

## “SON OF MAN” AS A SELF-DESIGNATION OF JESUS

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There has been a good deal of discussion recently in scholarly circles regarding the title ‘Son of Man’ in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> And while many different proposals have been made, two opinions on the subject have become dominant:

1. That there existed in pre-Christian Jewish thought a generally well-defined concept of a transcendent redeemer figure, spoken of as the Son of Man, whose coming to earth as Judge would be a feature of the drama of the End Time.

2. That the title Son of Man was not a self-designation of Jesus, but was applied to Him by the early Church via a series of misconceptions and became the foundational motif in the various early Christologies; the few authentically dominical Son of Man sayings in the Gospels refer not to Jesus but to a future apocalyptic figure.

Despite the widespread propagation of these views, however, much can be said to the contrary.

### IN PRE-CHRISTIAN JEWISH THOUGHT

In dealing with the Son of Man in Jewish thought, the question regarding the identification of pre-Christian sources is crucial. The monographs of Oscar Cullmann, H. E. Todt, A. J. B. Higgins, Ferdinand C. Hahn, and Reginald H. Fuller, together with the articles by P. Vielhauer and Eduard Schweizer—to name only a prominent and representative few of recent vintage—begin on the premise that I Enoch 37-71 (the “Similitudes” or “Parables”), IV Ezra 13, and Daniel 7 are all Jewish compositions which represent pre-Christian expectations regarding the Son of Man as the eschatological agent of redemption.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For an excellent survey of and interaction with current discussion, see I. H. Marshall, “The Synoptic Son of Man Sayings in Recent Discussion,” *New Testament Studies*, XII (4, 1966), 327-351.
2. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 139-144; H. E. Todt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. D. M. Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965); A. J. B. Higgins, *Jesus and the Son of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1964); F. C. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 13-53; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1965), 34-43; P. Vielhauer, “Gottesreich und Menschensohn,” *Festschrift für Gunther Dehn*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Neukirchen: Moers, 1957), 51-79; *idem*, “Jesus und der Menschensohn,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, LX (2, 1963), 133-177; *idem*, “Ein Weg der neutestamentlichen Theologie. Prüfung der Thesen Ferdinand Hahns,” *Evangelische Theologie*, XXV (1, 1965), 24-72; E. Schweizer, “Der Menschensohn,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, L (3-4, 1959), 185-209; *idem*, “The Son of Man,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXIX (2, 1960), 119-129; *idem*, “The Son of Man Again,” *New Testament Studies*, IX (3, 1963), 256-261.

A major difficulty with such a view is that to date there is no evidence for the pre-Christian nature of Book II (i.e., chapters 37-71) of Ethiopic Enoch, and it is precarious to deduce the existence of a firm Son of Man concept in the intertestamental period from Daniel 7 and IV Ezra 13 alone. As J. Y. Campbell points out, "most of the extant manuscripts of the Ethiopic Enoch belong to the eighteenth century; none can be confidently dated earlier than the sixteenth"—and even if R. H. Charles' guess be accepted that the Ethiopic version was translated in the sixth or seventh centuries, or F. C. Burkitt's that this occurred as early as the fourth, we are still centuries removed from pre-Christian times.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that C. H. Dodd and a few British scholars influenced by him at this point have refused to erect any arguments on evidence drawn from the Similitudes,<sup>4</sup> though there seems to be little reticence in accepting an early Jewish provenance for these chapters on the Continent and in the States. In addition, the caves of Qumran, while producing portions corresponding to every other chapter of the 108 chapters of Ethiopic Enoch, have yielded no fragments from the Similitudes themselves (i.e., I Enoch 37-71).<sup>5</sup> This fact has compelled some to suggest a first or second century A.D. date for the composition of the Enochian Similitudes and to view them as representative of some facet of early Jewish Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Admittedly, to argue from (1) omissions in the extant Greek portions and (2) the absence of these chapters in the evidence to date from the Dead Sea materials is to argue only negatively. Such a negative argument, of course, suffers from the inability of positive demonstration. It is also a tenuous argument in the sense that a great amount of material from Qumran has yet to be identified and published, some of which may present evidence to the contrary. But as matters stand today, it is a negative argument of sufficient import as to be highly significant. And it should give pause and cause for concern to those who erect upon the basis of the Similitudes such imposing Son of Man Christologies as are becoming fashionable today (though, sadly, it seems to have had only minimal effect). It is not sufficient to say, as does Reginald Fuller, that "while . . . we cannot be sure that the Similitudes themselves antedate the Christian era, we may treat them with some degree of confidence as evidence for a tradition in Jewish apocalyptic which is pre-Christian";<sup>7</sup> or to argue that since it cannot be definitely proved that they are not pre-Christian,

