

A Case for Divine Sonship: Jesus as ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ in John 8:42

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Abstract

A prominent theme in the Gospel of John is the Father-Son relationship. Jesus is clearly presented by John as the Son of God. Evangelical interpreters also affirm that the deity of Jesus is taught in John's Gospel. There has been some debate among interpreters concerning whether or not Jesus' sonship in the Gospel directly contributes to the understanding of his deity, and if so, how. This article seeks to present a case for divine sonship in Jesus' language in John 8:42, particularly Jesus' claim: "I came from God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον). The evidence presented will include linguistic analysis (e.g., patterns in John's word choices, word meanings, combinations of prepositions and verbs, etc.), contextual analysis, and theological parallels in John's writings.

The relationship between Jesus and the Father is a clear theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus consistently reveals himself as the Son in describing his relationship to God the Father (e.g., John 3:35; 5:17-30; 8:28; 10:34-38; 17:11; et al.). The degree to which this relationship is functional in nature versus ontological or essential is a vital aspect of understanding John's Christology (Kysar, 1975; Keck, 1996; Oates, 2022, p. 93). Some view the sonship of Jesus in John's Gospel as moral in nature with little to no ontological concern. T. E. Pollard originally described his view of John's presentation as giving no "thought to the ontological nature of the sonship," though he conceded it might raise questions of ontology (1970, p. 17). Pollard later revised his view based on John's use of prepositions and prepositional phrases in describing the Father-Son relationship, concluding that John's presentation went beyond the ideas of moral nature and unity (Pollard, 1977). Others, while affirming Jesus' role of obedience to the Father's will, interpret Jesus' sonship as clear evidence to his deity (Carson, 1991; Köstenberger, 2004; Rainbow, 2014). The purpose of this article is to present a case for divine sonship from Jesus' language in John 8:42 in which he states, "ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον" ("I came from God" [ESV]¹).

Jesus' words in John 8:42 are in response to the Jews' claim that God is their only Father in v. 41. Jesus states, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God [ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον] and I am here." There are two basic ways interpreters

understand the phrase ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον in this verse. Many see this phrase as synonymous with ἀπό θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν in 13:3 or παρά τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον in 16:27, and therefore serving to emphasize Jesus' heavenly origin (Barrett, 1978; Brown, 1966; Kanagaraj, 2013; Ridderbos, 1997). Murray J. Harris translates Jesus' words as "I came out from God's presence," equating the spatial sense of ἐκ with παρά (2015, p. 178). Combined with the verb ἦκω this phrase then speaks to the Incarnation and mission of Jesus. Some, however, argue that Jesus' words point to his essential unity with the Father and speak to his divine nature (Westcott & Westcott, 1908; Bruce, 1983²). Dodd translates ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς in 16:28 as "I issued out of the Father" (1968, p. 259). One would assume he understands the language of 8:42 in the same way. If ἐκ functions here in accordance with its basic spatial sense of "out of," as it seems to do throughout John's Gospel and Epistles, then Jesus' words in 8:42 would mean more than the locative origin of God's presence or point of departure for his mission (see Waldrop, 2019, for John's use of ἀπό, ἐκ, and παρά in accordance with their original spatial sense). They would in fact indicate that he is of the same essence and nature of God and speak to his divine sonship in a way consistent with his relationship with the Father presented in the prologue of the Gospel. There is further evidence that supports this understanding.

First, John frequently uses ἐκ instead of παρά or ἀπό for the purpose of showing a shared nature between source and trajector³. If

¹ All English Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV version of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

² Bruce, though cautious, allows for the possibility.

³ For instance, despite the noted trend that ἀπό is overtaking ἐκ in *Koine* Greek (see Luraghi, 2003), John uses ἐκ in every partitive expression employing a preposition except for one possible instance in John 21:10 where ἀπό is used. The partitive structure necessarily conveys an essential relationship since the part is a true member of the whole (e.g., John 11:19 where the "many" who are ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων are necessarily Jewish).

John wished to express Jesus' oneness with the Father in essence, ἐκ is certainly the source preposition he would have had to use. In his discussion of John 15:26 concerning whether the eternal procession of the Spirit is conveyed in the words *παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται*, Harris rightly concludes "only ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς would be appropriate" if eternal procession was in view (Harris, 2012, pp. 175-176). This seems to be confirmed in the Nicene Creed where a combination of John 15:26 and 1 Cor. 2:12 (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) is used in describing the Spirit as τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον ("Who proceeds from the Father"). It appears that the ἐκ from 1 Cor. 2:12 has been substituted for *παρὰ* in order to make eternal procession and the essential nature of the relationship explicit ("Early Christian Texts", n.d.).

