

Jesus the Son of Man

Introduction

If we are to form a clear and accurate understanding as to what Jesus believed about his own person and mission, we must begin with Jesus himself. Jesus does not set out theological propositions about his true identity in the language of Chalcedon, but rather he chooses titles ('Son of Man') and accepts other titles (e.g. 'Lord'), which give us insight into his thinking. However, it is worth remarking at the beginning that there are limitations on precisely how much we can learn about Jesus from investigating his titles alone. We learn more about Jesus from what he did, not just from the titles associated with him. However, 'Son of Man' is clearly the "preferred self-designation of Jesus"<sup>1</sup>, and so to understand his usage of it as a title is to understand Jesus' own thinking about himself and his role in the history of the salvation of the people of God.

In his *Correspondence with Abgar*, Eusebius states that Jesus was "called Son of Man, because ultimately He became a man."<sup>2</sup> At very best, this is an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of the title, and at worst risks limiting the meaning to simply an incarnational one. It is my argument that 'Son of Man' speaks primarily of *vindication* rather than human *incarnation*, and should be understood first in its original Jewish context and not simply later Christological discussion. That is not to say that 'Son of Man' has nothing to say to later theology, but that the term proclaimed much about Jesus to his listeners *in his own day*. As N T Wright highlights:

"Caiaphas' question... 'You are the Messiah, the son of the blessed one?' does *not* mean 'You are the second person of the Trinity?' or 'You are the incarnation of YHWH?'. It focuses on Jesus as the would-be Messiah..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kärkkäinen V M, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) p26

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, Book 1 2:20ff in Eusebius: *The History of the Church* trans. G A Williamson. (London: Penguin, 1989) p9

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N T *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) p523

The ‘Son of Man’ is a messianic term, and can only be properly understood in this context, although how exactly we should understand Jesus’ ideas of messiahship will be discussed later. Was he only using the term as a “specific indication of himself as a frail mortal”<sup>4</sup> and so emphasising his very human prophetic rôle in the mould of Ezekiel or Daniel? Or was he even “making reference to someone other than himself”, an apocalyptic figure who was yet to come?<sup>5</sup> Texts such as Luke 12:8 can be used to support the case for making a distinction between the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the future Son of Man, but as we examine the messianic nature of the Son of Man I hope it will become clear that it is unwise to make such a separation.

### **The Genesis of Christology**

Studying Jesus as the Son of Man is really the foundation of all study into how Jesus thought of himself. Although Mark, writing the earliest Gospel, introduces Jesus as the ‘Son of God’ (Mark 1:1), this is not a title that Jesus prefers to use himself. Much of later Pauline and then post-Biblical theology is saturated with references to ‘Jesus Christ’, ‘Son of God’ and ‘Lord’, but these ‘high’ Christological titles are far less common in the teaching of Jesus himself. Rather:

“Son of Man Christology is the earliest Christology in the sense that it developed out of an element of Jesus’ own proclamation.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus’ own preference for the title and its remarkable absence from the rest of the New Testament (outside of the Gospels, it occurs only three times<sup>7</sup>), has led to the belief that Son of Man, along with all later titles for Jesus “grew up at a time when Hellenistic influence had laid the foundations for Christology”<sup>8</sup> and that the

“descriptions and understanding of Jesus which emerge in the course of Christian history – can be explained as a sort of evolutionary process...[Christianity started] with a Palestinian Rabbi [and ended] with the divine Lord of a Hellenistic Saviour-cult.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **Moule, C F D** *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 edition) p12

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Pp11-12

<sup>6</sup> **Higgins, A J B** *The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p125

<sup>7</sup> Acts 7:56, Rev 1:13 and 14:14

<sup>8</sup> **Lindars, B** *Jesus Son of Man* (London: SPCK, 1983) p2

<sup>9</sup> **Moule**, pp1-2

Proponents of this approach which suggests an evolution of our understanding of Jesus and his gradual deification in human thinking may deny that any of the Son of Man sayings are authentic<sup>10</sup> and are simply later additions by the Church to the Gospel material added as Hellenism influenced Christianity. This argument is weakened somewhat by the complete absence of ‘Son of Man’ from the writings of Paul and the Apostles (with the exception of Revelation 1:13 and 14:14), and also that it is found *only* in the sayings tradition of Jesus. The title is frequently on his own lips, and to remove it from the Gospels is at the risk of silencing Jesus altogether.

