

Ἀληθῶς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς ἦν Οὗτος (MATTHEW 27.54): A CENTURION'S
VIEW OF JESUS THROUGH THE LENS OF ROMAN DEMIGODS

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Introduction

On the premise of Markan priority, Matthew's passion narrative (27.45-56) is based on Mark (15.33-41).¹ However, due to the redactional process from the evangelist Matthew, an aspect of the pericope (especially Mt. 27.51-53) is considered unique to Matthew, thereby raising a serious doubt about its historicity.² It is no longer in doubt that the framework upon which Matthew is built is Mark's;³ hence Matthean and Markan scholars sometimes hold similar opinions on the literary contexts of the texts. This cannot be truer than in Mt. 27.54 where Matthew's narrative follows Mark's image of Jesus as interacting with 'that of the Roman emperor and the imperial

1. D.P. Senior, 'Matthew's Special Material in the Passion Story: Implications for the Evangelist's Redactional Technique and Theological Perspective', *ETL* 63 (1987), pp. 272-94 (274).

2. Charles L. Quarles, 'Matthew 27.51-53: Meaning, Genre, Intertextuality, Theology and Reception History', *JETS* 59 (2016), pp. 271-86 (271). According to Quarles in another paper, certain scholars limit the unique area peculiar to Matthew in the pericope to 27.52-53. See Charles L. Quarles, 'Matthew 27.52-53 as a Scribal Interpolation: Testing a Recent Proposal', *BBR* 27 (2017), pp. 207-26 (207); cf. Joachim Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium: Kommentar zu Kap. 14,1–28,20 und Einleitungsfragen. Zweiter Teil* (HThKNT, 1.2; Freiburg: Herder, 1992), pp. 470-71.

3. Emmanuel Nlenanya Chinwkwu, *A Critical Introduction to the Traditions of Jesus* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 2015), p. 51.

family,⁴ displayed during the centurion's confession that Jesus was the Son of God. This shall be discussed in full later in the work.

The text of Mt. 27.54 contains the confession of the centurion and those keeping guard with him which is currently approached by scholars through alternate readings.⁵ Three major varieties of reading to that confession are described by Wilkins:⁶ (1) a pagan reaction; (2) a response of fear; (3) and a beginning confession of faith. The most satisfactory reading according to Wilkins is the third which stresses that, while the Sanhedrin charged Jesus with blasphemy for his claim to be the Son of God,⁷ Jesus' claim was justified at the crucifixion scene when cosmic apocalyptic events (darkness and earthquake)⁸ led the centurion and his soldiers to the 'realization that the identification is truthful'.⁹ To demonstrate that the centurion is aware that the crime leading to Jesus' execution was his blasphemous claim to be the Son of God, Wilkins raises the argument that 'the centurion is certain to know the various charges against Jesus because the military chain of command necessitates that he know about potential uprisings to rescue the convicted Jesus.'¹⁰ Wilkins's knowledge that the crime of Jesus was theologi-

4. Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 5.

5. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 920-22.

6. Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 990.

7. Raymond Brown (*The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels, Volume One* [ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994], pp. 531-32), while acknowledging, on the one hand, that 'the only likely historical charge [against Jesus as a blasphemer] would have been that Jesus arrogantly claimed for himself status or privileges that belonged properly to the God of Israel alone and in that sense implicitly demeaned God', states, on the other hand, 'many scholars, however, reject the historicity of the blasphemy charge, offering two principal objections: that crucifixion was not the appropriate penalty for blasphemy, and/or that nothing Jesus said at the trial was itself blasphemous.' Here, we are presented with the problem of approaching Jesus' blasphemy historically.

8. Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), pp. 560-63.

9. Wilkins, *Matthew*, pp. 990-91.

10. Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 990.

cally based—his claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God¹¹—is glaring in his study. What is therefore lacking in Wilkins’s study and his claim of the centurion’s awareness of Jesus’ crime is his inability to explain the centurion’s knowledge of Jewish Messianic theology enabling him the awareness of the nitty-gritty of Jesus’ claim.

