

David's Greater Son (Matt. 22:41–46)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Numerous factions, pursuing varying agendas, have all had their shot at Jesus. They have challenged him with their most difficult questions, forcing him into logical, political, and theological dilemmas again and again. Any one of these challenges would have been enough to discredit him, and none of these challenges seemed to offer even a shred of hope for a reasonable answer he could give. Yet each time, Jesus gave responses that stunned his opponents at every turn. Now that those questions have concluded, Jesus has his own question to ask them. This time, Jesus does not bring up the controversial questions of the day, as the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had done. Instead, Jesus asks a question about a topic on which there were no disagreements among the Jewish people. Through this, Jesus proves something extraordinary, namely, that *Jesus is David's greater Son*.

David's Son (Matt. 22:41–42)

In the previous section, the Pharisees had gathered together in order to plot how to test Jesus with a question about the greatest commandment in the Law (Matt. 22:34–36). This passage follows immediately after the conclusion of that passage, which Matthew indicates by stating that “while the Pharisees were [still] gathered together, Jesus asked them a question” (v. 41). Jesus had silenced the Pharisees again, but they did not have time to disband before Jesus poses to them his own question.

Mark and Luke introduce this story with Jesus' query about the sense in which the Christ might be called the Son of David: “How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?” (Mark 12:35; see also Luke 20:41). Matthew, however, seems to tell us about a question and answer that had preceded that question. Here, we see that Jesus first posed an open-ended question about the identity of the Christ: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (v. 42). In this culture (as in the ancient world generally), the idea of sonship often carried the idea that a son inherited his status from his father. Thus, Morris rightly paraphrases this question as, “Who is the great man from whom the Messiah is descended?”¹

Where our individualized culture might not care as much about the hereditary origins of a great man, the question of David descent was paramount to the Jews' understanding of the Messiah. It is for this reason that Matthew himself opened his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus, including an account of Jesus' legal adoption to Joseph, since Joseph was a biological heir to the throne of David (Matt. 1:1–25). Luke also gives a genealogy that traces Jesus' descent back to David, although commentators debate the reasons for the differences between the two genealogies. Most prominently, commentators have suggested either that (1) Matthew gives Joseph's genealogy while Luke gives Mary's, or that (2) Matthew gives the legal, throne succession genealogy while Luke

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 565.

gives the actual genealogy.² Regardless, Lenski makes an important observation that Jesus’ credentials in this area go remarkably without challenge in the Gospels: “No more deadly weapon against the Messiahship of Jesus could have been found than the proof that he was not of David’s line; but his bitterest enemies never ventured to cast even the least doubt upon his human descent from David.”³

The question, then, is not so much about whether the Christ is *David’s* son, but whether *Jesus* could plausibly fit the description of the Christ. Hendriksen writes, “In fact, the idea that Jesus would be the Christ was repugnant to them. The expected *Messiah* (of which ‘Christ’ is the Greek translation) was, indeed, the Son of David. This they knew, and this they taught (Mark 12:35; John 7:42). Moreover, in so far they were correct, for that is the teaching of Scripture (II Sam. 7:12, 13, Ps. 78:68–72; 89:3, 4, 20, 24, 28, 34–37; Amos 9:11; Mic. 5:2; etc.). But hearing *Jesus* called ‘the Son of David,’ how they hated that!”⁴ The Pharisees, then, have given the correct answer to the basic question of the Messiah’s sonship; however, the question remains as to whether this is the complete answer to Jesus’ question.

David’s Lord (Matt. 22:43–46)

To explore the inadequacy of the Pharisees’ answer, Jesus queries it with a quotation from Psalm 110: “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” (vv. 43–45). At one level, this follow-up acknowledges that they would be wrong to think of the Messiah as just any descendant of David, whose descendants were numerous at that point, a thousand years after David had died.⁵ Davidic sonship is a necessary, but not a sufficient, characteristic to identify the Messiah.

At another level, this line of questioning draws attention to the fact that the Messiah must be someone very great indeed, since (for example) the Book of Kings identifies three of David’s sons as incomparable, so that “there was none like” each king in his respective attributes: “Solomon is lauded for unparalleled wisdom and wealth [1 Kgs. 3:12], Hezekiah for unparalleled trust [2 Kgs. 18:5], and Josiah for unparalleled reforms [2 Kgs. 23:25].”⁶ Beyond the kings, a similar statement of incomparability appears regarding the prophets at the editorial comment at the end of Deuteronomy: “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deut. 34:10; cf. Deut. 18:15).⁷ The fact that none of these “incomparable” kings and prophets were the Messiah, coupled with the lofty language of Psalm 110, raises a number of questions about who, then, the Messiah might actually be. If Davidic sonship is the bare-minimum floor, Psalm 110 and

² Carson, “Matthew,” 89.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 886.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 811.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 886.

⁶ Gary N. Knoppers, “‘There Was None Like Him’: Incomparability in the Books of Kings,” *CBQ* 54.3 (1992): 413.

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 247–48.

other Old Testament texts suggest that the ceiling is much higher than had been fully appreciated.⁸

How high, then, is the threshold for being counted as the Messiah? Jesus points specifically to the curious language at the beginning of Psalm 110: “The LORD [יהוה; *YHWH*] says to my Lord [לַאֲדֹנָי; *lā’dōnī*]...” (Ps. 110:1b). The superscript of the Psalm identifies David as the speaker (“A Psalm of David”; Ps. 110:1a), and David speaks about Yahweh, who is, in turn, speaking to a third party: “my Lord.” How could this third party be the *lord* of the great David? Hagner explains, “by Jewish standards of familial respect, it is rather the son who might refer to his father as “my lord.”⁹ It is not that the Messiah would be merely David’s *great* son, but that he would be David’s *greater* Son.

