

# The Son of Man

by Darrell Bock

This title, Jesus' favorite according to the gospels, is one of the most discussed elements about Jesus' ministry in New Testament studies. Its use in the Old Testament is fairly limited, as the phrase simply means a "human being," with Son of Man being an expression like Son of Adam, which simply means Adam's son. So Son of man means son of a human being. It is used most often in address to Ezekiel as a human (Ezek 2:1). This prophet uses the phrase 94 times. Other texts also illustrate this meaning. God is not a man (Num 23:19) that he should lie. The suffering servant was so disfigured he did not look like a human (Isa 52:14). Psalm 8 also uses the term this way. The most famous use, however, comes in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Here one *like* a "son of man" is a figure who comes to the Ancient of Days to receive authority (Dan 7:13). The "son of man" figure is not a title here. The figure contrasts with the previous descriptions of various pagan nations in Daniel 7 as a variety of mixed animal forms. The representative of God and man is made in God's image and receives kingdom authority.

Now another element of background is that in Aramaic the expression is an idiom. It can mean "someone" or "some human being." It is debated whether it can be an indirect way to refer to oneself. This use is not clearly attested in the first century.

In Judaism the expression came to be used of a figure of salvation, a transcendent salvation figure as it appears frequently in 1 Enoch. However, this use cannot be dated with certainty before the time of Christ. Nonetheless, such usage shows that even some Jews pushed the figure of Daniel into a title.

The term appears 82 times in the NT. It is always spoken by Jesus in the gospels. "One like a son of man" appears in Rev 1:13 and 14:14. Stephen sees the Son of Man standing in Acts 7:56. All other uses are by Jesus.

Scholars have classified this expression in various ways.

One way is to discuss whether the use of the title comes with a clear use of Daniel 7, an indirect use or no use, since this is the only OT passage that is connected to the title specifically in the NT. Most uses of the title do not make an explicit connection to Daniel 7. In fact, the explicit uses that do come appear in two places: (1) the eschatological discourse where Jesus discusses the return of the Son of Man and (2) at Jesus' examination by the Jewish leadership where he speaks of the Son of Man seated at God's right hand coming on the clouds, a remark that combines Daniel 7 and Psalm 110:1. This means that in most uses in the gospels Jesus used the title but did not give a reference to tie it to as an explanation. Both of the explicit uses come late in Jesus' ministry.

Another way to discuss the sayings is to look at what the Son of Man is doing in the saying. This has led to a three-fold classification: (1) present ministry sayings, (2) suffering Son of Man sayings, and (3) future return or apocalyptic sayings. For each synoptic gospel the breakdown of such use is: Matthew: 30 times with 7 earthly, 10 suffering, and 13 apocalyptic sayings; Mark: 14 sayings with 2 earthly, 9 suffering and 3 apocalyptic; Luke 25 times with 7 earthly, 8 suffering and 10 apocalyptic sayings. The uses in John's gospel do not break out into these categories but uses the term 12 times. The connections to Daniel 7 appear in the apocalyptic sayings.

What does all of this mean for the use of the title? It would seem that Jesus chose a seemingly ambiguous expression, the idiom, and used it to describe his ministry as a representative human being. However, as he came to the end of his ministry he made clear, as its earlier use had suggested, that the term means a specific representative who had salvation authority as Daniel 7 suggests when Jesus returns to judge.

An illustration of such a use is the story of the healing of the paralytic (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24). Here Jesus speaks of the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sin as he uses the healing of the paralytic to point to his personal authority, an authority that was regarded by Jews to belong to God alone. Jesus says that he heals in order that they all may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin. In other words, Jesus uses what one can see (a healing) to illustrate the authority God has given a specific human being concerning forgiveness of sins, something one cannot explicitly see. An interesting feature about all but one of Jesus' uses of this expression is that in Greek it is always "the" Son of Man, with explicit use of a definite article to show that a particular use is in view.

The significance of this choice is that the Son of Man is a unique combination of human and divine features in Daniel 7. The "son of man" like figure in that passage points to a human, but the riding of the clouds refers to something in the OT that only God or the gods are said to do (Exod 14:20; 34:5; Num 10:34; Ps 104:3; Isa 19:1). Thus the expression combines humanity and divine activity with a glimpse at the giving of authority to this figure at a moment of exaltation. The combination makes it a crucial expression for Jesus as it uniquely combines the various elements that reflects his person and ministry. Jesus' use of it in a variety of contexts that cover the scope of his ministry allows him to develop the portrait. Particularly the disciples, who would have heard him use it again and again, would have come to appreciate what it meant. It seems that they preserved his unique use of it by restricting its use to him alone.

So the Son of Man is a title Jesus used to refer to himself and his authority. He revealed its full import toward the end of his ministry. But the title referred to Jesus as the representative of humanity who also engaged in divine activity. It was a way of saying I am the One sent with divine authority to also be the representative of humanity. In this context, all of Jesus' ministry and work, including his suffering on the cross for sin takes place.

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