However, Wilkins’s ability to bring scholarly approaches regarding the centurion’s confession under three broad classifications is commendable. Based on this classification, it is obvious that the last two ‘approaches’ to the centurion’s confession in Mt. 27.54 have been generously discussed in times past,¹² but the first approach, which discusses the centurion’s attribution of θεοῦ υἱός to Jesus as simply a pagan’s understanding of Jesus’ divinity catalyzed by the cosmic apocalyptic events at the crucifixion scene—a possibility that Jesus was a divine-man from the Roman religious purview—has received less attention among Christian scholars. The probable reason for the neglect of this first approach is because it neither affirms a Christian hope in Jesus as the Christ nor supports his redemptive mission in soteriology. After primitive Christianity, it seems that an acceptable reading of Matthew must be that which forces the centurion’s confession to stand as a Gentile’s confession of faith, an understanding which favors the centurion’s confession as the proclamation of the incarnation of Jesus.¹³ However, those who uphold the christological incarnation readings in the second and third approaches as the most satisfactory readings only do so due to their lopsided belief that the Matthean author was only an evangelist and theol-

11. Steven L. Cox, ‘A Consideration of the Gospel Accounts of the Jewish Charge of Blasphemy against Jesus’, *JBTM* 2 (2004), pp. 64-84 (67).

12. See, for example, R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 726-34. France neither sees the centurion’s confession as a response of fear or a beginning confession of faith. The title ‘Son of God’ does not even mean to France ‘a divine being’; rather it means to him ‘someone special’ (see also R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], p. 937).

13. Dunn admits that ‘in Hebrews a concept of preexistence begins to attach itself to thought of Jesus’ divine sonship for the first time (so far as we can tell), though it seems to be a rather sophisticated concept dependent in large measure on the writer’s attempt to wed Jewish eschatology to Platonic idealism’ (James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* [London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1992], p. 61).

ogian,¹⁴ (an interpreter of pre-Easter traditions) whose theological approach in the text brings Christian soteriology to the fore with no place to express himself as a historian of sort, who related pre-Easter history (a collector of traditional narratives). This strongly suggests that such a christological approach has zero tolerance for a methodology stemming from alternate approaches, say, aretological or any other which may consider the centurion as a religious person with a religious opinion which was expressed in his confession in Mt. 27.54. His opinion as a Gentile (Roman) and (Roman) soldier is therefore silenced. Consequently, this study wants to give voice to the centurion's opinion regarding θεοῦ υἱός, by objecting to the reading that the centurion in Matthew was a Christologist¹⁵ whose confession was a 'conviction that [Jesus] is the Messiah in the unique sense of the term "Son of God."¹⁶ It rather upholds that approach which recognizes the centurion as a Gentile and his confession as demonstrating that he saw Jesus not as the Christ but as a demigod typical of such demigods who exist in Roman divine pantheons and also that the events which took place at the scene of his crucifixion were an indication that the gods showed their wrath. The con-

14. Matthew, like Mark, wants to emphasize the bringing together of ἄνθρωπος and θεοῦ υἱός 'which offers attractive raw material for a two-natures Christology' (France, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 734).

15. Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 225. Ole Davidsen questions any interpretations which consider the centurion's confession 'to be an outright testimony of Christian faith' (Ole Davidsen, 'Officerens Bekendelse: Mark 15,39 I Et Semio-Litterært Perspektiv', in Søren Holst and Christina Petterson [eds.], *Den Store Fortælling: Festskrift til Geert Hallböck* [Copenhagen: Anis, 2012], pp. 13-28 [13]). Gamel agrees that there is 'legitimacy to the interpreters who criticized earlier efforts to render Mark 15.39 [Matt 27.54] as a "definite" grammatical construction (and thus a Christian confession)' (Brian K. Gamel, *Mark 15:39 as a Markan Theology of Revelation: The Centurion's Confession as Apocalyptic Unveiling* [LNTS, 574; London: T. & T. Clark, 2017], p. 59). Easter insists, 'whether historically-speaking he knew it or not, this centurion ... stands as one of the first people to recognize the crucified Jesus as the Christ' (Matthew C. Easter, "'Certainly This Man Was Righteous": Highlighting a Messianic Reading of the Centurion's Confession in Luke 23.47', *TynBul* 63 [2012], pp. 35-51 [35]).

16. Christopher Naseri and Gilbert N. Alaribe, 'Scholarly Interpretations of the Centurion's Statement in Mark 15.39', *Social Forum* 12 (2016), pp. 156-64 (157).

cept of θεοῦ υἱός shall now briefly be discussed under three semantic frameworks: Matthew's (representing a reinterpreted Jewish idea); the centurion's (representing the Greco-Roman idea); and the Council of Nicaea's (representing the church's idea).

