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# "THE SON OF GOD"

By Jacob Jocz, Toronto

In the dialogue between Church and Synagogue, the one theme which dominates the discussion above every other is the doctrine of the Trinity. This is understandable as the Synagogue regards herself as the God-appointed custodian of strict Monotheism. The Trinitarian concept is peculiarly Christian and derives its origin from the N. T. where the Messiah is frequently referred to as the Son of God. The whole Christology of the Church both as expressed in Creed and liturgy grew out of the concept of the Son of God.

The discussion on this particular subject is as old as the Church itself and is already implied in N. T. passages like Joh. 5. 18 and 10. 33. Here Jesus is plainly accused of claiming kinship with God in a special and unheard of way. Justin's Dialogue with Trypho[1], Origin's dispute with Celsus[2] and many hints in the rabbinic literature of the ancient Synagogue[3] show proof that this was a major subject in the controversy between Judaism and Christianity. To this day it remains the focal point of the discussion whenever Jew and Christian meet each other on the level of faith.

## *1. The historical problem*

The concept Son of God as understood by the Church presents a major historical problem. Scholars have to explain how a purely "Jewish" concept of the Messiah developed into the "Christian" idea of the Son of God. Many theories have been propounded and the literature is vast. In fact, all the problems connected with the N. T. hinge on this question. We naturally cannot enter into a detailed discussion of the many solutions proposed by scholars. Here we only confine ourselves to a few basic observations.

[1] Cf. Dial. 65.

[2] Cf. contra Celsum, I, 49.

[3] Cf. J. Bergmann, Jüdische Apologetik im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter, 1908, 81ff.

It is a fact that the concept Son of God in the Christian sense of the phrase is already embedded in the earliest strata of the N. T. sources. It certainly dominates the Pauline Epistles which are prior to any of our written Gospels. The tendency has therefore been to explain St. Paul in the context of a non-Jewish background. In this connection some very extravagant theories have been constructed with the intention of severing the Apostle to the Gentiles from his Jewish milieu. More moderate scholars work on the principle of a gradual development from a Biblical to a more speculative metaphysical concept of Messiahship to which St. Paul made his own contribution[4]. It is interesting to note that Montefiore who wrote from a Jewish point of view already worked on a similar hypothesis.

Montefiore begins with the premiss that in Jewish circles the Messiah was regarded as the son of God, but in such a description there was nothing of a Trinitarian flavour. To Jews such a phrase was near at hand; Israel was God's people and every Jew was a son of God. The Messiah, the Anointed of God, was *the* Son by reason of his greater devotion and zeal. This was the concept of the Messiah, Jesus inherited from his Jewish background. Regarding himself the Messiah, he also looked upon himself as *the* Son[5]. Only later as Christian doctrine develops, "Jesus becomes the Son of God not merely as the Messiah, but as metaphysically related to the Godhead[6]". This new concept of the Messiah introduced a foreign element which marks the point of departure from Judaism and draws a dividing line between Church and Synagogue. For this reason the controversy, in the Jewish view, is not with Jesus who remains to the end a faithful Jew, but with Christianity which has mistaken the title "Son of God" and has put upon it the wrong construction:

> What Jews have denied in thousands to protest against was not the teaching of Jesus, but the teaching of the Church — the incarnation, the Trinity, the worship of the Man-God, the mediation of the Messiah...[7].

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[4] Cf. Günther Bornkamm, Jesus von Nazareth, 1956, pp. 160, 174, 204.

[5] C. G. Montefiore, The Synoptic Gospels, 1909, I, 47.

[6] Ib. XCIII.

[7] Ib. II, 593.

If this argument is valid, then the responsibility for the strange aberration rests with Saul of Tarsus who attached a metaphysical connotation to the Messiah before there was yet any written Gospel. The source of the Church's christology must be sought in the Pauline epistles. It is because of this fact that Jewish scholars single him out for special attack. He is looked upon as the real culprit who introduced this new element which changed the whole nature of what was once a genuine Jewish movement[8]. But the surprising feature about the whole situation is the fact that in St. Paul's letters we already find a fully developed Christology in which the Son of God occupies a central position. It has therefore been the task of scholars to explain the origin of this strange phenomenon.

