
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IV.

THE TITLE "THE SON OF MAN."

BY PROFESSOR MILTON G. EVANS, D.D.

ACCORDING to the Gospels, Jesus selected the title "the Son of man" as appropriate to himself. Only twice is it used by another than Jesus, and both are probably quotations. Outside of the Gospels it is found only in Stephen's prayer, for the phrase "son of man" in John's Apocalypse does not refer to Jesus, but to the "one like unto a son of man" of Daniel's vision.

The frequency of the Messianic name "the Son of man" in the Gospels and its absence from the Epistles have often been noticed, and the inference drawn, that Paul's silence is due to ignorance of such a title for Jesus. Assuming Paul's ignorance, the conclusion is reached, that no such Messianic title was current in the apostle's lifetime, and that therefore the representation of the evangelists is unhistorical. Arguments drawn from the processes of historical and literary criticism have of late been freely used to show that this old conjecture is the true solution of the problem. For example, it is urged that Paul could not have known the term "the Son of man" as a Messianic name; else he would have used it, rather than the terms "the last Adam," "the second man," and "the man from heaven" (1 Cor. xv. 45), in order to describe the ideal humanity of Jesus; and the passages in the Gospels where the title occurs are so manipulated as to exclude almost all of them from the sayings of Jesus. Some of the passages are rejected because of their "evident secondary

character"; others are eliminated as "apostolic interpretations"; others are bluntly called "unhistorical"; and the rest are declared to be equivalent to the supposed Aramaic original *bar-nash*, which means simply "man" or "a man." The last proposition is maintained by insisting that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that to know what Jesus said, the present Greek version must be translated into Aramaic.

But even if it be admitted that Jesus spoke Aramaic,—and there is no sufficient reason for denying it,—the necessary inference is not, that he must have used the original of the Greek phrase "the Son of man" in the sense of "man" or "a man." Competent Aramaic scholars hold that the indefinite *bar-nash* could not have been translated into the definite Greek ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, but that this Greek name must have been equally definite in the Aramaic.

Lietzmann has given the most thorough recent discussion of the title, and has reached the conclusion, that its first traces appear in Marcion, among the Ophites and in the Ignatian Epistles; that it was a technical term of Hellenistic theology, which might possibly have been formed in Jewish circles; and that the early Greek communities borrowed the formula to designate Jesus. This view suggests more questions than it answers. Lietzmann has not satisfactorily answered two pertinent questions, What led to the coinage of the Greek title? In the face of the evidence that pushes our Greek Gospels back of the middle of the second century, how does it happen that they contain the title seventy-eight times, reckoning duplicates?

Until more cogent reasons have been given, than have hitherto been adduced, for denying the historicity of the name "the Son of man" in the Gospels, the student of the New Testament may continue to investigate the title as a source of information for Jesus' self-consciousness.

Granting that Jesus used the title, the question is, What significance did he attach to it?

It is a commonplace of New Testament theology to find in the name "the Son of man" a reference to Jesus' intimate and inalienable relation to human nature. Students differ as to the exact idea he intended to convey, but they agree that it must be gotten from the words "man" or "son of man." "Man" and "son of man" are most frequently used in Hebrew as perfect synonyms. But interpreters commonly make "son of man" a stronger term than "man," and with some show of reason. "Son of" is an orientalism meaning "related to." That is, a man may have a certain quality so marked as to be appropriately called the son of that quality; for example, son of folly, son of peace, son of perdition. The figure is natural, since sons partake of the nature of parents, and if a man has peace for father, he must be preëminently a man of peace. So, it is argued, the phrase "the Son of man" suggests that the one to whom it is applied must possess in a high degree the attributes of humanity. Schleiermacher, however, saw the necessity of importing more into the title than a mere claim of participation in human nature. "Its application would have been pointless, however, had he not used it in a sense inapplicable to other men; and it was pregnant with reference to the distinctive differences between him and them." The difficulty lies in detecting the "distinctive differences," and views vary from the slightest to the most marked difference conceivable. Thus, Grotius and many subsequent interpreters think that Jesus meant to intimate that he thought nothing human alien from himself (*qui nihil humani a se alienum putat*), and Neander supposed that Jesus assumed the name, "because he had appeared as man; because he belonged to mankind; because he had done such great things even for human nature; because he was to glorify

that nature; because he was himself the realized ideal of humanity." All these conceptions are true, but it is doubtful whether any one of them was consciously in Jesus' mind, when he used the title "the Son of man." They are too abstract and philosophic in tone to harmonize well with his usual mode of speech.