What Θεοῦ Υἱός Meant for Matthew

As a Roman reflecting Greco-Roman civilization, the centurion understood the notion of Jesus being a Son of God differently from the Gospel writers (Matthew and Mark) who reported the confession with christological and missiological inclinations. To these theologians, especially Matthew, the phrase meant 'nothing less than the full christological sense'.¹⁷ No wonder it stands as 'the central and dominant term in Matthew's christology'.¹⁸ This 'Son of God' was Christ who is understood as so from the post-resurrection era onwards. Prior to this period, up to the Old Testament times, 'Son' meant a variety of things, and 'Son of God' refers to a number of beings *belonging* to God, including the king or Messiah who 'was the representative or surrogate of God on ... earth'.¹⁹ In short, 'son of God' refers primarily to non-divinities in Old Testament theology.²⁰ It was after the resurrection that such Old Testament texts like the coronation text (Ps. 110) received christological coloration. The words of the cultic prophet in Ps. 110 regarding

17. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1644. In studying 4Q246 and Lk. 1.30-35 as parallels, Segal suggests that the Son of God in that Qumran scroll 'reflects a royal messianic figure [or] a heavenly "eschatological savior" or "liberator," similar in function to Melchizedek in 11QMelchizedek or the Prince of Light or Michael in 1QM' (all these descriptions fit the New Testament Christ) (Michael Segal, 'Who Is the "Son of God" in 4Q246? An Overlooked Example of Early Biblical Interpretation', *DSD* 21 [2014], pp. 289-312 [302-3]).

18. David Hill, 'Son and Servant: An Essay on Matthean Christology', *JSNT* 6 (1980), pp. 2-16 (2).

19. Ungaran Rashid, 'Jesus as "Son of God": A Biblical Study Based on the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospel of Matthew', *JISCS* 3 (2019), pp. 41-64 (43).

20. When we see the 'Son of God' as the same person as 'the Messiah' (e.g. Mt. 16.16; 26.63), then an exception to non-divinities being messiahs must be made (e.g. Isa. 9.6-7; Jer. 23.5-6). Rashid argues that the real meaning of these epithets has been the subject of 'extensive argument amongst interpreters' ('Jesus as "Son of God"', p. 51).

the Lord who is subordinate to the Lord was regarded as Jesus subordinated to the Father (see Mt. 22.41-46). Notably, the Christology of the Old Testament which speaks of a Messianic intervention just received its fulfillment in the New Testament; so also, its accompanying prophetic events in the Old Testament would as a matter of necessity find their fulfillment in the New Testament. Since, for example, ‘earthquake is a prelude to the opening of tombs and resurrection of past saints, who, of course, are Israelites,’²¹ Matthew must have drawn his eschatological inspiration from Ezekiel’s prophetic lines (37.7, 12-13).²² To this christological interpretation which later produced its very popular reading within the church, the confession of the centurion is adjudged to only justify the inclusion of the Gentiles to the missiological mandate of Jesus. His exclamation was a confession, that is, ‘a profession of his belief in Jesus as the Son of God’.²³ This view has led to the scholarly acceptance of the so-called Colwell’s rule²⁴ in which υἱός in such cases is considered a definite noun. This means, if it is anything to go by for the centurion, Jesus was not *a* Son of *a* God²⁵ but *the* Son of [the

21. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 576.

22. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 576.

23. Naseri and Alaribe, ‘Scholarly Interpretations’, p. 157.

24. In Colwell’s rule, ‘sentences in which the copula is expressed, a definite predicate nominative [e.g. υἱός] has the article when it follows the verb [e.g. ἦν]’ (E.C. Colwell, ‘A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament’, *JBL* 52 [1933] pp. 12-21 [13]) (the examples in square brackets are mine). However, there is an exception to the rule. The exception states, ‘definite predicate nouns [e.g. υἱός] which precede the verb [e.g. ἦν] usually lack the article’ (Colwell, ‘Definite Rule’, p. 20) (the examples in square brackets are mine). In this circumstance, I argue that υἱός in the phrase θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὐτός should lack the article having preceded the verb ἦν. Colwell uses Jn 1.49c where βασιλεύς precedes εἶ to illustrate this point.

25. ‘A Son of a god’ instead of the definite ‘the Son of god’ emphasizes more clearly the familial metaphoric nature of the title in the polytheistic context of Roman religion. For example, Octavian was named *divi filius* (‘son of a god’) to show his familial relationship with Julius Caesar, his deified father (Nina C. Coppolino, ‘AUGUSTUS (31 B.C.–14 A.D.)’, see online: <http://www.roman-emperors.org/auggie.htm>).