Furthermore, it is my hypothesis that far from an evolutionary Jesus-becoming-Christ, the later emphasis on ‘Son of God’, ‘Christ’ and ‘Lord’ rather than ‘Son of Man’ is only the “drawing out and articulating of what is there”<sup>11</sup> already in the person of Jesus, and that the resurrection and experiences of the New Testament have broadened the insights of the Church into Jesus, rather than the Church embellishing Jesus of Nazareth and turning him into Jesus Christ under the influence of Hellenism. Such a view of Jesus is not *evolutionary* and the result of addition to Jesus’ historical person and deeds but is rather a *developmental* understanding. Even if the later ‘high’ titles were added, the lack of a clear chronological development of such a process is difficult to discern, and it is “not always easy to separate the earliest form of the traditions from later reinterpretation”<sup>12</sup>.

Textual evidence also shows that far from there being different Jesuses for each different title, the titles “Christ, the Son of Man, and the Son of God...must refer to one another.”<sup>13</sup> Kim cites Mark 8:27-9:10 as an example of this:

a) ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘**You are the Messiah.**’ (8:30)

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<sup>10</sup> Lindars, p2. There is much controversy and discussion over which, (if any) parts of the Gospels represent authentic Jesus material. It is not possible to discuss the authenticity of Jesus’ teaching in an essay of this length, so for purposes of brevity I am assuming the authenticity of Jesus’ sayings in the Gospels as we now have them

<sup>11</sup> Moule, p3

<sup>12</sup> Stanton, G *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989 edition) pp220-1

<sup>13</sup> Kim, S *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) p1

b) “Then he began to teach them that **the Son of Man** must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (8:31)

c) “**the Son of Man** will also be ashamed when he comes in the **glory of his Father** with the holy angels.” (8:37)

d) “This is **my Son**” (9:8)

Jesus self-identification as the Son of Man is full of the messianic ideas of suffering and rejection, divine sonship and future coming and glory. Admittedly, Jesus’ preference for “the Son of Man and suffering language [rather than] the exalted language of Christ and the Son of God”<sup>14</sup> veils this somewhat, but it does indicate that Jesus thought strongly of himself in messianic terms and all that they entailed. As the texts above demonstrate, the Son of Man, Son of God and the Messiah are synonymous, and the self-designation ‘Son of Man’ is in some senses the key that Jesus offers to unlock the door to his true identity.

### **Meaning of ‘the Son of Man’**

The Greek texts render ‘Son of Man’ as *ho huios tou anthropou*, which is in turn a translation of the Aramaic *bar nasha*. It is a highly significant term if we are to fully grasp Jesus’ messianic identity, especially with its allusions to the Old Testament, as I shall discuss later. Some scholars hold that ‘Son of Man’ is simply a circumlocution for ‘I’, without implying anything more than that. It could mean ‘I myself’, but more likely is a simple parallel to ‘human’<sup>15</sup>, for example in this re-rendering of Mark 2:28:

“The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath; so a human being is lord of the Sabbath.”<sup>16</sup>

I would grant that this is one possible usage of the Son of Man, although this explanation alone is scarcely adequate for all the Son of Man material in the Gospels. In other passages such as Luke 9:58, Jesus quite clearly uses Son of Man in reference to himself:

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<sup>14</sup> **Burridge, R A** *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (London, SPCK, 1994) p59

<sup>15</sup> **Sanders, E P** *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993) p246

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p246

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Jesus also uses Son of Man in a reference to his own death in Mark 8:31, so to suggest that it is purely a circumlocution for ‘human’ or ‘I’ is at best an incomplete hypothesis. Additionally, if ‘I’ is the origin of the phrase, then it is difficult to account for the awkwardness of the Greek translation: why was a simple ‘I’ not used in Greek?<sup>17</sup> Perhaps then there is something underlying the Greek text that suggests something of more significance in the original Aramaic? To come to a hard conclusion about this is difficult, although I agree with Moule that the Greek suggests something a great deal more significant than simply ‘I’ (see below).

Looking at the Jewish social context is also no guarantor of defining the meaning of the term, as even in the Judaism of Jesus’ day “there were no hard definitions...of ‘Son of Man’”<sup>18</sup> and its possible meanings. So there are clearly limitations to what we can learn about Jesus’ thought from his titles alone, but we can know what he *did* however. He chose to call himself ‘the Son of Man’, and so we can better know what Jesus understood by this by the way he lived and ministered, rather than trying to understand a term from language alone, or even in isolation from its context.

The contexts in which Jesus uses the term vary. In addition to circumlocutional usage, he defines the Son of Man in his own actions and teaching as one who has the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), who will suffer and be killed (Mark 8:31), who will come in future glory (Matthew 24:30-31) and who will be seated on the glorious throne (Matthew 19:28). This is far from an exhaustive list of Son of Man actions and sayings, but it openly suggests something greater than simply a “self-deprecating Son of Man en route to a painfully ignominious death” who is trying to suppress his divinity<sup>19</sup>, or that Jesus is simply entitled ‘Son of Man’ in light of his prophetic

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<sup>17</sup> **Stanton**, p232

<sup>18</sup> **Sanders**, p248

<sup>19</sup> **Burridge**, p49

ministry in the mould of Ezekiel.<sup>20</sup> ‘Son of Man’ goes beyond both of these, as may be made clearer by the Greek text.

