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WHO IS THIS SON OF MAN ?

by J. NEVILLE BIRDSALL

IN this review article Dr. Birdsall, Lecturer in Theology in the University of Birmingham, surveys five recent books on the significance of the phrase "The Son of Man" in the gospels. In a covering letter he suggests that a suitable conclusion to the survey might be the Red Queen's remark to Alice: "It takes all the running you can do to stop in the same place". Our readers will probably see why.

AS the late T. W. Manson suggested in his contribution to the *Festschrift* for C. H. Dodd,¹ the course of study on the life of Jesus in the present century can be seen as the continuation of the two ways which Albert Schweitzer saw as typified in his own work and in that of William Wrede—the latter, the way of thoroughgoing scepticism, the former that of thoroughgoing eschatology. Wrede considered that the picture of Jesus which we have in the gospels is the creation of the early church foisted upon the actualities of the historical Jesus, of whom we know but little: for Schweitzer, such a solution was the result of the historian's unwillingness to see that Jesus was, as regards his picture of the world and his religious expectations, "as one unknown" to men of the present day. In other words, the perplexities with which the exegete as well as the historian is faced inhere in the very words and thoughts of Jesus, and may not legitimately be sloughed off as inconvenient or outmoded, responsibility for them ascribed to the misguided mythopoeia of the early church. In the writer's opinion, the analysis of Manson which applied these categories to the work of Dodd, Bultmann and Manson himself is acutely correct: although there are differences in the course of debate since Schweitzer's epoch-making work. In the first place—and the genius of Schweitzer is shown by this—since Schweitzer's day, all but the anachronistic have accepted an eschatological message as the message of Jesus: there is no place in today's discussions for the philosopher of the nineteenth century hidden beneath the false trappings of the first. Secondly—and here the scholars and theologians of today differ radically not only from Wrede, but also from Schweitzer himself—the studies of the twentieth century since the

¹ *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology: Studies in Honour of C. H. Dodd* (Cambridge, 1956), chapter 11: "The life of Jesus: some tendencies in present-day research" (T. W. Manson).

first world war have all been contributions not only to historical study but also to a positive theology: whether it be Bultmann, Dodd, Manson or their pupils and followers, all are concerned with the gospel records as documents of positive evangelical content and theological value. The issues between them have not been whether to speak of Jesus is relevant to today—this is agreed as common ground between them—but how far and in what manner the way in which Jesus spoke of His message and Himself is any longer an acceptable way of speaking of Him: and intermingled with this concern has been the historical question of the degree to which the reflection of the early church about Jesus and His significance has influenced and moulded the tradition of His words. There would seem to be a correlation between the view that Jesus' own words are obliterated by those of the first-century church and the view that the words of the New Testament can no longer have objective meaning, on the one hand, and between the acceptance of the Synoptic record as in large measure reliable and the quest to understand Jesus' words as still of positive theological value and content, on the other.

The scholars of whom we have made mention were concerned more with the significance of the terminology of the "Kingdom of God" than with the allied term "Son of Man"—although the period was not lacking in studies of the latter term. Lately, however, a number of books have appeared which have returned to this personal designation of Jesus. It is a growing number and this review of five of these studies makes no claim to exhaustiveness nor does the choice imply that these works are more significant than those unnamed. The choice lies in the vicissitudes of publication, not in any appraisal of the lasting significance which these and other contributions to the discussion may possibly have. They appeared between 1959 and 1967, and may conveniently be discussed in the categories of thoroughgoing scepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology, and it so happens that, as in the case of Wrede and Schweitzer, it is the sceptical whose work has first appeared.

These are the work of H. E. Tödt, here viewed in the English version of its second edition, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*,² and that of A. J. B. Higgins, *Jesus and the Son of Man*.³ Higgins' work shows some close analogies to that of Tödt, although one knows it to have been a long time a-building and no direct influence can be presumed. This is an instance of a phenomenon

² S.C.M. Press, 1965.

³ Lutterworth Press, 1964.

which is continually appearing in the world of learning, where two lines of research independently undertaken converge in their results. In this instance the complications arising by the convergence have led to a situation not unlike the White Knight's discussion of his song and its correct appellation: we have in succession the German of Tödt's work, the English of Higgins, the English of Tödt's work with an appendix on Higgins' book and a review of the English Tödt by Higgins. However, we shall confine ourselves to the two primary works and not the epiphenomena.

It perhaps should be stressed, to obviate misunderstanding of the somewhat technical use of the word "sceptical", which has been made, that neither doubts that Jesus spoke about "the Son of Man": they are representatives of "scepticism" in that, for them, Jesus never used the term in referring directly to Himself. The passages where such identity is presumed are the product of the convictions and reflections of the early church. One scholar, P. Vielhauer, has indeed lately suggested that Jesus never used the term in any connection. This view (to which Tödt devotes an appendix)⁴ has not met with general acceptance. Rather, as both Tödt and Higgins exemplify, even the sceptical wing assume that Jesus used the term of an eschatological figure who would appear in the last times to save the elect. This basis is derived from the analyses of Bultmann to whom Tödt at least is directly indebted.