Another method of attacking the problem is to consider the title in relation to the whole of Jesus' self-testimony as revealed in the Gospels. He usually appealed to the Old Testament in confirmation of his claims and of his method of work. He knew that Israel's history was a preparation for himself, and that its literature gave intimations of his person and mission. It is *a priori* probable, then, that the phrase "the Son of man" has a history, and that the ideas Jesus intended to convey are older than himself. We know, also, that, while he borrowed from the past, he put into borrowed terms a significance hitherto little appreciated, or altogether unknown. Maybe the formula "the Son of man" was transfigured in a way analogous to his transfiguration of the familiar term "the kingdom of God."

But if it be admitted that the root idea must be found in the Old Testament, there remains the difficulty of determining the text or texts that suggested the title. Hofmann connects the name with Gen. iii. 15, and thinks that Jesus meant to teach that he is "the one in whom the hope of humanity is fulfilled"; and Cremer says: "'The Son of man' is a Messianic conception, a Messianic name given to Jesus by himself, chosen and adopted by him on account of the relation in which he stands as the promised 'seed of the woman' to his brethren."

Schmid supposes that Ps. viii. 3–5 suggested the title. This psalm speaks of the union of lowliness and dignity in man,—lowliness because of material insignificance, compared with moon and stars, and dignity because akin to God in having dominion over animate creation. If this is

true of man, Jesus thought it uniquely true of himself, and so used this passage to call attention to himself as the ideal man in whom is "the perfect union of the Son of man and the Son of God." There is no necessary improbability in Schmid's view, since the author of the letter to the Hebrews saw a connection between Jesus Christ and the Eighth Psalm (Heb. ii. 5–9).

Weizsäcker called attention to the frequent occurrence of the expression "son of man" in Ezekiel's prophecy, and suggested that the definite title "the Son of man" developed from it. His argument is, that Ezekiel was a man and a prophet. His human weakness is emphasized by the epithet "son of man"; but, in spite of his frailty as man, he was strengthened for prophetic work by Jehovah. Since the prophet was humanly weak, but divinely strong, the term *son of man* came to be appropriate to any prophet whatsoever (cf. Dan. viii. 17), and therefore a title of honor. Jesus, then, adopted the title to call attention to himself as the prophet of God *par excellence.* Weizsäcker, however, used Dan. vii. 13, also, in order to explain more fully the significance of the name.

Recently Bartlett pointed out the fact that Jesus often associated the idea of suffering with the name "the Son of man." Bartlett fancies that in this way Jesus intended to associate facts mentioned in the Old Testament concerning the Servant of Jehovah with the ideal man that he knew himself to be. As the teaching of Isaiah was of more consequence to Christ than the title "Servant," he selected the ideas imbedded in that title, and subsumed them under the less familiar name "the Son of man." The value of this suggestion is, that it emphasizes a fact too often overlooked, viz., suffering and death are affirmed to be the predestined lot of him who is called in the Gospels the Son of man.

In a recent note contributed to *The Expository Times*,

Ebrard Nestle says: "Among the passages of the Old Testament which must be taken into account, if we wish to understand the use of the expression 'the Son of man' in the New Testament, Psalm lxxx. must not be overlooked." Nestle does not develop the suggestion very fully, and I do not know what line of thought he would have pursued, if he had. The verse referred to reads:—

> "Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand,
> Upon the Son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself."

This verse drops the figure of a vine, which has been used throughout the psalm to represent Israel, and refers to the nation collectively under the figure of a man. The "son of man" is in parallelism with "man" of the first line, and is an exact synonym for it. The Psalmist does not have an individual in mind, when he uses the phrase "the son of man." It is conceivable however, that, as Matthew substituted the person of Jesus for the nation in the verse "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Matt. ii. 15), so Jesus might have thought of himself, instead of the nation, as the one whom God had chosen.

The weight of recent opinion inclines to the view that Dan. vii. 13 was the origin of Jesus' self-designation. Daniel had a vision of four great world powers, each of which was symbolized by a beast indicating the nature of the kingdom represented. The symbolism is intelligible, for nations now choose beasts and birds to represent that which they think distinctive in power. For example, Russia has chosen the bear, England the lion, and the United States the eagle. Daniel saw, succeeding and overpowering these brute kingdoms, a power that had "one like unto a son of man" as its emblem. This kingdom is heavenly in origin, in contrast with the kingdoms that came up out of the sea; its duration will be eternal, in comparison with the powers doomed to pass away; its sway will be humane, in contrast with the ferocity of brute kingdoms. As man

was created superior to beasts, so a kingdom that selects man for its emblem must and will overcome powers that choose brutes to represent the national ideal. Jesus, then, selected his title to intimate that he was the founder of the kingdom of the saints of the Most High that Daniel saw. The similarity of Jesus' words: "And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory" (Matt. xxiv. 30), and "Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. xxvi. 64), to Daniel's description: "Behold, one like unto a son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away and his kingdom which shall not be destroyed," cannot be accidental, but rather a designed allusion.