The easiest way of dealing with the problem is to say that Paul and his successors adopted pagan ideas from the religious beliefs of Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome[9]. This view expressed by J. Klausner is somewhat modified by a later passage which we think worth quoting in his own words:

> Saul-Paul of Tarsus, who was a Jew, but one steeped in Greek culture, began to employ the concept "Son of God" in a sense close to but not identical with the pagan concept: as Messiah, Jesus is "Son of God" in the sense of a "heavenly man" not susceptible to sin nor even to death ... This was the first step toward deification. But Paul the Jew did not go so far as to call Jesus "God"[10].

This is so simple a solution that we cannot help questioning its validity. It is therefore necessary to have yet another glance at St. Paul's christology.

### 2. *Pauline Christology*

J. Gresham Machen in his book *The Origin of Paul's Religion* has brought out very forcefully the extent of Paul's dependence upon the tradition of the Church. This factor has been overlooked by scholars in their assessment of the Pauline christological outlook. If we are to accept extraneous pagan influence upon the

[8] Cf. Joseph Klausner, From Jesus to Paul, 1944, 112, etc., etc.

[9] So Joseph Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel, 1956, 389.

[10] Ib. 528.

Apostle we must equally accept similar influence upon the primitive Church at the earliest time. On this score we fully agree with K. L. Schmidt when he says:

> Das uns erhaltene älteste Evangelium, das des Markus, setzt den Messiasglauben, den Christuskult und -mythus voraus, der jenseits aller Persönlichkeitspsychologie steht[11].

This means that as early as the Gospel of St. Mark we have a fully developed outlook akin the that of St. Paul.

The other possibility is to explain the Pauline Christology out of the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic writings. This has been attempted many times and J. Klausner inclines towards such a view[12]. But on Klausner's own evidence, perhaps with the exception of the Syriac Book of Baruch[13], the Apocryptal and Pseudepigraphic writings represent a "Jewish" view of the Messiah. Klausner says in connection with the Fourth Book of Esra:

> This is the thoroughly Jewish view, in complete opposition to Christianity, in which the Messiah takes the place of God in the Day of Judgment and what follows[14].

This is not to deny considerable influence on the part of what is called the "apocalyptic" outlook upon Christian thinking. The assimilation of ideas is an established fact and is always taking place. Contact with the Gentile world must have equally affected the theology of the early Church. But the point we want to make, a point which was already made by Gresham Machen with a remarkable show of evidence, is that the Christology of the Church ultimately leads back to Jesus himself. There are elements in the Pauline outlook which are *sui generis* and which we can explain satisfactorily only on the assumption that they originated with Jesus himself. Martin Buber comes remarkably near the truth when he shows from three Pauline texts (Phil. 2, 6; 1 Cor. 8, 6 and Col. 1, 15ff.) that Paul's intention was twofold:

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[11] RGG², III, 115.

[12] Cf. J. Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel, 385.

[13] Cf. ib., 331.

[14] Ib. 358.

Loyalty to the highest possible conception of his Master and unweakened maintenance of monotheism[15].

It is our contention that Saul of Tarsus with his Jewish background, no matter how influenced he may have been by Greek thought, would have never radically departed from "Jewish" monotheism except for the two facts: a) that the Master himself made stupendous claims to authority, b) that these claims were vindicated by his Resurrection. It is not enough for K. L. Schmidt to suggest that the concept of the "Son of God" which with Jews was a dignity-title for the Messiah, was misunterstood among Gentiles and this led to the idea of the Virgin Birth[16]. We will also have to assume that Saul himself misunderstood the meaning of "Son of God" and put upon it the wrong construction; but such an assumption is impossible. K. L. Schmidt would have been more accurate had he followed consistently his own line of thought:

Von Anfang an dachte die Kirche über eine Sache nach, die für sie Gericht und Gnade in einem war: *Gott wurde Mensch.* Der Historiker, der klare Linien sehen will, der mit Begriffen wie «Persönlichkeit», «Genie», «Held» einen hellen Raum überblicken will, gerät hier in ein ihn befreiendes Helldunkel oder Halbdunkel...[17].

