

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO: “You are my Son”

How much difference can a few Semitic syllables make? The Hebrew of Isaiah 9:6 and the Arabic of Sūra 112, verse 3, have many of the same consonants and vowels, but while the phrase from Isaiah means, “*for a child is born to us,*” the phrase from the Qur’an means, “*he does not beget nor was he begotten.*” The repeating Arabic negative sets the expressions off in different directions. In between, as if caught in the middle of the conversation, is the insistent and clear witness of the Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing this we may have life in his name (John 20:31).

This confession in particular became the focus of the earliest Qur’anic anti-Christian quotations (inscribed in the Dome of the Rock). Yet the controversy over the Christian confession of Jesus’ divine Sonship seems to have begun not from Christian polemic against Islam, but rather from Muslim denial of the well-established Christian confession.

1. Denial under the Dome

- The denial of the divine Sonship of Jesus is one of the main themes of the Dome’s inscriptions (Q 4.171, 17.111, 19.35, 112.3). Therefore it is essential to try to describe what the Gospel meant when it called Jesus the “Son of God,” and to understand why the Qur’an finds this title so abhorrent.

2. The Son of God in the Gospel

- The clear affirmation of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Son of God (e.g. John the Baptist—John 1:32, 34; Nathanael—John 1:49; Martha—John 11:27; Jesus—John 10:36; etc.). John 5:19-47 is a central passage for understanding what the Gospel means when it calls Jesus the Son of God.

3. The meaning of the Son of God in the Gospel

- In John 5:19-47 Jesus explained the things that make him the Son of God: (a) he does what the Father does—5:19, (b) the Father’s unique love for him—5:20 (see the Father’s words at Jesus’ baptism & transfiguration—2 Peter 1:16-18), (c) the Father entrusts “all judgment” to the Son—5:22, 27 (d) the Son is worthy of the same honor as the Father—5:23, (e) he has the power to give life to the dead—5:25-26 (cf. Romans 1:3-4).

4. Jesus’ command to guard his identity

- In the Gospel accounts it is Satan (Matthew 4:3,6) and Jesus’ enemies (Matthew 27:40,43) who questioned—or denied—his Sonship, while his disciples confessed that Jesus was the Son of God and had their confession directly affirmed (Matthew 16:17).
- Jesus’ tendency to warn his disciples to keep quiet about his identity as Son of God (e.g. Matthew 16:20) is not due to any lack of certainty in his own identity, but rather due to his humility and the faithlessness and misunderstandings of the people (John 2:24-25).

5. Denial of Son of God in the Qur’an

- The Qur’an contains a number of passages that focus on the concept of “son of Allah” and several that deny it in very strong terms (Q 112.3; 19.89-90; 9.30). Some express shock with “glory to him” (Q 2.116, 4.171, 10.68, 19.35). Some claim that unidentified people are saying, “Allah has taken a son” (Q 2.116; 10.68; 17.111; 19.35, 88, 92). In addition to verses that strongly deny the concept that Allah would have a son, the Qur’an contains a curious verse which seems to admit the possibility (Q 43:81).
- There is a problem with the frequent Qur’anic claim, “they say, ‘Allah has taken a son’” because the Gospel declares Jesus to be the *pre-existent* Son of God (John 1:1-3; 17:5; 1 John 1:2; Colossians 1:17).

6. Meaning of the Qur’anic denial

- Why does the Qur’an deny that God has a Son? **(1)** the Qur’an seems to imply that to confess the Son of God would be to say Allah needs help, which Allah does not need—Q 10.68; 17.111, **(2)** Belief in the Son of God is understood to be inappropriate to Allah’s identity—Q 19.92, **(3)** the Qur’an seems to understand that those who confess the Son of God believe in a relationship between God and a woman—Q 6.101. The New Testament does not make this link, nor have Christians around the world believed this when they have confessed that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Nickel explores whether the disagreement between the Gospel and the Qur’an over the Son of God is only a matter of misunderstanding, or if it represents a basic disagreement about the identity of Jesus.