Jewish] God, a direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.²⁶ Wilkins writes,

For Matthew's readers, those Old Testament passages that spoke so darkly of a suffering Servant who would bring forgiveness of sin are now crystal clear (e.g., Isa. 42:1–4; 52:13–53:12). They point to the crucifixion of their Messiah, who brings true redemption in his sacrifice on the cross.²⁷

By such definitiveness, the centurion appears as one who understood Jewish Messianic teachings, in order to associate Jesus with the long-expected Son of God. The centurion indeed, by this interpretation, understood Jesus' historical mission to Israel as well as his role as the eschatological Lord discussed in the *Mishna* and the *Halakah*.²⁸

Because of this predominant Christian interpretation given to the centurion's confession, many inquirers did not see that exegetes who strongly uphold this view have unwittingly created a completely anachronistic *Sitz im Leben* of the studied pericope especially, v. 54. These exegetes did this by laying the foundation of the shift from Matthew's eschatological sonship to the Christology of pre-existence. Though 'as characters who appear on the scene only briefly, it is not for the soldiers but for the reader to grasp the full import of their words.'²⁹ It, how-ever, looks plausible that the christological context upon which their words are read is far above the Matthean centurion's original station. For example, Jesus' instruction to the disciples when sending out the Twelve (Mt. 10.5) forbids these Jews from going to the Gentiles.³⁰ Again, in Mt. 10.5, he strictly commands them to go (*ἀπέλθῆτε*)

26. It has become an accepted fact among most New Testament scholars 'that the theme of fulfillment plays a central motif in Matthew's Gospel' (F.P. Viljoen, 'Fulfillment in Matthew', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28 [2007], pp. 301-24 [301]). But 'for today's reader ... Matthew sometimes draws awkward links between Old Testament citations and their fulfillment in Jesus' (p. 301; emphasis original).

27. Wilkins, *Matthew*, p. 976.

28. J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 41.

29. J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as a Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd ed, 1988), p. 89.

30. Anderson's possible solution to this problem is that 'either Matthew's community cancels entirely its mission to the Jews (because of lack of response?)

the way of the Gentiles.³¹ These texts are testaments to the low station which Gentiles occupy in the missiological mandate of Jesus before his resurrection. But after his resurrection, Jesus opens the doorway to evangelize even the Gentiles. Indeed, the induction of any Gentile into the Christian brotherhood would not be possible until after the resurrection when Jesus specially commissions the disciples to make disciples of *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*. This then suggests that no true confession of Jesus' divinity as a Savior can be achieved by any Gentile including the centurion without experiencing Jesus' resurrection. Therefore, it is quite difficult not to see the confession of the centurion (27.54) as an anachronistic situation if it is adjudged a Christian confession leading to the acceptance of the Gentile(s) as followers of Jesus. This can account for why 'Matthew carefully avoids outright christological anachronisms but holds that the frequently ambiguous christological confessions and claims which transpired in Jesus' day unerringly pointed forward to the full understanding held by the church in the post-resurrection period.'³²

and concentrates on winning Gentiles to faith in Jesus, or Matthew's community expands and enlarges its mission to Jews to include Gentiles' (D.W. Anderson, 'The Origin and Purpose of Matthew 27.51b-53' [PhD diss., University of Otago, 2013], pp. 117-18). This opinion by Anderson only strengthens his belief that the studied pericope, with the exception of v. 54, 'is not a Matthean literary creation but rather is a fragment of a very early Jewish Christian passion tradition' (p. 15). If, however, one reads the pericope as the authentic Jesus' words and not an infusion into the Matthean text by a Gospel Community (namely, Matthean), it becomes problematic to interpret the centurion's exclamation and confession as confirming Jesus' sonship because of its anachronistic *situation in life*. In the circumstance one would rather go along with Sim's opinion which does not see Matt 27:54 as pro-Gentile in Matthew (David C. Sim, 'The "Confession" of the Soldiers in Matthew 27.54', *HeyJ* 34 [1993], pp. 401-24).

31. Despite Jesus asking his disciples to stay off Gentile areas, Gundry is of the opinion that, in Matthew, Jesus was reported as making inroads into the Gentile region much more than in Mark. See Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 310, who says, 'Matthew changes [Mark's] ambiguous εἰς τὰ ὄρια Τύρου ... to εἰς τὰ μέρη Τύρου [with a] similar distinctive phraseology in 16.13 where entrance is surely meant.'

32. D.A. Carson, 'Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew', in Harold H. Rowdon (ed.), *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), pp. 97-114 (99).