For the historian there is no way out of the dilemma, except to go back to the source and to blame Jesus himself for the misunderstanding. It seems to us that Rudolf Otto is essentially right when he ascribes Mtt. 11. 27 to genuine tradition and regards it as an original logion uttered by Jesus in spite of its somewhat gnostic flavour[18]:

All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The whole question of authority which is so prominent in the Gospels is closely tied up with the question under discussion. The

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[15] Martin Buber, Two Types of Faith, 1951, 134.

[16] RGG² ib. 120.

[17] RGG² ib.

[18] Rudolf Otto, the Kingdom of God and the Son of Man, Engl. 1938, 393; also pp. 162ff. where Jesus' consciousness and mission, apart from the messianic connotation is skilfully discussed.

present writer holds that the term "Son of Man" is meant to disguise the true origin of the Messiah. This becomes clear from the passage in Mtt. 16, 13 which narrates the incident at Caesarea Philippi: Jesus asks: "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" But whatever others say, Peter speaking for himself and the rest of the disciples answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We hold that here "Son of the living God" is not merely a dignity-title attached to the Messiah, but the ultimate secret shrouding the person of Jesus Christ. In this respect Gerald Friedlander accurately assesses the situation:

> The Gospel introduces the idea of one divine son, apart from all men, becoming a mediator between God and humanity (Mtt. 9, 27; Luke 10,22; Mk. 10, 45)[19].

This fact may be disconcerting to scholars and upset our theories about Jesus of Nazareth, but has to be faced squarely.

Returning to St. Paul we must take into account not only his own personal contribution to the christological doctrine of the Church, but also the tradition which he inherited from the early Church regarding Jesus of Nazareth. We contend that faith in the Messiah, whatever it may have meant to the Jews, to the disciples it meant faith in a man endowed with singular divine authority. It was not faith in his teaching, or faith in his leadership that made a disciple — but faith in the Master himself. But such a relationship was only possible after the Resurrection.

The Resurrection is therefore the second important factor in the Pauline christological concept. To overlook this is to discard the foundation-stone of St. Paul's theology:

> If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... if in this life we who are in Christ have only hope, we are of all men most to be pitied (R. S. V. 1 Cor. 15, 14ff.).

It seems to us that the only way to explain Paul's fundamental departure from the Jewish messianic view is to give full weight to the implications arising from the stupendous claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. Here it is of importance to notice that

[19] Gerald Friedlander, The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount, 1911, 82.

there is not a single passage in the whole of the Pauline corpus which says that Jesus raised himself from the dead. Although St. Paul ascribes Lordship to Jesus of Nazareth, in fact divinity, he always speaks of the Resurrection in the passive mood, as do all N. T. writers. Behind this fact is the essential Monotheism of the Jew Saul of Tarsus, who understood the Incarnation to mean a true and unadulterated humanity on the part of the Son of God. In the person of Jesus Christ God did not walk *incognito* to play about with the laws of nature as he pleased, but became man in every respect. The "man Christ Jesus", is not a semi-god or God in disguise, but a humble man who suffered and died upon a Cross. That he was raised from the dead by the power of God is the most extraordinary thing ever said about him. That this man Jesus was the Son of God, in a sense in which no one else has ever been, is demonstrated by his Resurrection. To undermine the Apostle's faith in the Son of God, we would first have to undermine his faith that Jesus was raised from the dead.

To sum up: St. Paul's christology has two specific sources, the claim to supreme authority on the part of the historic Jesus[20], and the resurrection-faith which was handed on to him by the early Church. This does not mean that we need deny extraneous influence upon St. Paul. No man's thinking can be traced like a graph, and a man with such wide connections like the Apostle was exposed to a variety of influences. There are obvious Biblical elements, rabbinic elements, hellenistic elements and a mosaic of other components which colour the Pauline outlook. But these are not decisive in themselves; they are used to embellish the main theme: that he who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh *is* the Son of God (Rom. 1. 1ff.).