3. J. Y. Campbell, "The Origin and Meaning of the Term Son of Man," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLVIII (191-2, 1947), 146.

4. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 116-117; *idem*, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 242-243.

5. J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea*, trans. J. Strugnell (London: SCM, 1959), 33; J. C. Hindley, "Towards a Date for the Similitudes of Enoch. An Historical Approach," *New Testament Studies*, XIV (4, 1968), 553-554, citing a private communication from Matthew Black.

6. J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery*, 33-34; F. M. Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 202-203.

7. R. H. Fuller, *Foundations of N.T. Christology*, 37-38.

we may continue to use them as such, as does A. J. B. Higgins.<sup>8</sup> The evidence to date is of such a nature as to make the employment of I Enoch 37-71 in reconstructing pre-Christian thought precarious indeed, and to suggest that the confidence with which these chapters are employed in current discussion as representing early Jewish apocalypticism must be judged as supported more by dogmatic assertion than critical foundation. In fact, of the three alleged sources employed today in explanation of the title Son of Man (I Enoch 37-71, IV Ezra 13, and Daniel 7), only Daniel 7 is demonstrably pre-Christian; IV Ezra, written by a quietistic Pharisee, almost certainly stems from the latter part of the first Christian century and the Similitudes of Enoch was probably written about the same time, or even later, possibly by a Jewish Christian with roots of some type in Jewish Essenism.

In his work on Old Testament "testimonia" portions employed in the New Testament, C. H. Dodd has shown that "there are three passages in Scripture containing the term 'Son of Man,' and three only, which can be *proved* to have been employed for testimonies" and which can be used with any degree of confidence to elucidate the New Testament at this point: Psalm 8, Psalm 80, and Daniel 7.<sup>9</sup> In Psalm 8:4-6, 'Son of Man,' in parallelism with 'man,' is "simply man as such, man in his weakness and insignificance, yet 'visited' by God, and by his merciful ordinance 'crowned with glory and honor'."<sup>10</sup> In Psalm 80:17-19 it is the nation "Israel, under the similitude of a human figure, humiliated into insignificance until visited by God and raised to glory."<sup>11</sup> Though Psalms 8 and 80 are assuredly pre-Christian, it is only Daniel 7 which employs the title in a Messianic sense and which is therefore of significance here.

Alan Richardson is representative of many who have pointed to the recurrent Son of Man expression in Ezekiel as the basis for the use of the title in the Gospels.<sup>12</sup> But, again, C. H. Dodd has shown that while "Ezekiel may no doubt have been in the minds of early Christians, . . . proof that it was so is lacking in the New Testament. Ezekiel does not appear to have been a primary source of testimonies."<sup>13</sup>

In laying sole dependence upon Daniel in understanding the title in pre-Christian thought, we cannot continue to interpret the seemingly enigmatic figure of Daniel 7 by the categories of I Enoch 37-71. Using the Enochian Similitudes to explicate Daniel's Son of Man, most scholars today assert that the one like a Son of Man in Daniel 7 is a transcendent

8. A. J. B. Higgins, *Jesus and the Son of Man*, 15-16, 198-199.

9. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, 117.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Cf. A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1958), 20-21, 128ff.

13. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, esp. 117n. E. Schweizer proposes that Ps. 22 and Wisd. of Sol. 2-5 are the pivotal passages here ("The Son of Man," *op cit.*, 128); this, however, is refuted in my discussion that follows.

and glorified redeemer figure who is exalted above all sufferings. To this, however, C. F. D. Moule has pertinently remarked:

But the fact remains that in Daniel 7:21, 25, the specially aggressive 'horn' on the beast's head "made war with the saints, and prevailed over them" and was destined to "wear out the saints of the Most High;" and it is precisely with these saints of the Most High that the Son of Man is identified. It is irrelevant that this interpretation of the Son of Man vision is a secondary interpretation [as some assert]: all that concerns the present investigation is that it was in Daniel 7 as Jesus and his disciples knew it—and I know of no evidence to the contrary. But, if so, the Son of Man, in the only document known to have been available then, stands for a loyal, martyr-group who are brought to glory and vindicated *through suffering*.<sup>14</sup>

Whether we are to understand the title in Daniel 7 in a strictly individualistic sense or along the lines of corporate personality is not the point here. What is the point is that while Daniel 7:13-14 indeed speaks of the glorification of the Son of Man, it is in context a glorification and vindication through suffering. Thus I would suggest, along with Gustaf Dalman, Ernest Best,<sup>15</sup> C. F. D. Moule, and others, that there were two connotations contained in the title Son of Man in pre-Christian Jewish thought: (1) that of humility and suffering, and (2) that of majesty and glory.

#### IN THE GOSPELS

Since Bultmann, it is commonly asserted that (1) Jesus never employed the title Son of Man of Himself, (2) Jesus only used the title in regard to a coming apocalyptic figure who would vindicate His own earthly ministry at some time in the future and with whom He would be associated in some manner, (3) it was the early Church that first applied the title to Jesus, first in an apocalyptic sense identifying Him with the coming Son of Man and then to Him in His earthly ministry and suffering, and (4) all evidence to the contrary must be discounted as being *vaticinia ex eventu*.<sup>16</sup> But though this line of argument is highly

14. C. F. D. Moule, in review of H. E. Tödt's *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition in Theology*, LXIX (550, 1966), 174. On a suffering motif in Dan. 7 and Ps. 80, see also W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), 280; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, 117; E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 163-164. One need not see in the Son of Man image the sole source for a suffering Christology in the New Testament, as Moule tends to do following the thesis of C. R. North.
15. G. H. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus*, trans. D. M. Kay (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), 264-266; E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion*, 164.
16. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (London: SCM, 1952), I, 29-31, 49. For detailed expositions, see the works cited above (note 2) by Tödt, Higgins, Hahn, and Fuller. For an extension of the position beyond the guidelines laid out by Bultmann, see Vielhauer (cited above) and H. M. Teeple, "The Origin of the Son of Man Christology," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXIV (3, 1965), 213-250.

defensible on its own presuppositions, it runs roughshod over *prima facie* interpretations of the evidence and bases itself upon hypothetical reconstructions in favor of a more normal reading of the data. We must not deny that there were theological motives and tendencies at work in the composition of the Gospels, so that the reporting of the words of Jesus was conditioned in each case by the author's background, interests, purpose, and audience. But we handle the evidence much too loosely if we interpret the records as indicating the exact reverse of what they purport.

The title Son of Man occurs 81 times in the Gospels, 69 of them in the Synoptic Gospels. And with just one exception (John 12:34, where the people ask Jesus regarding His use of the term), all of the occurrences are attributed to Jesus Himself. In no instance is the title recorded as given to Jesus by others, nor is it employed in any explanatory manner by the evangelists themselves. Furthermore, it is found in all the strata of the tradition: in Mark, in the non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke (Q), in the material peculiar to Matthew (M), and in the material peculiar to Luke (L). Apart from the Gospels, it appears only in the quotation of Psalm 8:4-6 in Hebrews 2:6-8, on the lips of the dying Stephen in Acts 7:56, and in the parabolic description of the exalted Jesus in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14. It is only in the latter three cases (Acts 7:56 and Revelation 1:13, 14:14), however, that it is employed as a Christological title outside of the Gospels (though there is evidence from the Bodmer Papyrus P<sup>74</sup> that "Son of God" may be more than merely a secondary reading in Acts 7:56<sup>17</sup>). On the face of it, therefore, it would seem that there is a widely based tradition that Jesus used the term of Himself and little evidence that there was any extensive use of Son of Man as a Christological title on the part of Christians during the first century.