Matthew's understanding of θεοῦ υἱός, so far as a careful reading of his Gospel suggests, is from the Jewish rather than the Hellenistic background. He believed that Jesus was the Son of God who fulfilled all Old Testament Messianic Scriptures, hence his extensive use of the fulfillment motif.³³ To the Jews of Matthew's time, there is a spillover of the pre-Christian Judaistic belief of the Messiah as 'an eschatological figure, an anointed human agent of God, whose coming as a deliverer was awaited in the end time'.³⁴ Matthew thought Jesus to be that Son of God. This thought is reflected in many passages in Matthew including 27.54. But an exception must be made regarding this expected Son of God in 27.4, not because the text lacks historical impetus to describe the historical Jesus,³⁵ but because θεοῦ υἱός there lacks the *locus standi* to be considered a Jewish confession or a Jewish affirmation of ancient prophetic expectations primarily because of the Gentile context of the confession. Therefore, a reading that removes an anachronistic *Sitz im Leben* should rather be tested against the claims of christological and missiological approaches.

What Θεοῦ Υἱός Meant for the Centurion

Grammatically, there is a striking similarity between the confessions of the centurion (Mt. 27.54) and that of the disciples of Jesus earlier on (14.33). At a certain period in the ministry of the disciples, they made the confession

33. Viljoen, 'Fulfillment', pp. 301-2.

34. Rashid, 'Jesus', p. 47.

35. While Conzelmann argues that the centurion's confession 'is not historical, but a symbolic representation of the Gentile church's confession of the Crucified One' (Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], p. 128), he offers no tangible reason for dismissing the historicity of the confession. Fortunately, such reason is supplied by Dibelius who asserts that the confession is unhistorical because 'it lies outside ... human "possibility"' (Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* [New York: Scribner's, 1935], p. 195). Brown makes a hint that the entire pericope (including 27.54) could be historical, though without sufficient proof (*Death*, p. 462). This study, therefore, argues that the confession is historical due to the cultural inclination of the character known as the centurion. A centurion's Greco-Roman religious upbringing empowers him to know intuitively, and so does not need ὁ Πατήρ μου, ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς to enlighten him on who is a Son of God or not.

ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς εἶ. This shares similarity with the soldiers' confession ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος. By this lexical similarity, it is easy to argue that the centurion viewed Jesus' divinity just as Jesus' Jewish disciples did. Such argument would naturally lead to the conclusion that the confession of the centurion was messianic. But if we understand the author of the book of Matthew as a theologian and his Gospel as a redacted literary work, then we may have to make a distinction not based on grammar primarily but on context, and probably on context alone. Did the centurion call Jesus a Son of a God probably in reaction to the cosmic apocalyptic events he witnessed? Yes, but his knowledge of Jesus' divinity does not seem to go beyond understanding Jesus as a superhuman, a demigod only comparable to Greco-Roman demigods, up to the extent of understanding him as the Jewish Savior. Prior to this point, I mentioned that 'son of God' in Old Testament theology includes humans who were anointed to represent God (surrogates of God) on earth and this is the foundation upon which Matthew's interpretation of Jesus as Son of God is based. However, for the Greco-Roman person, *son of God* 'carried a divine sense because of the influence of Egyptian mythology',³⁶ and it is from this lens that the centurion viewed Jesus. For the fact that 'the divine sonship metaphor is rarely considered in the Roman sociopolitical environment of the first and second centuries, which is a key context of the New Testament and other early Christian literature,'³⁷ the Roman centurion is also rarely interrogated (regarding his confession) as a Roman. Being a non-Jew and never a part of the Sanhedrin,³⁸ the centurion must understand divinities within Roman mythologies and from the perspectives of the Roman religious ethos and pantheons. This is because 'human beings do not think in isolation from their cultural practices'³⁹—cultural practices of which their religious cognition is a part. This shall be demonstrated with the following historical facts.

36. Rashid, 'Jesus', p. 43.

37. Peppard, *Son of God*, 3.

38. There is no evidence that the Sanhedrin allowed a Roman squad in their legal proceedings either as witnesses or as peacekeepers.

39. Peppard, *Son of God*, p. 3.

Supernatural Birth

Since ‘Jesus’ divine sonship [in Matthew] is traced back specifically to his birth’,⁴⁰ just as some Roman divinities, it is quite appropriate to relate his divinity to that of Roman divinities by comparing Jesus’ heroic conception with that of Roman demigods.⁴¹ The Romans, at least of the centurion’s time, were more likely to be aware of mythical stories (transmitted from generation to generation) that spoke of superhuman demigods whose births were far from ordinary and whose lives evoked wonderment like that of Jesus. This generational handover is characteristic of all myths. Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, was said to possess divinity not only because his adopted father was divine (which would have made him just *divi filius*) but because his mother was impregnated in the temple of Apollo by a serpent, thus making him a son of Apollo, an Olympian deity (*deus*),⁴² and qualifying him to be *deis filius*. Despite Augustus’s miraculous birth, no extant text refers to him precisely as *deis filius*. That is exactly what he was, had the words appeared in a Greek text.⁴³ Clearly then, the centurion’s confession of Jesus as Son of God, is recorded in Greek as θεοῦ υἱός, ‘which, since it does not include the Greek article, in a polytheistic context referred to sonship of a god among many ...’⁴⁴ Such distinctive birth status gives a