This greater status of the Davidic son opens up a number of implications. First, the fact that David’s son is *greater* than David means, by definition, that he will be *different* from David. If so, then we should not tie our expectations too closely to the exact form of David’s own life. Morris writes, “Jesus’ contemporaries seem to have thought of ‘the Son of David’ as a Messiah like David, one who would sit on David’s throne, make warlike conquests as David did, and in general be David all over again. Jesus rejected that idea.”¹⁰ The Pharisees’ eager answer to Jesus’ original question in this dialogue suggests that they confidently believed that identifying the Messiah as David’s son disproved the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah. David’s own testimony in Scripture, however, should have given them pause to be so confident about the appearance of David’s son.

Second, France makes an important observation that Mark and Luke begin with Jesus raising a question about the title “Son of David,” but that Matthew shows the question that comes before, when Jesus first asks the Pharisees, “Whose son is he?” Jesus does not dispute the Davidic sonship of the Messiah; however, he is also taking pains to highlight the differences of the Messiah from David, contained in David’s own acknowledgement of the Messiah as his Lord. France then writes this:

When the debate is framed in that way, the question “Whose son?” remains after the first suggested answer has been put aside, inviting the reader to provide an alternative answer. And in the light of the preceding pericopes that answer is not difficult to find: in 21:37 Jesus has implicitly laid claim to the status of Son of God. It is that implication which he now invites his hearers to draw out, for surely one who is the lord of David, the most distinguished of all historical Israelites, must be himself more than just another human king. *If David calls him “lord,” he is clearly the son of someone far superior to David.*¹¹

⁸ “The title ‘Son of David’ has been prominent throughout the gospel story (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31), and on his arrival at Jerusalem it has been openly attributed to Jesus in 21:9, 15, when he has not only accepted it without rebuke but even defended its use against the objections of the chief priests and scribes. Moreover, the reader knows from the repeated emphasis in ch. 1 that Matthew sets great store by this as a title to explain the role of Jesus as Messiah. It therefore seems incongruous that here we find Jesus questioning its appropriateness as a title for the Messiah, and therefore also by implication for himself. But the argument seems to be not that the title is wrong, but that it is inadequate: the Messiah is *more than* David’s son; he is his lord.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 848.)

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 651.

¹⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 566.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 849, emphasis added.

Jesus’ question, “Whose son?” therefore subtly points to the only logical possibility: if the Messiah were David’s lord, then the Messiah must be the Son of the only being greater than David.

Third, the failure to recognize the dual sonship of the Messiah—son of David, and Son of God—is a catastrophic error. In this case, the partial truth of recognizing the Messiah only as the son of David blinds someone from worshiping Jesus as God. Calvin writes, “Satan therefore permitted Christ to be acknowledged as a true man and a *son of David*, for he would in vain have attempted to overturn this article of faith; but—what was worse—he stripped him of his Divinity, as if he had been only one of the ordinary descendants of Adam.”¹²

Tragically, the Pharisees do not repent: “And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions” (v. 46). Lenski writes, “They had no answer since they were obdurate and refused to give the right answer. Although convicted, they will not yield.”¹³ Jesus had previously “silenced the Sadducees” (Matt. 22:34), and now he also silences the Pharisees. Hagner writes, “Whereas he has passed the tests they put to him, they fail in the test he puts to them.”¹⁴ Seen in the light of this final interaction, it becomes clear that Jesus had not been caught off-guard by the questions of the religious leaders. Rather, he had allowed them to raise all their objections so that he can answer them all, one by one, before then playing his own trump card. David had been great; Jesus proves himself to be greater.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Mark 12:35 and Luke 20:41. How does Jesus broach the question about the identity of the Christ in those passages? What additional, introductory question does Matthew record that leads into that discussion? How does the framing of the identity of the Christ (“whose son?”) shape the way that we interpret Jesus’ later comments about the lordship of David’s son over David? What does it tell us that the Pharisees answered Jesus’ question without hesitation?
2. How did ancient peoples understand the relative greatness of a great man in comparison with his son? Who were some of the illustrious descendants of David? Why were none of them recognized as the Christ? What does “Christ” mean? Why was it such a shock for Jesus to point out that David calls the Christ “lord”? As you study Psalm 110, do you think that Jesus’ exegesis is a self-evident observation from the text? Why or why not?

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:66.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 892. Lenski also writes this: “Their conception of the Messiah was that he was David’s son and only David’s son, a mere human Messiah, however great and mighty he might be in his human glory and power. His deity was a closed book to their blind reading of Scripture. They dared not say that he was not to be David’s son; they knew that he would be. They dared not deny David’s inspired word that the Messiah would at the same time be David’s Lord and thus very God. Yet the Pharisees would not admit the Messiah’s deity.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 891.)

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 649.

3. What made David great? How did David's greatness shape the expectations of the Jewish people for David's son? What differences from David might make David's son greater than David himself? How does Jesus' question, "Whose son is he?" open the possibility of understanding the Christ as the son of someone other than David? Why is it important to believe that Jesus is both the son of David as well as the Son of God?

4. Do you think that modern people find this debate as important as the Jews of Jesus day did? Why or why not? What are the challenges of connecting the modern mind to questions of Old Testament promises and prophecies, types and shadows, covenants and ceremonies? Does this interaction help to show us why Jesus considers the Old Testament important? How can you grow in your faith by grappling with Jesus as David's greater Son?