The Bultmannian position which assigns the title exclusively to the eschatological hope is unconvincing. The devotees of this view may justly be asked: Why should the Church have been so careful to insert the title Son of Man into the words of Jesus alone, when (as the Bultmannians assert) it really represented their Christology and not His? And, further, Why were Christians so circumspect as to preserve such a saying as that of Luke 12:8 (where Jesus supposedly distinguishes between Himself and the coming Son of Man) when for them at the time of writing there was no such distinction between Jesus and the Son of Man (as the Bultmannians acknowledge)?<sup>18</sup>

The title, as Ernest Best points out, "is varied very little by Matthew and Luke in their adoption of the passages in which it occurs in Mark,"

17. As pointed out in the 25th edition (1963) of the Nestle-Aland Greek Testament, P<sup>74</sup> reads τοῦ θεοῦ for the usual τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. G. D. Kilpatrick suggests that this stems from a date older than the scribe of P<sup>74</sup> ("Acts vii. 56: Son of Man?", *Theologische Zeitschrift*, XXI, 3, 1965, 209).

18. Rephrasing slightly the question put by E. Schweizer, "The Son of Man Again," *New Testament Studies*, IX, (3, 1963), 257, n. 3.

which suggests "a particular reverence for it" and supports the conclusion that "it was continued because it lay deep in the tradition."<sup>19</sup> We cannot, therefore, speak of the Gospels' use of Son of Man as being simply editorial. It may have had meaning for the evangelists, or it may have been almost as ambiguous to them as when Jesus first used it. But though it was not a current designation for Jesus in their circles at the time of writing, the evangelists received it and preserved it—probably in large measure because they did not know to what other title they might change it.<sup>20</sup>

Son of Man seems to have been enigmatic in meaning and ambiguously understood in Jesus' day. The title itself is not found in the Qumran literature published to date, and only by association with the 'Servant of Jahweh' or the generic idea of 'Man,' understood as a symbolic title of Messianic import, can the concept be inferred to have had some currency within popular Judaism.<sup>21</sup> The question "Who is this Son of Man?" of John 12:34 indicates something of this ambiguity in the peoples' inability to apprehend Jesus' preference for this title rather than that of Messiah.

Perhaps, as Eduard Schweizer and I. Howard Marshall suggest, Jesus "adopted the term Son of Man just because it was an ambiguous term, revealing as well as hiding."<sup>22</sup> Though in view of His explicit reference to Daniel's "abomination of desolation" in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:15, Mark 13:14) and His allusions to the imagery of Daniel 7:13 in that same discourse (Mark 13:26, par.) and in His reply before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:62, par.), both with reference to the Son of Man, it can scarcely be doubted that Daniel 7 was the source upon which Jesus based His own understanding and to which He pointed in His use of the title.<sup>23</sup> Evidently, as Gustaf Dalman insisted, what He meant to say in using this title of Himself was "that He was that one in whom this vision of Daniel was to proceed to its realization."<sup>24</sup> And in so doing, He possessed a title which combined both the elements of suffering and of glory—thus signalling both aspects of His redemptive ministry.

19. E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion*, 162.

20. *Ibid.*, 163.

21. On 'Servant of Jahweh,' see M. Black, "Servant of the Lord and Son of Man," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, VI (1, 1953), 1-11; F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 63-66, 87. On 'Man,' see O. Cullmann, *Christology of the N.T.*, 141-142 (on IQS 4.23); G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 56-66 (on targumic treatments of Jer. 31:21 and Zech. 6:12, on 1QH 3.7-10 and 1QS 4:20-23, and on the LXX translations of II Sam. 23:1 and Num. 24:7, 17).

22. E. Schweizer, "Son of Man," *op. cit.*, 128. Cf. also *idem*, "Son of Man Again," *op. cit.*, 359; I. H. Marshall, "The Divine Sonship of Jesus," *Interpretation*, XXI (1, 1967), 93; *idem*, "Synoptic Son of Man Sayings," *op. cit.*, 350-351.

23. In this regard, I En. 37-71 and IV Ezra 13 are comparable: I En. 71 has clear references to Dan. 7; I En. 46 is virtually a midrash on Dan. 7:13; and IV Ezra 13:3 is dependent on Dan. 7:13 as well.