40. Dunn, *Christology*, p. 61.

41. There are possibilities that the Gospels are tailored to some extent to reflect Roman mythologies. See M. Le Roux, ‘The Survival of the Greek Gods in Early Christianity’, *JS* 16 (2007), pp. 483-97 (485), who says, ‘Christianity recorded its greatest initial success in the Roman Empire by assimilating to itself so much of the Graeco-Roman culture,’ and that, consequently, ‘the gospel of Jesus was immediately colored by a new context—different from its original Aramaic context.’

42. Olivia Hekster and John Rich, ‘Octavian and the Thunderbolt: The Temple of Apollo Palatinus and Roman Traditions of Temple Building’, *CQ* 56 (2006), pp. 149-68 (160).

43. Peppard (*Son of God*, p. 32) observes, ‘*deus/divus* distinction [is] not stable in actual Latin usage and nonexistent in Greek (both [are] rendered by θεός).’ However, Rick Brown writes that Fossum mentions ‘a monument in Pergamum that commemorates “emperor Caesar, Son of God [Greek, *theou huios*], God Augustus”’ (Rick Brown, ‘The “Son of God”’: Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus’, *IJFM* 17 [2000], pp. 41-52 [44]).

44. Rosie Tanabe, ‘Son of God’ (February 2023), see online: <https://www.new>

Roman the impetus to refer to someone as a son of a god or a divinity. To a Roman, Jesus' birth qualified him as a demigod. As a single demonstrable fact, Jesus' miraculous birth does not qualify him as a son of a god in the studied text; but when added to other facts soon to follow, it may have summarily given impetus to the centurion to adjudge him as θεοῦ υἱός.

Use of Rare and Primitive Language

A certain Greek healer named Menekrates was known to have declared himself 'divine' because he had the power to perform 'superhuman miracle cures'.⁴⁵ He was known to heal sicknesses that no one could heal. His self-proclaimed divinity may have been tolerated by the Greeks because 'healing patients who are given up by doctors was, in Greek eyes, a miracle reserved for gods ...'⁴⁶(cf. οὐκ ἴσχυσεν ἀπ' οὐδενὸς θεραπευθῆναι [Lk. 8.43]). However, one unique thing about Menekrates is that he kept a retinue of celestial δοῦλοί, dignitaries of sort. One of these celestial slaves was 'Alexarchos, the learned brother of Kassandros, the later king of Macedonia'.⁴⁷ Alexarchos was said to have written a letter to his friends whose words have confused scholars to date, a letter which Athenaeus 'doubts whether even the Delphic oracle could make sense of'.⁴⁸ Indeed, god or gods have always shown distinction between human means of communication and that of divinities. Speaking of God's language being different from that of men, Basil of Caesarea comes to mind. Anthonioz *et al.* write,

In the Second Homily of his *Hexaemeron*, he makes a rather confusing statement which has produced multiple interpretations. In this statement he used a verb σκηματίζεσθαι 'to be designed, to take shape' [which] seems to suggest that God's language is fundamentally differ-

worldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Son_of_God&oldid=1099150. Though Torrey 'claims that in some New Testament passages the article is omitted because of the anarthrous construct state in the Semitic original' (Colwell, 'Definite Rule', p. 12), this seems to apply only in John's Gospel (see C.C. Torrey, 'The Aramaic Origin of the Gospel of John', *HTR* 16 [1923], pp. 305-44).

45. H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 439.

46. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, p. 439.

47. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, p. 440.

48. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, p. 440.

ent from human language in its physical production and can be compared with it only metaphorically.⁴⁹

But at times, divinities use a rather difficult form of human language to encode certain information they pass to humanity. That was exactly what the Greek celestial slave Alexarchos did. For instance, even though the linguistic base of the letter is Greek, the letter remains enigmatic because of its incomprehensibility.⁵⁰ Jesus' words on the cross are marked by similar qualities of enigma and incomprehensibility.⁵¹ Scholars have, for example, struggled with the real meaning and intention of Jesus using the words *eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani*.⁵² However, the centurion heard these Aramaic words of Jesus which, though spoken *φωνῇ μεγάλῃ*,⁵³ was not altogether clear to even Aramaic speakers. Understandably, Jesus' enigmatic statement on the cross was part of *τὰ γενόμενα* which put fright in the centurion. These enigmatic words would have reminded him of Greco-Roman divinities who also had the ability to use human language in a very incomprehensible manner.