Second, the immediate context of Jesus' claim in 8:42 refers to begottenness and filial, spiritual relationships. The Jews claim Abraham as their father in v. 39. In v. 41, when Jesus points out their error, the Jew's respond, "We have not been born out of sexual immorality [ἐκ πορνείας οὐ γεγεννήμεθα]" (translation mine), before stating that God is their father. It is possible that there is a veiled accusation against Jesus and the events surrounding his birth in these words (Wright, 2004, p. 12). If so, Jesus' response would likely not be a reference to the Incarnation, but rather his true origin. Concerning this possibility, Carson observes, "If this is a correct reading, then it is a further instance of Johannine irony, irony which extends beyond the virginal conception of Christ to the question of his ultimate origin in the Father" (Carson, 1991, p. 352). Even if the Jews are claiming they are not illegitimate spiritual children (Thompson, 2015), they explicitly introduce the concept of being begotten, which involves nature and essence, a concept already implicit in the father-son language⁴. Additionally, the verb ἐξέρχομαι used by Jesus in describing his origin can have a generative sense as is seen in the Septuagint in 2 Chron. 6:9 and Gen. 35:11 and in the New Testament in Heb. 7:5 (Reinhartz, 1999). In all three of these references where ἐξέρχομαι has a generative sense, it is modified by an ἐκ-phrase in which the object speaks to the person(s) or ances-

tor(s) out of which the descendant will be born.

Third, a revelation from Jesus that he is of the same essence as God would not be out of place in a context where Jesus tells the Jews that they do not believe *because* he is telling them the truth. Jesus is answering the Jews' question "Who are you?" from v. 25, yet in v. 43 Jesus says, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word." Then in v. 45 he clarifies with certainty the cause of their unbelief: "But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me." The surrounding context suggests that Jesus in fact is speaking clear truth with regards to his identity. In v. 23 Jesus states he is from above and not of this world. In v. 24, ἐγὼ εἰμι provides the sole content of what the Jews must believe in order to not die in their sins⁵. In v. 28 ἐγὼ εἰμι is the content of what will be known when they lift up the Son of Man. Jesus uses these words a third time in revealing his person in 8:58 where he proclaims, "before Abraham was, I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι]." With this last statement the Jews seek to stone Jesus, indicating their understanding of the implications of his words (Borchert, 2002, p. 309; see also Wikenhauser, 1961). So for Jesus to make a statement in 8:42 that speaks to his oneness with the Father in essence fits the surrounding context concerning the revelation of Jesus' true person to the Jews.

Fourth, the use of ἐκ with the compound verb ἐξῆλθον seems to be more than a stylistic choice in the Gospel. Working in the greater sphere of Cognitive Linguistics, Paul Danove's case frame analysis method seeks to better understand verbs and their complements, providing greater specificity to how the complements function in relation to the verbs they modify (Danove, 2009)⁶. A very elementary case frame analysis of ἐξέρχομαι and ἔρχομαι⁷ in the Gospel and Epistles shows that these verbs require three arguments or "entities required to relate the verb's concept" (Danove, 2009, pp. 1-2). These include the source of movement, the object that is moving, and the goal of movement. When ἐκ functions to show the source of departure with these verbs in John's Gospel other than in 8:42, it is used with an impersonal object or *plural* personal

⁴"When Christ tells those who claim God as their Father to love himself because he proceeded from God, then, he taught us that the reason we should love him was his *begetting*...his incorporeal birth" (italics added), Hilary of Poitiers. (2018). "On the Trinity," in *John: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*. Ed. Robert Louis Wilken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). 267.

⁵Noting that in the Septuagint these words are found "on the lips of God himself," Barrett states, "We may say then that ἐγὼ εἰμι, thus understood, (i) indicates the eternal being of Jesus; (ii) thereby, and in itself, places Jesus on a level with God," Barrett, C. K. *Gospel*, 283.

⁶This method has made a positive contribution to linguistics (see Aubrey, 2016, pp. 193-195).