That such is the case can be seen from the fact that scholars are able to prove either way — that Paul drew from his Jewish background and also from alien tradition. Thus W. D. Davies shows the close connection between Pauline thinking and Rabbinic Judaism[21], while Joseph Klausner has accumulated a store of

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[20] Cf. J. Jocz, The Jewish People and Jesus Christ, 1954, 34, 36, 40f.
[21] W. D. Davies, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, 1948.

evidence to prove St. Paul's dependence upon Hellenism[22]. The fact is that both views are right, but neither, nor put together, do they explain the nature of Pauline Christology. It is only because scholars have underestimated the importance of the living tradition of the Church that they have been forced to the view that Paul is so occupied with the heavenly Christ that he loses sight of the historic Jesus altogether[23]. The truth is that there is no Gospel for St. Paul without the historic Jesus. It is the very heart of his kerygma that the Son of God became man and was born of a woman (Gal. 4. 4f.). Not that Jesus became God but that God in the person of Jesus "emptied himself and took the form of a servant" (Phil. 2. 7). This was the Good News which Paul preached.

### *3. The theological implications*

The christological concern dominates Christian theology through the ages. Whenever the Church tried to understand her position she could only do so *vis-a-vis* the miracle of the Incarnation. In every other respect she resembles the Synagogue. Her only lines of demarkation from the world and from pseudo-Christianity was her profession: *verbum caro factum est.*

That God became Man is a contradictory proposition. It lends itself to misunderstanding and is at the root of all heresies. To this day the balance between orthodoxy and heresy is very delicate. This tension is inherent in the very structure of the Christian Faith: it keeps two irreconcilable elements in tension but without fusion — the Son of God and the Son of Man. In the words of the "Athanasian" Creed:

> Now the right faith is that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and man.
>
> He is God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and he is man, of the substance of his Mother, born in the world;
>
> Perfect God: perfect man, of reasoning soul and human flesh subsisting;

[22] J. Klausner, From Jesus to Paul, 1944, cf. for criticism, J. Jocz, op. cit. 132f.

[23] So S. G. F. Brandon, The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church, 1951, 67f., cf. also Klausner, op. cit. 312ff.

Equal to the Father as touching his Godhead: less than the Father as touching his manhood.

Who although he be God and man: yet he is not two, but is one Christ:

One, however, not by conversion of Godhead into flesh: but by taking manhood into God;

One altogether: not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

The logic of these statements is not self evident, neither can it be. Behind these sentences is the desire on the part of the Church not to resolve the ultimate secret of the Incarnation. When hard pressed to elucidate her position she was forced into the field of speculative philosophy and exegetical inquiry. Under stress she frequently said more than is warranted by Biblical evidence, but on the whole she remained true to her task: profession of the miracle of the Incarnation. With all her faults, this is the remarkable achievement of the historic Church and distinguishes her from all other Christian sects.

The credal statements of the Church, whatever their philosophical intention, carry the message about a God who was not satisfied to remain the transcendent God of the universe but stooped down to the human level and in the person of his Son became man in order to seek and save what is lost.

This is the central proposition of the Christian faith and from it we want to deduct several implications:

### (a) God

The statement that God became Man challenges our concepts about God and presses towards a radical revision of our ideas about him. It is so contradictory to all our concepts about the Deity that both religion and philosophy have to reject it. For this reason Judaism has never treated the Incarnation seriously. For the Synagogue it is too blasphemous to contemplate. This is understandable: religion and philosophy decide about God in advance and thus reduce him to their own pattern. Here God can only do what is consonant with "reason" and in accordance with the rules of logic. He must not do the extraordinary if he is to remain a worthy of our respect.

It is perhaps true to say that against the background of the

O. T. the Incarnation is more easily reconciled. But even here it is only vaguely anticipated though the God of Israel is known as a God "who alone does wonderous things" (Ps. 72. 18). Perhaps the nearest approach to the Incarnation is the passage in Deutero-Isaiah:

> I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit (Is. 57. 15).