There are two objections to the supposition that Dan. vii. 13 suggested the name to Jesus. First, Daniel's outlook is towards a victorious kingdom, while Jesus predicted his own triumphant return; second, "one like unto a son of man" cannot be construed to mean "the Son of man." Neither objection is weighty. Jesus claimed that he came to found a kingdom; the kingdom of God came historically in him. "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you" (Luke xi. 20). It follows, as a matter of course, that, if he thought of his own coming in power and glory, he thought that the kingdom would at the same time be triumphantly established. Again, in the Old Testament the term "son" is applied to Israel collectively and to Israel's theocratic king, and the name "servant" is applied to Israel as a unit, to a portion of the nation conceived as a unit, and to an individual. In like manner the phrase "son of man" representing the na-

tion, could have been used of an individual, and that person spoken of as "the Son of man." Granting that such varying use was possible and probable, the question arises, Who first applied the name to a single person? Did Jesus first use it in a personal sense, or did he find the title already in use, and appropriate it?

Some scholars assume that Jesus was acquainted with the Book of Enoch, and borrowed the name from it; others regard the son-of-man passages in Enoch post-Christian interpolations. While interpolation is always possible, and in some cases probable, a literary problem must not be solved by such a theory without the most cogent proof. In the present instances, critics of authority are divided, but those that claim a pre-Christian date for the Similitudes of Enoch seem to me to be right. But, assuming that the Similitudes are pre-Christian, there is no need to insist that Jesus borrowed the title. He may have used the name without any conscious reference to Enoch, either because it had some limited currency as a Messianic title, or because he thought it appropriate. It cannot be supposed that the one who first coined the title "the Son of man" had more creative genius than Jesus. Some one must have originated the name, and, in the nature of the case, there is no reason why it should not have been Christ, except that it is found in pre-Christian parts of the Book of Enoch.

The author of Enoch speaks of "the Son of man" as preëxistent: "And at that hour, the Son of man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits and his name before the Head of Days" (xlviii. 2; cf. lxx. 1); as having unlimited judicial authority: "And there was great joy amongst them, and they blessed and glorified and extolled, because the name of the Son of man was revealed unto them; and he sat on the throne of his glory, and the sum of judgment was committed unto him, the Son of man, and he caused the sinners and those who have led the world

astray to pass away and be destroyed from off the face of the earth" (lxii. 26–29; cf. John v. 22–27); and as having universal dominion: "And all the kings, and mighty, and the exalted, and those who rule the earth, will fall down on their faces before him, and worship, and set their hope upon that Son of man, and will petition him, and supplicate for mercy at his hands" (lxii. 5–9). From these passages we find that the person bearing the name the "Son of man" in Enoch is not a being of lowliness and weakness, but of supernatural origin and world-wide dominion. In fact, it is a Messianic title. Jesus, then, could well have adopted it, or created it, as appropriate to himself, if he knew that he had pre-mundane existence (John iii. 13; vi. 12), if he knew that God had given him authority to execute judgment (John v. 27), and if he knew that universal dominion awaited him (Matt. xxv. 31, 32). The most serious objection to the borrowing theory is, that, according to the Gospels, especially the synoptics, Jesus did not reveal himself as the Messiah until late in his ministry, and therefore he could not have adopted a well-known Messianic title. The objection rests on the supposition that the Book of Enoch had wide circulation, and that the title "the Son of man" was as widely known and as fondly cherished as the title "the Son of David." The dilemma is this: Unless the title had been widely known, there would have been no advantage in borrowing it; if its use was confined to a small circle of thinkers, there is nothing gained in supposing that Jesus used a name already coined.