⁷By elementary I mean that I have only analyzed the verb with regards to the arguments it requires. I have looked at each instance of a preposition of movement showing both movement *from* or *to* (*παρὰ*, *ἀπό*, *ἐκ*, *εἰς*, and *πρός*) because they function in supplying either the point of departure or the goal of the movement. I have done this with the verbs ἐξέρχομαι and ἔρχομαι.

object such that the “out of” spatial sense is clear.⁸ In other words, the object of the ἐκ phrase is a container of sorts out of which the trajector moves. Additionally, John seems to use spatial-appropriate prepositions when using them to denote the goal of movement. An analysis of how εἰς and πρὸς function with these two verbs shows that John uses different prepositions for impersonal and personal goals of movement (see Harris, 2012).⁹ When the movement goal is impersonal, εἰς is always used.¹⁰ When a person is the goal of the movement, πρὸς is used.¹¹ John distinguishes between the two based on the nature of the goal. This distinction seems to be based on the spatial sense of the prepositions, given that the notion of entering “into” is not valid concerning movement toward a person. This intentionality, combined with the fact that ἐκ has the “out of” sense in every other instance as a modifier of these verbs, suggests that it carries the “out of” sense in 8:42 concerning Jesus’ origin. If so, Jesus’ essential nature and divine sonship is likely in view.

Fifth, the closest parallel to 8:42 in John’s writings is 1 John 5:1, which states, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God [ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται], and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him [γαγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ].” Here, the true child of God loves every other true child of God. In John 8:41, the Jews claim that God is their Father. Jesus then challenges their claim in 8:42 on the basis of their failure to love him. Though believers are the most likely referents for those who have been born of God and therefore the objects of love in 1 John 5:1, it seems that Jesus would be included as well given his later description in 1 John 5:18 as ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (Jobes, 2013). Jesus, being born of God in 5:18, will be loved by those born of God according to 5:1. If the theology of 1 John 5:1 is impacted at all by Jesus’ teaching in John 8:42, then a strong case can be made

for seeing a relationship between Jesus’ coming ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ in John 8:42 and being born ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ in 1 John 5:1. This would favor Jesus’ words being a statement about his divine sonship.

John presents no systematized thought concerning what later theologians called the eternal generation of the Son in John 8:42. But without providing succinct details so as to dispel all questions, he has nevertheless established a pattern of using prepositions in conjunction with certain verbs that has clear theological import concerning the Father-Son relationship.¹² The evidence presented above suggests that the language of Jesus in John 8:42 does indeed go beyond moral unity in his relationship to the Father. Jesus answers the charge concerning his identity, revealing both his preexistence and essential nature. Beyond claiming to be the Son of God in this passage, Jesus reveals himself as God the Son. “Out of” God is how he has come and who he is as he stands in dialogue with the Jews. Westcott therefore seems correct to confidently assert, “The words can only be interpreted of the true divinity of the Son, of which the Father is the source and fountain. The connexion described is internal and essential, and not that of presence or external fellowship” (Westcott & Westcott, 1908, p. 136).

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⁸ When ἐκ modifies ἐξέρχομαι and ἔρχομαι and shows the point of departure, it has an impersonal object that is a dimensional container (e.g. region, object, or figurative object) such that “out of” is an appropriate description of the movement in nearly every instance. The only exceptions are the partitive use in John 11:19 with ἔρχομαι where the Jews are the plural, personal object, and John 8:42. For ἐκ as a modifier of ἔρχομαι, see John 3:31; 4:7, 54; 6:23; 7:41, 42; 11:19; and 12:28.

⁹ Harris notes this general pattern in the NT, and this distinction holds in John.

¹⁰ Εἰς is used with a personal object in John 21:23; however, the subject is not personal (ὁ λόγος [‘the saying’]). The use of εἰς here strengthens the argument concerning spatial sense as a ‘saying’ actually enters through the process of hearing. For the other uses, see John 1:43; 4:43; 12:13; 19:17; 1 John 4:1; and 2 John 7.

¹¹ See John 18:29, 38. Given only two uses of πρὸς with ἐξέρχομαι, it should be noted that distinction holds without exception for εἰς and πρὸς when used with ἔρχομαι as well. For εἰς, see John 1:7, 9, 11; 3:19, 22; 4:5, 45, 46, 54; 5:24; 6:14, 24; 9:39; 11:27, 30, 38, 56; 12:1, 12(2x), 27, 46; 16:28; 18:37; 20:1, 3, 4, and 8. For πρὸς, see John 1:29, 47; 3:20, 21, 26; 4:30, 40; 5:40; 6:5, 17, 37, 44, 45, 65; 7:37, 45, 50; 8:2; 10:41; 11:19, 29, 45; 13:6; 14:6, 18, 23, 28; 16:7; 17:11, 13; 19:3, 39; 20:2, and 2 John 10.

¹² E.g., 1:1, 14, 18; 3:35, 36; 5:19, 30, 43; 6:33, 38, 46; 7:17, 28, 29, 33; 8:23, 26, 28, 38; et al.

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