A God who humbles himself to dwell with the humble is very close to the Father of Jesus Christ. But the Gospel goes further: that God should concern himself with the good is axiomatic; the *skandalon* lies in the statement that the Son of God gave his life for sinners. This is a new slant upon revelation. It is from underneath the Cross that the N. T. could say: God is Love. By trying to prove the Incarnation from the pages of the O. T. we reduce it to the expected and forseable which it is not. The Incarnation enhances the Biblical vision of God but goes beyond it.

### (b) Man

The Incarnation bears directly upon our understanding of the human situation and works in two directions: we can either say with Anselm of Canterbury that sin is so grievous and the sinner so helpless that only God can save him, or with the Psalmist "thou hast made him little less than God and dost crown him with glory and honour". Man constantly sways between these two views. The strange fact is that both are true, but this we only discover in the fact of the Son of God, who reveals to us the pattern of God's original purpose with man, and also man's helplessness to cope with his own need. It is only in the light of the Cross and the Resurrection that man discovers the gift of Eternal Life and is readopted as a child of God. The Incarnation thus spells man's helplessness which is the real offence to Judaism as to all religion.

### (c) Mediation

God's condescension in Jesus Christ would impeach his holiness if the Incarnation meant only a demonstration of God's love.

The Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection are three aspects of God's redeeming act and reveal his holiness as well as his mercy. Since the Son of God died for sinners the way to the Father is via the Cross. It means that any other way, be it the way of ethics or the way of religion, is man's self-chosen path, and as such presumption. The Cross uncovers the truth that man cannot by his own right claim an approach to God, nor can he do so by his own effort. The gulf which divides the Holy One of Israel from the rebel-creature can only be bridged by God himself. The Incarnation is the bridge thrown from God's side so that man can reach the Father's home. Mediation in the Christian sense is not therefore interference in an otherwise direct relationship between man and God, but its re-establishment. The Cross is not to divide but to unite man to God. The "Mediator" (*μεδίτης*) is *melitz*[24] which term in rabbinic usage has the connotation intermediary between two contending parties. This is exactly what the N. T. understands by the function of the Messiah, only that it is God who takes the initiative and not man. The Messiah, the Son of God, does not interfere, but intervenes on our behalf: not that Jesus the Saint pleads for his fellow-creatures, but that God himself in the person of his Son pleads with sinners to accept His grace.

Jewish writers who present the christian concept of mediation as a kind of interference in the relationship between God and man misinterpret the position. In the christian view Jesus Christ does not sever but re-establishes the broken relationship between man and God. Behind the Jewish objection to mediation is human hybris which makes man misunderstand his true position, namely that he is estranged from God. Gerald Friedlander represents a typical Jewish point of view when he says:

> Judaism refuses to accept this view of the Fatherhood of God, and denies the right of any man to be considered as the only son of God, apart from all other men. The Jew has no need of a mediator, since God is his Father, ever near and ever watching. The idea of a transcendental God, only to

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[24] It is difficult to see why Delitzsch failed to translate this important noun in his Hebrew N. T., cf. 1 Tim. 2, 5. Salkinson-Ginzburg's translation is here more accurate.

be approached through a mediator, belongs rather to the Gospels, and is quite alien to Jewish belief[25].

This naive form of egalitarianism which refuses to acknowledge the difference between person and person may be applicable to political theory, but breaks down in the realm of the spiritual. In the realm of values men are not equals in stature though they may be equals in rights. Confronted by Jesus Christ man finds himself in a new situation. Here he is face to face with the mystery of personality which is ultimately the secret of God himself as a Person.

(d) The spiritual world

For the Apostle Paul to say that the fulness of God was pleased to dwell in Christ (Col. 1. 19), and again: in him dwelleth the fulness of God bodily, is as startling as the Johannine utterance about the Word which became flesh. Here the Apostle draws the last consequences of the meaning of the Incarnation: the invasion of Eternity into time. This is so unexpected a conclusion that it is impossible to even contemplate the theory "that someone conceived the idea of Incarnation and then imposed it on so intractable a set of facts as those contained in the Gospels[26]".

But if the Gospel is based upon a fact how can the frail body of a man contain the immeasurable pleroma of the Godhead?

