

W. E. L. Broad. *Alexander or Jesus?: The Origin of the Title "Son of God."* Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015. 206 pp. \$25.

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In his well-researched book, Broad—Canon Emeritus at Durham Cathedral—moves the reader through his logic of solving the mystery of how “Son of God” very quickly became the most historically and theologically significant moniker for Jesus of Nazareth. Broad’s research into historical documents leads him to conclude that Alexander the Great’s title as “invincible god”¹ and its application later to Caesar Augustus and successive Roman emperors provided the model the church used in so designating Jesus. Outlining that history through ancient biographies of Alexander, along with canonical and non-canonical Jewish and early Christian writings, Broad offers a sweep of eras from 350 B.C.E. through the first centuries of the church. Drawing deeply from source, form, and redaction critical models of exegesis, Broad clearly offers his thesis and carries the reader along what he considers to be a sure path to his conclusion. Documented with footnotes to many primary source materials, his brief book of 157 pages remains fully accessible to the lay reader, requiring no special theological or historical background study.

In this book, Broad proposes that Paul’s use of the term “Son of God” is a contextualization of the Jewish “christ/messiah” adapted to Greco-Roman minds. While Jews longed for the advent of the christ, Greeks and Romans had no such yearning; this key fact impels Broad to surmise that Paul used the term “Son of God” because it was already a household term referring to the emperor. Broad’s research traces Alexander’s quest to be known as the son of god, offering an engaging historical development of that term. Alexander’s acclamation of divine parentage and the process that led to the Caesars’ similar claims enticed me to eagerly ponder how that civil appellation intersected with the church’s confession so early in the first century, much as I had been intrigued when I learned of the Priene Inscription several years ago. The Priene engraving in Asia Minor declared that Caesar Augustus (63 B.C.E.-14 C.E.) had initiated a new era for Rome: “The birthday of our God signaled the beginning of good news for the world because of him.”² Gordon Lathrop interprets Mark’s parallel wording (“The beginning of the gospel [or good news] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” [1:1]) as a direct affront to Augustus’ successors in Rome, “directly contrary to the presence of the emperor’s cult.”³ Noted New Testament scholar Craig Evans also affirms the Markan beginning as a decided challenge to Rome: “Mark appears deliberately to highlight parallels between Jesus’ behavior and his treatment at the hands of the Romans, on the one hand, and Roman traditions and

¹ W. E. L. Broad, *Alexander or Jesus?: the Origin of the Title "Son of God"* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 45.

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 27.

³ Lathrop, 27-28.

practices concerning the Ruler Cult, on the other.”⁴ In contrast, Broad considers Mark’s “Son of God” statements mere literary devices, insisting (along with many form critical scholars, I realize), for instance, that the centurion’s declaration at the foot of the cross⁵ cannot be historic fact. Broad confidently declares:

But almost certainly the words of the Roman soldier are fictitious and are *certainly misrepresented*. The supporters of Jesus who were present are said by Mark to be women looking on from a distance and *these cannot have realistically* have [sic] *heard* what the centurion said. What the soldier *actually said* [previous italics mine, not Broad’s] is different from the normal English translations given, for the Greek from which it is translated reads truly this man was *a son a god*.⁶

While I understand his exegetical position, I would prefer less arrogance in proposing what might *actually* have been said if one discounts Mark’s rendering of the event.

Another shortcoming to Broad’s argument is his insistence that Jesus’ use of Father/Son language does not indicate a godhead relationship, as the church claimed very soon after his resurrection. One example of Broad’s stubborn dependence on form and redaction criticism will suffice. After citing John the Evangelist’s use of “Father” as “God” one hundred times, Broad insists with James Dunn “that John is not recording history but speaking theologically and the theology that he is using is that of the Church at the end of the first century C.E.”⁷ I remain far more convinced by Larry Hurtado’s perspective on the early usage of the “Son” terminology. Hurtado writes:

By common scholarly consent, scarcely more than a year after Jesus’ execution (dated variously from 27-33 C.E.), the Jesus movement had attracted the ire of religious zealots such as Saul of Tarsus (whose subsequent conversion is widely reckoned by scholars to have happened within a couple years of Jesus’ crucifixion). Furthermore, this Saul/Paul also claims that his conversion to the Jesus movement involved his capitulation to a very high view of Jesus (“God... [revealed] his Son to me,” Gal.1:14-16).⁸

With tongue in cheek, Hurtado then remarks that “if he had intended no special role for himself in their religious life, Jesus would have to be seen as spectacularly unsuccessful in communicating his intentions to his followers. Or else he chose followers who felt particularly

⁴ Craig A. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 70.