Moule emphasises the use of the definite article in *ho huios tou anthropou* to make the case that:

“the use of the equivalent of the definite article or a demonstrative pronoun [makes] an allusion back to an initial mention...of Daniel’s human figure.”<sup>21</sup>

That is to say when Jesus identifies himself as *the* Son of Man, he has a clear reference to the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14 in mind. Jesus is in effect saying ‘I am him, I am *the* Son of Man’. If this is the case, it offers a profound insight into Jesus’ understanding of the nature of the Son of Man and his own messianic mission.

#### **Daniel’s Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14**

After the end of the reign of the kingdoms of four different beasts in Daniel’s vision, one ‘like a Son of Man’ appears before the divine throne and receives an ‘everlasting dominion’ from the Ancient of Days. Unlike the temporary kingdom of the beasts, “that of the Son of Man is to endure”<sup>22</sup>, and this eternal and glorious kingdom is also shared with the “holy ones of the Most High” (7:22). The parallels between the Son of Man in Daniel’s vision and the messianic-redemption work of Jesus are strikingly similar, although it is of course easy to read this into the Danielic vision when one has the benefit of twenty centuries of Christological study to rest upon!

If – as I am arguing – Jesus was identifying himself with the Danielic Son of Man, what did he understand by it, and what would his contemporaries have understood by it? Before proceeding to discuss this further, it will be necessary to examine some of the understanding of ‘Son of Man’ in Jesus’ own day.

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. Ezekiel 2:1. Ezekiel is called ‘Son of Man’ over one hundred times, although the NRSV translates *ben Adam* as simply ‘mortal’.

<sup>21</sup> Moule, p16

<sup>22</sup> Hooker, M D *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967) p27

It “remains very doubtful whether ‘the Son of Man’ was ever in Jewish use as a title for the Messiah”<sup>23</sup>, though doubtless in the Gospel tradition it is used in a messianic sense, as I contend Jesus intended it to be used. Daniel aside, the Son of Man idea is also found in the Similitudes of Enoch:

“And at that hour the Son of Man was named  
In the presence of the Lord of the Spirits,  
And his name before the Head of Days.” (1 Enoch 48:2)<sup>24</sup>

The date of the Similitudes is disputed, but they may be contemporary with the New Testament<sup>25</sup>, although the lack of certainty over the date (which may even be post-Christian), means it is then difficult to determine precisely how much influence it would have had on Jesus’ hearers. On the other hand, there is no escaping that 1 Enoch 48:2 does echo Daniel 7:13-14 to an extent, which indicates a continuing stream in exilic and post-exilic Jewish thought regarding the exaltation of the Son of Man in the presence of the Most High.

Even if we cast Enoch aside, Daniel was still widely read by the Jews up until Josephus<sup>26</sup> and so we can confidently assume that the idea of the Danielic Son of Man was prevalent in the Jewish context in which Jesus found himself. This then places an eschatological and apocalyptic slant on Jesus as the Son of Man, but before discussing this I wish to first expound a little on the Danielic Son of Man.

The Danielic Son of Man is not coming to earth either as incarnation or as part of the *Parousia*. He is coming *to* God, not from him. Daniel 7 then moves on to a court sitting in judgment (7:26), where the verdict is that the kingdom formerly ruled by the beast is “given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High” (7:27). However, this is the same everlasting kingdom given to the Son of Man in 7:14, which opens up a new possibility for the identity of the Son of Man. According to Lindars, he:

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<sup>23</sup> **Barrett, C K** *The New Testament Background* (London: SPCK. 1996 edition) p340

<sup>24</sup> **Charles, R H** *The Book of Enoch* (London: SPCK. 1962) p66

<sup>25</sup> **Barrett**, p341

<sup>26</sup> **Josephus** *Antiquities* 10.11.7:267ff in **Whiston, W** *Josephus: The Complete Works* (Nashville, Nelson, 1998)

“functions as a symbol of the victorious people of God”<sup>27</sup>

As the Son of Man comes in glory before the Ancient of Days, there is judgment leading to vindication and glorification, but the kingdom is given to the Son of Man *and* the Holy Ones of the Most High, and so the two become synonymous.