The N. T. seems to have a conception of the spiritual which is completely independent of space and time. The world of values can only be expressed in terms of personality. We come here to the last secret of what is meant by the phrase "Son of God".

Some Jewish scholars so write as if Christians mean to imply that God enjoys family life and begot a son. Ambiguous Christian speech is partly to be blamed for this[27]; even our credal statements lend themselves to misunderstanding. But this is inevitable con-

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[25] G. Friedlander, the Jewish Sources of the Sources on the Mount, 1911, 82; cf. alsz I. Epstein, Judaism, 81.

[26] Quoted from the splendəd articln by Stanley B. Frost, History and the Bible, in Canadian Journal of Theology, April 1957, p. 94.

[27] The Church Fathers sometimes fail to distinguish between the Jesus Christ in history and God. Ignatius has the expression: "For our God, Jesus Christ..." (Eph. 18).

sidering the difficulty of putting into reasoned language what is ultimately beyond comprehension. This can be seen from the expressions employed in the Nicene Creed: "only begotten of the Father", "begotten of his Father before all worlds", "begotten not made". These expressions have an interesting history behind them and can be defended on scriptural and theological grounds[28], but they do not add to clarity. What both the N. T. and the Church are trying to convey by its choice of terminology is the *otherness* of dimension where spiritual values are concerned. In the world of spirit our usual causality ceases to operate. Here matter becomes in the truest sense the vehicle and tool of the Spirit; the Sonship of Jesus Christ is not determined by the circumference of his body, but immeasurably exceeds it. By the expression "Son of God" we mean to indicate personality in the ultimate; the Creed puts it more precisely: *θεὸν ἐκ θεοῦ, φῶς ἐκ φωτός*. God of God, Light of Light.

### (e) The goal

It is a reflection upon human nature that faith in God could ever be conceived in terms of acceptance of credal statements. There is a world of difference between faith and the Faith. The former is a function, an activity, a verb[29], the latter is a reasoned theological statement which can be made without personal involvement. That the Church has tended to substitute Creed for faith may partly be due to the fact that man shies from the intangible world of spiritual values and prefers to more concrete expression of intellectual propositions. The Sonship of Jesus Christ puts a new construction upon all our religious and intellectual efforts, theology included.

Faith in God through Jesus Christ implies sonship of the believer through the Son of God. The corrolary to the Son of God is the sons of God. The believer's sonship is the ultimate intention of the Incarnation. St. Paul hardly ever speaks of the Son of God without correlating it to our own position. For him the believer is a person

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[28] Cf. F. J. Badcock, The History of the Creeds, 1938, pp. 180ff.

[29] It is peculiar to English that faith is a noun; to describe the activity of faith the Englishman has to resort to a different verb.

who knows himself a son of God through Jesus Christ: the Son of God came that we might receive the "adoption of sons" (Gal. 4. 4ff.). The relationship between the Son and the sons is effected by the communion of the spirit of God: because ye are sons God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts so that ye cry, Abba, Father (Gal. 4. 6–7; Rom. 8. 15–16).

There can be nothing mechanical in personal relationships. Our sonship in Christ is not an act of magic; the holy Spirit of God only works in a strictly personal manner. It is the warmth of the love of God emanating from His Son which kindles responsive love in the hearts of his estranged children. It is no coincidence that most Christian hymns have as their theme the love of God. The love of God in Jesus Christ is the core of the Gospel.

Such is the restraint of Almighty God and such is the working of His Holy Spirit that even our adoption is not an arbitrary act by impersonal decree, but a Father's wooing of faithless sons.

That God's Fatherhood is not a pious phrase but the profoundest statement about him is warranted by the fact that Jesus Christ is His Son. This is "mythological" language; it means that it is language taken from one sphere and transposed into another. In a sense all human language is mythological; man can only express himself in symbols. The Church employed the language of the Bible to express the unique relationship between Jesus the Messiah and the God of Israel: the relationship of Son and Father. In this she continued the tradition of Biblical anthropomorphism and thus avoided the pitfall of philosophical abstraction. To "de-mythologize" on this point would mean to surrender the very message of the Gospel — that God entered the human domain in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the Gospel.