

Did Jesus Believe He Was the Son of Man?

By Ben Witherington, III

Almost all scholars, of whatever affiliation or persuasion are utterly convinced that Jesus used the phrase "Son of man" to refer to Himself. This phrase is found in all the source layers of the Gospels whether we think of distinctively Markan, Lukan, Matthean, or Johannine material, or even in the sayings source that Luke and Matthew seem to have both drawn upon. By the criteria of multiple attestations this phrase has the highest claims to have been spoken by Jesus of Himself and used frequently. The more important question then is, what did Jesus mean by calling Himself the Son of man so frequently, especially when He used other titles much less frequently?

In medieval theology and even in some modern contexts it has been traditional to say that the phrase Son of man refers to the humanity of Jesus, whereas, "Son of God" refers to His divinity, but this is not really correct when one realizes that Jesus is drawing on ideas from the prophet Daniel to express His identity to his Jewish audience.

The Hebrew phrase *ben adam* (which literally means son of Adam) found frequently in Ezekiel, is sometimes translated "son of man" but it is not actually the source of Jesus' usage. Rather, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and the Aramaic phrase *bar enasha* which literally means son of a human being (not son of a male in particular) is what Jesus is drawing on. This phrase comes from Dan. 7:13-14 and there is much debate as to how to interpret that crucial text. Did this Son of man figure meet with God, the Ancient of Days, in heaven or on earth? The answer is the latter because God's coming for the final day of judgment on the earth is always depicted in these prophecies as transpiring on earth, not in heaven. Thus the phrase "one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven," refers to his coming from heaven to earth, where God's judgment throne has already been set up. This son of man figure is given power and authority over all peoples and he is said to be worshipped by all peoples, In addition it is said that his dominion or kingdom will be forever.

Several aspects of these two verses are crucial for our understanding of Jesus: 1) This son of man comes from heaven to earth to judge the earth and have dominion over it all; 2) He is said to be the one whom all will worship; and 3) His reign is said to last forever, a very different promise than the one given to David in 2 Samuel 7 where we are told that his descendants will always reign. Here instead a personal promise is made to an individual that he will reign for ever. Furthermore, we should note that Daniel 7:13-14 are the only Old Testament verses where we hear both about Son of man and eternal kingdom of God, and these two phrases are the most frequent phrases on Jesus' lips throughout His ministry. Here is another clue that this is the most important Old Testament text out of which Jesus' self-understanding arose.

The questions that one must ask about Daniel 7:13-14, since this is a prophecy written by a Jew is, What sort of person can rule forever in a divine kingdom handed to him by God, and what sort of person would a Jew agree should be worshipped, especially in view of the withering critique of the worship of pagan Emperors in Babylon and Persia in earlier chapters of Daniel (see Dan. 5-6 for example)? The answer is only a divine and eternal person who also can be called son of man. In other words, this is a person who is both divine, and worthy of worship, and also human. This person can be worshipped without Jewish monotheism being violated. Having said this we can now look at several Son of man texts in the Gospels in a fresh light.

The obvious place to start is with a text like Mark 14:62 (NIV), where Jesus affirms that He is the Jewish Messiah and the Son of the blessed One, but quickly turns the discussion to the phrase He prefers, Son of man, and says "And you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven," (the last part of this verse is a direct quote from Daniel 7.) Jesus is here speaking of His second coming when, instead of Him being judged, the tables will be turned and His current judges, including Caiaphas will see Him coming to judge them! The significance of this is not lost on Caiaphas who tears his robe after Jesus says this and screams blasphemy. Notice that he does not scream blasphemy immediately after Jesus assents to the question whether he was Messiah or Son of God or not. It was certainly not blasphemy to claim to be the Jewish Messiah, as most early Jews believed Messiah would be a human being anointed and appointed by God as the rightful Davidic king, but not God. But to claim to play the role of Yahweh coming to enact the final judgment even on Jews was clearly seen as blasphemy, for only God was expected to come on final judgment day on the basis of all the Old Testament prophecies about the Day of the Lord (see Joel 2:1-11).

A second text which more emphasizes the human side of the equation is Mark 10:45, (NIV), "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." What we have here appears to be an interesting combination of ideas from Daniel 7:13-14 and from the servant songs, especially Isaiah 53:1-12. Notice the language of the "coming" of the Son of man, which may refer to the purpose for which He came to earth (which may imply that He existed before He took on human form on earth). Notice as well the language of ransom, of the buying out of bondage of lost humanity through a sacrificial death. There is as well the element of substitutionary sacrifice or atonement here, the one (namely Jesus), will die in the place of the many (namely all the rest of humanity—the contrast here is between one and many, not between many and all). This in turn implies that Jesus sees Himself as offering Himself as an unblemished sacrifice. Ironically Jesus Himself is the one person for whose sins Jesus did not have to die, since He was not a sinner, which is precisely why He was the only human person who could offer Himself as atonement and ransom.

Another interesting and important Son of man saying is found in Mark. 2:10, (NIV), "but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Scholars are divided as to whether this phrase is a comment of Mark's or should be predicated of Jesus Himself, but in either case what is noteworthy is the idea that someone who calls Himself Son of man has authority (on all the earth) to forgive sins. As the critic of Jesus rightly says, only God can ultimately forgive sins, but he has not understood the implications of Jesus doing so. This whole indirect approach is typical of Jesus. He does not directly say He is God, but He is indirectly claiming here to have divine power and authority from God the Father to forgive sins, even without a Levitical sacrifice taking place. One has to ask, what kind of person can do this? And the answer is a human but also divine one.

A further text of importance is Mark 2:28, (NIV), "so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Now in Jewish theology, God of course was the Creator of the universe who set up the sabbatical pattern in the first place, and rested on the seventh day (see Gen. 1). Since God had created the Sabbath, only God was the Lord thereof. Yet here, Jesus claims, as Son of man, to be Lord over the Sabbath, and claims that He can reinterpret the Sabbath to mean, this is the perfect day to give sick people "rest" from their illnesses, even though this activity constitutes work by any Old Testament definition. In other words, as Son of man, Jesus felt He could rewrite the Sabbath rules. Why? Because He was Lord over the Sabbath and its proper observance now that God's divine saving activity was breaking into human history through Him.

Much more could be said along these lines if we were to investigate other key Son of Man texts in the Gospels, but this is sufficient to show just how important Son of Man sayings are for understanding Jesus' messianic self-understanding. For much more on this, one should consult Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*, (Fortress Press, 1990).