It must be admitted that "the Son of man" was not a current Messianic title. The form of Jesus' question at Cæsarea Philippi shows that "the Son of man" and "the Christ" were not convertible terms. Peter reached a novel conclusion when he identified them. Further, Jesus always refrained from announcing his Messiahship, and therefore must have chosen his loved title to conceal rather

than to reveal his identity. Late in his ministry the people began to suspect the identity, which Peter had discovered earlier. The question of the perplexed multitudes, "We have heard out of the law that the Christ abides forever, and how sayest thou, The Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man?" (John xii. 34), shows that the crowds are beginning to think that Jesus uses the name "the Son of man" in the sense of "the Messiah." At this late day they can do so, because they had heard him teach for nearly three years. They know that he had made Messianic claims, and they know that he had always associated such claims with some one called the Son of man. Hitherto they had been unaccustomed to this association of ideas, but now they perceive that Jesus had constantly intended such association. Yet they are not quite certain, and so ask, Who is this Son of man? It is clear to the historian why Jesus did not select the familiar title "the Son of David." It is equally clear why he did not call himself "the Messiah." In popular thought these terms were synonyms; and if he had proclaimed his Messianic office, the people would have imagined that he intended to fulfil their expectations. He must not awaken or stimulate false conceptions. Yet he knew that he had the royal authority which the Jews attached to the Davidic title, and he must claim such authority, without indorsing the popular view of the nature of the Messianic kingdom. For this reason he selected the less familiar name, "the Son of man"; for, according to its use in the Book of Enoch, it indicated authority and dominion, but without the carnal associations that belonged to the familiar name of "the Son of David." Just because "the Son of man" had Messianic significance and just because it was not a familiar Messianic title, Jesus selected it. In this way he gave it currency with the meaning that historically belonged to it, and at the same time associated with it ideas not inherent in the

title "the Son of David," but ideas that must inhere in any title that adequately described his notion of his Messiahship.

What the new ideas were which Jesus incorporated into the relatively new Messianic title, must be ascertained from the texts in which "the Son of man" occurs. Apart from the instance in xvi. 13, Matthew reports that Jesus used the title twenty-nine times; thirteen of which are apocalyptic, nine refer to suffering and death, and seven occur in connections that demand special study. Mark records the title fourteen times, of which three are apocalyptic, nine refer to suffering and death, and two are used in other connections. Luke has the name twenty-five times, of which ten are apocalyptic, seven refer to suffering and death, and eight are used in varying contexts. John reports that Jesus used the name "the Son of man" nine times and "son of man" once (v. 27). Five of these refer to his death and consequent glory, and the rest to his Messianic dignity and work.

In view of these facts, and especially in view of the great number of passages that predict the future destiny of the one called "the Son of man," Bruce's conclusion can hardly be maintained: "In adopting the style and title of 'the Son of man,' as the ruler of that kingdom, it was not alone the halo of apocalyptic glory that he had in view; it probably lay nearer his heart to accentuate his human sympathies." The frequency of the apocalyptic application of the name cannot be denied, and it is best explained by supposing that Jesus consciously called attention to the dignity and authority and destiny of the Messiah as portrayed in the Book of Enoch.

Again, no explanation of the title is satisfactory which does not take into account the great number of times Jesus associated suffering and death with the Son of man. These passages give no support to the theory that Jesus intended

to teach his participation in human nature. They all refer to the uncommon lot of some one called "the Son of man," and not to the common lot of all men.

If we had only the two classes of texts cited, there would be no great difficulty in reaching a conclusion. The apocalyptic passages are explained, if we suppose that Jesus meant to claim superhuman authority and glory; and the texts that speak of suffering are explained, if we suppose that he intended to retain the transcendent claims implied in Enoch's use of "the Son of man," and at the same time to transform the materialistic signification of the term into the signification of glory through suffering. On this theory Mark ix. 12 is significant: "And how is it written of the Son of man that he should suffer many things, and be set at naught?" Substitute "the Christ" for "the Son of man," and Jesus' words would have tended to alienate those most attached to him, for no Jew believed that the Christ must suffer many things, and be set at naught. Jesus, however, knew that the Old Testament Scriptures prepared for the Son of man, because they prepared for the Christ. In this way he taught the disciples to associate ideas of suffering with the Son of man, so that when they should be taught by history that death was not alien to the Son of man, who would then be known as the Christ, they would drop the less familiar name, and boldly preach the predetermined death of the Messiah, the Son of David. Thus, his cautious instruction enabled his followers to believe what hitherto had been unbelievable. "Remember how he spoke to you when he was yet with you in Galilee, saying, that the Son of man must be delivered up into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (Luke xxiv. 7). In the view of the evangelists, then, Jesus suffered, not because he was man and shared the common lot of man, but because he was "the Son of man," the Messiah.