Emperor Worship

It is true that 'when read in the light of Roman social practices, emperor worship, and imperial ideology, several early Christian texts take on new meaning.'⁵⁴ The verity of the above statement crystallizes when Mt. 27.54 is studied in the light of Roman socio-cultural practices and nuances. Recent

49. Stéphanie Anthonioz *et al.*, 'Introduction', in Stéphanie Anthonioz *et al.* (eds.), *When Gods Speak to Men: Divine Speech according to Textual Sources in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), pp. 1-8.

50. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, p. 441.

51. Geert van Oyen and Patty van Cappellen, 'Mark 15,34 and the *Sitz im Leben* of the Real Reader', *ETL* 91 (2015), pp. 569-99.

52. L. Paul Trudinger, "'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?": A Cry of Dereliction? or Victory?', *JETS* 17 (1973), pp. 235-38 (235).

53. Paladino argues that 'speak' may not be very proper to describe how Jesus made the statement. He makes this assertion because of the involvement of the verb (*ἀναβοάω*) which 'has to do with important proclamation, the acclamation or shout of a crowd, and a hopeless cry for help' (Gian N. Paladino, 'Elōi, Elōi, Lama Sabachtani? Mk 15:34 Jesus' Death Cry Linguistically Considered', see online: https://www.academia.edu/25425327/El%C5%8Di_El%C5%8Di_lama_sabachtani_Mk_15_34_Jesus_Death_Cry_linguistically_considered).

54. Peppard, *Son of God*, pp. 4-5.

studies in fact confirm that, in first-century Rome, an emperor worshipped as divine ‘was not an essence but a status—a status honored because of powerful benefactions’.⁵⁵ Such benefactions are measured by the emperor’s ability to show leniency even in the face of terrible provocations. Matthew 27 shows evidence of mockery made of king Jesus (see Mt. 27.29, 37), and his show of leniency (by choosing not to destroy the soldiers and others due to this mockery).⁵⁶ This kingly pardon leads to the centurion’s generous proclamation of the divinity of Jesus at Calvary. To speak of Jesus’ benefaction to the soldiers leading to honoring him as divine, it would be recalled that, the royalty of Jesus was confirmed before Pilate and possibly in the presence of the centurion (Mt. 27.11). Σὺ λέγεις⁵⁷ shares similarity with the way sacral kings of old responded to implicating statements from subjects and subordinates in order to exonerate the king from guilt and blame. By Jesus’ response, Pilate and his team of Roman soldiers understood that Jesus had admitted his royalty and his divinity which should exempt him from all manner of torture and mockery.⁵⁸ Unfortunately the reverse was what he got due to the insistence of the Jews. The crucifixion of the king as a common criminal was the height of all insults he received from these Romans, which should attract the fury of the gods.⁵⁹ True to it, when the Ro-

55. Peppard, *Son of God*, p. 35.

56. It is reported that some scholars have considered the centurion’s confession as in fact mockery (Naseri and Alaribe, ‘Scholarly Interpretations’, p. 156). I do not think this interpretation is correct owing to the use of the aorist indicative passive ἐφοβήθησαν and its accompanying adverb σφόδρα which gives the impression of great fright which even could put one to flight. The psychological implication of this construction does not include mockery. The only justifiable passages where the soldiers mocked Jesus were prior to the cosmic apocalyptic events.

57. Σὺ λέγεις goes beyond mere talking to take the shape of an avowal. It, therefore, assumes the same legal form with ܐܘܢܝܢ in 2 Sam. 1.16.

58. The inscription (ΟΥΤΟΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ) hung over the head of Jesus was the accusation of the Jews to Jesus, admitted by Pilate and his soldiers to be true.

59. Jessie M. Tatlock (*Greek and Roman Mythology* [New York: Century, 1917], p. 77) writes, ‘When Zeus, in anger at Asclepius’s presumption in restoring the dead to life, struck and slew him by a thunderbolt, Apollo rashly attempted to avenge his son’s death by shooting with his arrows the forgers of the thunderbolt, the Cyclopes. In punishment for this insubordination, Zeus compelled him for one year to serve a mortal.’

mans witnessed the earthquake, thunder and eclipse, they understood it as the fury of the gods indeed, leading to the fear expressed only by these Romans.⁶⁰ The fear that took them when they saw those cosmic apocalyptic events was predicated on a sudden realization that the king they severally ill-treated had the backing of the gods yet they were spared; an act of charity indeed.