⁵ “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

⁶ Broad, xxii-xxiii. (Many such typographical and/or grammatical errors remain in this printing, a problem I hope Broad will address in next editions.)

⁷ Broad, 85.

⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003), 59.

free...to ignore his message.”⁹ John Painter, likewise, hears in the Apostle Paul’s choice of monikers for Jesus in 1 Corinthians—written within two to three decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection—indications of divinity:

Paul did not preach “Jesus crucified,” but “Jesus is Lord,”¹⁰ and not “Christ is Lord” (*Kyrios Christos*), but “Christ crucified!”¹¹ Paul identified the human name with the divine glory, and the name that came to be associated with the divine with the suffering of the cross. In this interchange we find the insistence that Jesus is the Christ (see 1 John 2:22–23).¹²

In such references, Paul in no way links the lordship/divinity of Jesus to the idea of a conqueror or empire-builder, but rather, he associates Jesus’ divinity with servanthood—a far cry from the quest for glory of Alexander.

Broad also ignores Jesus’ use of “*abba*” in the gospels—a tradition that James Charlesworth believes is authentically from the pre-Easter, Jesus material. Charlesworth, director of Princeton Seminary’s Dead Sea Scrolls project, writes that “[t]here can be little doubt that Jesus used this formula (‘Abba’) when addressing God. It is represented in all five independent layers of the gospel tradition. It is in Mark, Q, . . . Special Matthew (words presented only in Mt), Special Luke (words found only in Lk), and John.”¹³ To conclude, then—contra Broad—that the gospel writers, and especially Mark, used the term “Son of God” for the very purpose of contrasting Jesus with the Roman emperor seems far more likely, given the ready witness (*martyria*) of first and second century believers who went to their deaths refusing to bow to Caesar while proclaiming Jesus as truly divine.¹⁴

Broad’s story, finally, does not persuade me to accept his main argument—that Paul needed to find a non-Jewish way to declare to Gentiles of the Roman Empire the importance of a Jew from Nazareth. The historical narrative Broad proposes relies far too heavily on Alexander’s

⁹ Hurtado, 60. I also recognize that countless esteemed scholars question where the line should be drawn between what Jesus actually taught and what the Church eventually preached, a point driven home quite effectively by Robert Wilken who reminds us that very question was asked by Porphyry two millennia ago. See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 204.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23.

¹² John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John, Sacra Pagina Series*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 254-255.

¹³ James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 132.

¹⁴ The witnesses’ account of the martyrdom of Polycarp records his final words: “Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed child Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you...I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom be glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen” (“Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna,” *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans Bart D. Ehrman [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006], 387-389).

Siwa encounter¹⁵ while ignoring Paul's early usage,¹⁶ martyrs' firm convictions,¹⁷ recent archaeological evidence,¹⁸ the extremely early "hymn" in Philippians 2:6-12 with its reliance on Isaiah 45:5, 21, and especially "Matthew's preference for *proskyneo*" as the worship of Jesus throughout his gospel.¹⁹ Broad's thesis would be better served if he addressed these particulars within his argument.

Though I find the arguments of the several afore-named scholars to be more persuasive, I applaud Broad for tackling the topic and for digging deep into the history of Alexander, who, after his encounter at Siwa in Egypt, appears to have developed a compulsion to be known for all time as divine. For that reason, I recommend *Alexander or Jesus?* as a work which enlightens us historically while it challenges us to ponder the Christian story through a unique paradigm—always a useful mental, and possibly theological, exercise.

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¹⁵ Broad cites the Siwa event more than thirty times in his brief book.

¹⁶ See Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ and How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁷ See *Acts of the Apostles* and *Apostolic Fathers*, especially Ignatius' letters and Polycarp's martyrdom account.

¹⁸ See Charlesworth.

¹⁹ Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?*, 114.