If Jesus is the Son of Man, his destiny and mission is allied with that of the people of God. So identifying himself as the Son of Man as

“part of his prophetic work of announcing the kingdom, [Jesus] aligned himself with the ‘people of the saints of the most high’, that is, with the ‘one like a son of man. In other words, he regarded himself as the one who summed up Israel’s vocation and destiny in himself.”<sup>28</sup>

Jesus the Son of Man is the one who is vindicated, glorified and who shares the kingdom with the saints. So Son of Man clearly “constitutes a title of majesty”<sup>29</sup>, and in the light of the Danielic references to majesty, authority and the vindication of the Son of Man and God’s people it is easier to understand passages such as Mark 2:1-12 where Jesus the Son of Man declares he has authority to forgive sins which only God can do. He is accused of blasphemy, but his association of the Son of Man with divine authority is further evidence that Jesus had Daniel 7 in mind. The Son of Man is given authority from God in 7:14, and Jesus the Son of Man uses this authority by forgiving sins.

### **Vindication and suffering of the Son of Man and his people**

Thus far I have shown that Jesus’ idea of the Son of Man is demonstrated by his actions rather than the title alone, and that it goes beyond a simple “Semitic idiom for (the) man”<sup>30</sup> and in fact speaks of messiahship and of divine authority in the mould of Daniel 7. There is of course the suggestion that Jesus of Nazareth separated himself from the Son of Man, although it is “inconceivable that the evangelists thought that

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<sup>27</sup> Lindars, p3

<sup>28</sup> Wright, p517

<sup>29</sup> Dean, J *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) p174

<sup>30</sup> Barrett, p340

Jesus was referring to anyone but himself<sup>31</sup>, and all the Son of Man texts would not support this view as I have already discussed.

Jesus is the Son of Man, and even more than that, he is the Messiah and the Son of God. I have shown how these titles are closely linked in Mark 8:27-9:10, but having done this, Jesus then teaches further about the Son of Man which helps us more clearly understand the concepts of suffering and vindication behind it:

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45)

Here the Son of Man “finds greatness through service, and authority through suffering”<sup>32</sup>, which would certainly have surprised his disciples if they were only familiar with the Son of Man as a glorious figure in the mould of Daniel 7. But before God’s people can be ransomed and vindicated together with the Son of Man, he must first suffer. Jesus did suffer in due course, but the bond between the Son of Man and the Holy Ones in Daniel 7 give the term “strongly corporate overtones”<sup>33</sup>, and the necessity of suffering which is laid upon the Son of Man is also laid upon the disciples<sup>34</sup>, he is also the example to his followers. In suffering and redemption then, the Son of Man is also the *Ebed Yahweh* prophesied in Isaiah 42-61, who was vicariously fulfilling the destiny of Israel<sup>35</sup>, and so the messianic nature of Son of Man in Jesus’ usage becomes even clearer.

The usage is further amplified at Jesus’ trial, and the three concepts of Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man are woven together, and the chance for Jesus to suffer and to be vindicated is sealed as the High Priest asks him:

*‘Are you the **Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?**’ Jesus said, ‘I am; and*

*“you will see the **Son of Man**  
seated at the right hand of the Power,” and*

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<sup>31</sup> Lindars, p3

<sup>32</sup> Hooker, p141

<sup>33</sup> Caird, G B *Pelican Gospel Commentaries: The Gospel of St Luke* (London: A&C Black, 1963) p94

<sup>34</sup> Hooker, p140

<sup>35</sup> Kim, p73

*“coming on the clouds of heaven”.*

*Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy!’*

(Mark 14:61-63)

Jesus affirms his status as the messiah with divine sonship, but chooses to define it in terms of the Son of Man. Not a frail human Son of Man, but one seated at the right hand of God and ‘coming on the clouds of heaven’<sup>36</sup>. This is clearly an allusion to Daniel 7, and proof that Jesus was not only confident as to his divine identity but also that he would indeed be vindicated in his forthcoming suffering, which ultimately happened in the resurrection and ascension.

In conclusion, the term ‘Son of Man’ is not only used by Jesus, he also defines it. Certainly it was an Aramaic circumlocution, but it is clearly more than that and is rich in Christological detail. By declaring himself to be the Son of Man, Jesus also declares his messiahship and divine sonship in the tradition of the Danielic figure. It follows that Son of Man must then also speak of suffering, vindication, and a future glorious kingdom that will be the inheritance of all God’s saints. Son of Man identifies Jesus, but in his suffering, death, and resurrection he also includes an invitation to his disciples to follow the way of the Son of Man.

3,273 words

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<sup>36</sup> The reference to Daniel 7 speaks of the Son of Man coming *to* God, not *from* him, and so this particular text cannot then logically be connected to the Parousia without altering its meaning and context beyond recognition. It simply expresses Jesus’ confidence of his vindication in by God in his sufferings and that he will then be given the kingdom (and so an interesting parallel between Daniel 7 and Philippians 2 then emerges) together with God’s saints who suffer and are vindicated in the same manner as the Son of Man.

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