What Θεοῦ Υἱός Meant up to the Council of Nicaea

To consider that the conceptual framework upon which Matthew discussed θεοῦ υἱός is Jewish rather than Greco-Roman is not theologically troublesome owing to its clarity in the Old Testament and many scholarly works. Such framework enabled him to identify Jesus as the long-expected Old Testament messianic Son of God. What is however problematic is that within the late first century, the meaning of θεοῦ υἱός for Jesus changed drastically, moving away from eschatological and christological confession to Christology of pre-existence, modifying Matthew's (and Mark's) *Sitz im Leben* to the point where the term becomes a Christology of incarnation. On this premise, the confession of the centurion has received the impetus to be discussed as *messianic*. This is observable only when 'the conceptual framework within which the term "son of God" has usually been construed in biblical scholarship' is critiqued.⁶¹ Owing to the aforementioned that the late first-century church documents have seen to the interpretation of θεοῦ υἱός as demonstrating Jesus' incarnation, an important question to ask should follow thus: 'did the Son of God language when used of Jesus always have this connotation of denoting deity, of signifying pre-existent divinity?'⁶² If any answer in affirmation is received, then it is certainly doubtful on many fronts but not excluding the two frameworks already used to define the term θεοῦ υἱός (that of Matthew and that of the Roman centurion). Consequently, Peppard says,

60. It would be recalled that when Caesar was murdered, the gods showed their fury by unleashing earthquakes (see Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* [repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], p. 423).

61. Peppard, *Son of God*, p. 3.

62. Dunn, *Christology*, p. 13.

our understanding of divine sonship in early Christianity—especially in the Roman world before Nicaea—relies on some false assumptions and untested anachronisms. That is to say, when examining the term ‘son of God’ and the concept of divine sonship in the New Testament era, biblical scholars have too often conducted their research within the later framework of fourth-century Christian thought.⁶³

It was at this period in the life of the church (end of first century to fourth century) that a thorough modification of θεοῦ υἱός (probably by literal reading of Hebrews and John) happened to include Christ’s pre-existence. This situation—documented in the Nicene Creed—could be adjudged christological extremity, which removes the contexts upon which the term is used in the synoptic Gospels in the bid to defend the hypostatic nature of Christ against the likes of Arians and Adoptionists. We can thus affirm against this anachronism that ‘the understanding of Jesus as Son of God apparently did not provide the starting point for a Christology of pre-existence or incarnation.’⁶⁴

Conclusion

The centurion’s confession of Jesus as θεοῦ υἱός has received categories of approaches and three main approaches were discussed in this work; these were called frameworks. They include Matthew’s (representing a reinterpreted Jewish idea), the centurion’s (representing the Greco-Roman idea) and the Council of Nicaea’s (representing the church’s idea). On the first framework, the study observed that Matthew’s understanding of θεοῦ υἱός, so far as a careful reading of his Gospel suggests, is from the Jewish rather than the Hellenistic background. Matthew believed that Jesus was the Son of God who fulfilled all Old Testament messianic Scriptures, hence his extensive use of the fulfillment motif. Invariably, this means that Matthew thought Jesus to be that θεοῦ υἱός. This thought is reflected in many passages in Matthew including 27.54. The second framework considered the centurion’s perspective when he referred to Jesus as θεοῦ υἱός. The study concluded that the centurion’s knowledge of Jesus’ divinity was based on the understanding of Jesus as a superhuman, a demigod comparable to Greco-Roman

63. Peppard, *Son of God*, p. 9.

64. Dunn, *Christology*, p. 64.

demigods, and this understanding does not imply the apprehension of Jesus as the Jewish Savior foretold in Old Testament writings on the coming Messiah. This signifies that the centurion's confession is in tandem with Roman cultural view of divinities, explicated in the study with the tripartite indices of supernatural birth, use of rare and primitive language, and emperor worship. The last framework was the understanding of the Council of Nicaea about θεοῦ υἱός as confessed by the centurion. The study argued that within the late first century, the meaning of θεοῦ υἱός for Jesus changed drastically, moving away from eschatological-christological confession to Christology of pre-existence, modifying Matthew's (and Mark's) *Sitz im Leben* to the point where the term becomes a Christology of incarnation. This implies that the confession of the centurion received the impetus to be discussed as *messianic*; an implication that is quite misleading. In all, this study argues that a proper context to read the confession must be that which admits that the centurion was a Gentile whose religious cognition was also non-Jewish. It further argues that the pre-existence context with which modern scholars read the confession stems from an anachronistic *Sitz im Leben* of Matthew which rhymes with a fine-tuned confession at the Council of Nicaea.