The unclassified passages must now be studied, in order to see whether they materially modify our conclusion, or whether they more naturally convey the idea that Jesus shared human nature, or was the ideal man. The two texts in Mark have parallels in the other synoptics. In the first text Jesus claims a prerogative that belongs to God alone, and makes good his claim by healing the paralytic. He says, also, that this power is delegated to him while on earth, and so intimates that he forgives sins in fulfilment of a mission (Mark ii. 10). In the second passage Jesus asserts his authority over a day that in popular theology limited God's creative activity,—a day which had been hallowed by legislative enactment and centuries of observance. In Jewish thought Jehovah alone was Lord of the Sabbath. Inevitably plots were formed to put to death one who claimed lordship over the sacred day (Mark iii. 6). Jesus' conclusion, "So that the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath," was based on the consciousness that he possessed unique authority, and not on the consciousness that he was a man. Both texts in Mark, then, are in perfect accord with the idea of authority embodied in Enoch's title "the Son of man."

In Matthew and Luke are two sayings reported in different contexts. The first is, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has not where to lay his head." Luke records these words in connection with Jesus' steadfast determination to go to Jerusalem and with the hostility of the Samaritans. His language, then, does not refer to his homelessness, but to impossibility of escape from enemies. Foxes have holes to which they flee from pursuing dogs; birds have lodging-places where they seek shelter from hawks; the Son of man has no place of refuge. He must be pursued to the death. Jesus is not inviting the impetuous follower to a life of homeless wandering, but to a life beset with extreme

danger. This passage, then, falls in line with those that speak of the suffering and death of the Son of man.

The second instance is, "And whoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it will be forgiven him." Jesus had just cast out a demon, thereby demonstrating his power. His hearers did not know that he was the Messiah. For prudential reasons he cannot tell them, and so uses the unfamiliar title. Because he was unknown to them, they could speak against him and be forgiven; but if they blasphemed the power of God that worked through even an unknown person, they are guilty of an eternal sin, because they are obdurate enough to confound moral distinctions. Jesus claims the dignity of a divine agent, who can say of himself, "But if I through the Spirit of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you." No one but the Messiah had been appointed to establish the kingdom. In this passage, then, the Son of man has official significance only, and no subtle suggestion that he is the ideal man, or that he shares the frailty of humanity.

The text most frequently used to prove that Jesus associated the idea of human sympathy with the name he adopted is, "The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners." But the context forcibly suggests official dignity. Jesus has just declared John to be the greatest of prophets, because of his relation to himself; he has told John that he had been right in his identification of the Messiah; but he cannot, for sound moral reasons, say to John, "I am the Christ." Much less can he disclose his identity to the crowds. In consequence he uses the name "the Son of man." If he esteemed John so highly as to call him the greatest born of women, he must have esteemed himself still more highly, and therefore put into his name "the Son of man" a distinctly Messianic meaning, rather than the notion of human sympathy.

In Matt. xiii. 37, the Sower is certainly a person of dignity. No notion of human sympathy or weakness or of an ideal man can be associated with the Son of man in the parable of *the Sower*.

In Luke vi. 1, Jesus asserts his authority over the conduct and conscience of men. Worth and strength, not lowliness and weakness, is the implied estimate of himself here.

Luke xix. 10 gives the nature of Messianic work, in contrast with popular notions concerning the mission of the Messiah. Jesus knew that he had come to save the lost; he knew that he could fulfil his mission. His claim of redemptive service is a claim of dignity and authority, an authority as exalted as his service was far reaching and effective. He combined his work and method in the words, "For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." He must have set high value on his own person, if he thought that in consequence of his death many would be benefited.

In every instance, then, the title "the Son of man" is used in connections that point to Jesus' estimate of himself as possessing unique authority, having a unique mission, and accomplishing it in a unique way.

To conclude: Jesus selected the title, because it was Messianic, but obscurely so; and he put into it the meaning attaching to it in the Book of Enoch and also the unwelcome truth of Isaiah, that suffering and death awaited him who must redeem Israel. To the author of Enoch it was a title of dignity; to Jesus it was a title of dignity; to Jesus' hearers it conveyed no clear meaning. It aroused inquiry, stimulated reflection, but solved nothing. The solution came, when, by the stern teaching of history, the disciples learned to think more of the Son of man that saves by service of death, than of the Son of David, who was

expected to save by force. Jesus selected the title, to claim Messianic dignity and at the same time to correct false views of Messiahship. To him the name "the Son of man" meant, that he who has supernatural origin and power must establish the kingdom of God upon earth by redemptive death and subsequent royal authority.