24. G. H. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 258.

## IN THE EARLY CHURCH

That Son of Man was not a common Christological designation in the early Church is indicated by its almost complete absence in Acts and the epistles of the New Testament, a *Gemeindetheologie* understanding of the Gospels to the contrary. And this was probably so for at least two reasons. In the first place, the title could not be understood in the Greek world otherwise than as referring simply to the humanity of Jesus. While the Jewish Christian Gospel of the Hebrews and the Nag Hammadi Gospels of Thomas and of Philip retain in varying degrees something of its earlier flavor,<sup>25</sup> the Gentile fathers from Ignatius and Justin to Cyprian and Augustine "with one consent, though in variously conceived modes, have seen in this title a reference to the human side in the descent of Jesus."<sup>26</sup> And this is typical of its reception outside of a Jewish milieu. Thus from the Apostolic Fathers to the present, the title has come to be regarded in the dogmatic theology of the Church as but the converse of the title Son of God. But in the early Church it was not so.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, a Son of Man designation for Jesus in the period between His redemptive sufferings and His coming glory was not strictly appropriate. Just as the title Messiah was not considered entirely fitting until He had completed the work of the Messiah, and was declared to be such by the evident acceptance of His work by God in the resurrection from the dead,<sup>28</sup> so the title Son of Man was not the most suitable in the period between the completion of His redemptive work and the assumption of His full glory.

Interestingly, and I believe significantly, only in those portions where suffering and glory are brought together on the part of His people, and Jesus is portrayed as standing with His afflicted saints (i.e., Acts 7:56, Revelation 1:13, 14:14), is He spoken of in terms of the Son of Man. But these are exceptions in the literature of the early Church, and seem to be considered in some sense extensions of Jesus' own sufferings in the experiences of His people and anticipations of His final glory in their vindication.<sup>29</sup>

For the early Christians, then, Jesus *was* the suffering Son of Man

25. Cf. Jerome on the Gospel of the Hebrews (E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 165); Gospel of Thomas, 86 and 106; Gospel of Philip, 54 and 120. In the Gospels of the Hebrews and of Thomas, the term is attributed to Jesus.
26. G. H. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 253.
27. Paul's "Second Adam" doctrine (Rom. 5:12-21, I Cor. 15:21-22, 45-49, Acts 17:31), which was probably introduced into the Church in its explicit form by the apostle himself (the hymn of Phil. 2:6-11 may presuppose a similar imagery, but does not explicate it), may be a variant of the Son of Man motif. But if so, it only indicates to what extent the Son of Man concept required reconstruction if it were to be understood in a non-Jewish milieu (cf. E. Schweizer, "Son of Man," *op. cit.*, 127-129; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 41ff.).
28. Cf. my "The Messianic Secret in the Light of Recent Discoveries," *The Evangelical Quarterly* (1969).
29. Cf. C. F. D. Moule, "The Influence of Circumstances on the Use of Christological Terms," *Journal of Theological Studies*, X (2, 1959), 256-257.

in line with Daniel's representation, and He *would be* the glorified Son of Man who would return to complete the prophetic picture. Or as C. F. D. Moule observes: "Half its content was already a thing of the past, and half was—at any rate in the eyes of the early Church—yet in the future. . . . It was naturally assumed that the Church was in a *Zwischenzeit*, between the going and the return; and what relevance has the term Son of Man to that?"<sup>30</sup> The earliest Christians remembered that Jesus preferred to speak of Himself as the Son of Man, and thus they took pains to record it as on His lips alone; but they took the titles of Messiah, Son of God, and Lord to be the appropriate designations for Him in this interim period of redemptive history, and thus they refrained for the most part from speaking of Him as the Son of Man.

#### CONCLUSION

Contrary to much of current thought on the subject, the evidence strongly suggests that Son of Man was a distinctly self-designation of Jesus used by Him to indicate His understanding of the nature of His Messiahship. In so doing, He reached back to the enigmatic figure of Daniel 7 and in fulfillment of the prophet's vision sought thereby to explicate His person and redemptive ministry in terms of glorification through suffering. "In using the title," as Dalman has said, "He purposely furnished them with a problem which stimulated reflection about His person, and gave such a tendency to this reflection that the solution of the problem fully revealed the mystery of the personality of Jesus."<sup>31</sup>

30. *Ibid.*, 257.

31. G. H. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 259.