Tödt's book, as its title specifically intimates, is very much a "history of the synoptic tradition", with reference above all to the growth of Christology in the early church before the composition of the gospels. He sees the Christology to which the use of the term Son of Man in the synoptics points as a Christology of *authority*, to be contrasted with the Christology of *humiliation*, to which the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 bears witness: indeed, it is possible to discern, especially in the few pages of conclusions, that overriding the whole investigation is the conviction that the contrast between these two is of permanent theological value, although the author does not turn aside to expound this enigma further. The major part of his book is taken up by a minute examination of the sayings, divided primarily according to whether they relate to the Coming, the Present or the Suffering and Rising Son of Man: and each section is further subdivided into studies of the occurrences of the term under these aspects in the sources of the synoptic gospels and in the synoptics

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 329-347, Excursus VI: Discussion of Ph. Vielhauer's concept of the coming Son of Man in "Gottesreich und Menschensohn in der Verkündigung Jesu", *Festschrift für Günther Dehn* (Neukirchen, 1957), pp. 51-79.

themselves. It is assumed that the only authentic use of the term by Jesus is of the Son of Man as a transcendent figure linked with the ministry of Jesus only insofar as men would be judged by their attitude and relation to Jesus. Jesus declared His message with authority and expected men to accept it and His grounds of authority by faith. In the post-Resurrection period it was perceived that Jesus was now vindicated as one who truly possessed authority: and He was identified with the Son of Man of His own preaching. He was considered to have exercised his ministry with the authority of the Son of Man and hence arose the creation of sayings—through utterances of Christian prophets—both of additional sayings about the future coming (originally conformed very closely to the manner of Jesus' own utterances, especially in regard to the distinction between Jesus and the Son of Man) and of the sayings which spoke of the ministry of Jesus as the ministry of the Son of Man. The community in which we may seek the origin of Q is that in which this development took place, a community which saw its function as the transmission of the teaching of Jesus. And already, before the writing of Mark, there was elsewhere in Palestinian Christianity the parallel development which used the term Son of Man in sayings connected with the kerygma in its apologetic aspect, linking the suffering and rising of the Son of Man (identified with Jesus equally on grounds of His authority) with scriptural announcements. The saying of Mark 10: 45, which is the only place to link the death of the Son of Man with ransom, is regarded as a late phase of the development, the final form of the saying being the result of the terminological links of "serving" with the Lord's Supper. Hence, we have a presentation of the growth of Christian thought as a process which, while having verbal links with the teaching of Jesus, has no essential links with His ministry or intention: Christian belief, while stemming from the Resurrection experience, radically changes the significance and application of the term Son of Man which it had received from Jesus. And since Tödt occasionally stresses that the "Son of Man" is an image, not "the myth of an unreal heavenly Son of Man", we may probably discern a tendentious opposition to the suggestion that Jesus or the early church was using a metaphysic in formulating His message.

Higgins' book covers the same area as that of Tödt, but his aim is distinct, as his title shows: as firm an adherent as Tödt of the view that the early church has profoundly influenced the tradition of the words of Jesus, he is nevertheless concerned with Jesus' own use and intention and his study of the redaction is

ancillary to this. He says at one point that Tödt's book covers a wider range than his own: while this is true, in view of the different orientation just spoken of, it should be noted that he has included in his purview the Johannine material, and also gives a closer attention than does Tödt to textual variants which bear upon his discussion. He rejects outright all sayings which speak of a present earthly activity of the Son of Man: although in one instance within this group he suggests that an original I-saying stands behind the present form, into which the term Son of Man has infiltrated after the identification of Jesus with this figure (Matt. 11: 19 = Luke 7: 34). Similarly, the sayings of a suffering 'Son of Man are rejected, but I-sayings are deemed to lie behind the present form of Mark 10: 45 and 14: 21. Jesus used the term Son of Man of a future glorious figure, advocate for his people and judge of men, and never identified this figure with Himself. This does not mean for Higgins, any more than for Tödt, that all uses of the term in such a sense or context are authentic Jesus-words; many such sayings, particularly in Matthew, are studied and judged to be community or editorial creations. On these grounds he expressly rejects any view which would understand the thought of Jesus as linking the Servant with the Son of Man, as giving a community interpretation of the figure, or as identifying himself as Son of Man *designatus* or *absconditus*. But a puzzling feature of the concluding chapter, in which these conclusions are summarized, is the apologetic and uncertain tone in which they are presented: "if the conclusions reached are correct"; "if these studies are on the right 'lines"; "(I) am impelled by what I take to be the evidence of the texts"—such phrases, while displaying a comely modesty, are extremely baffling and unnerving at the conclusion of a scholar's *magnum opus*, fruit of many years. If he is still unsure of his work, how can we be convinced? It may be this which lies behind the positive conclusions with which the book closes, for these are expressed in terms which remain unclear to the present writer, and even contradictory. It was intrinsically improbable that Jesus called himself the Son of Man (p. 195): not even a future identity with the Son of Man is a meaningful suggestion (p. 200). Like Tödt, he tilts at the Son of Man metaphysic, in the somewhat odd phrase: "it is not sufficiently realized . . . that after all the Son of Man was never an objective reality but an idea in the minds of certain Jews" (p. 202). But now (*ibidem*), in italics: "the Son of Man idea was adapted by Jesus to denote himself as the Son of God he already believed himself to be, reinstalled in his heavenly seat. The Son of Man is the Son of God

exercising his intercessory or judicial functions". If this is not Jesus identifying Himself in His future role with the Son of Man of whom He spoke, what is it? and what are the implications of "reinstalled"? I cannot find a meaning in it unless it imply that Jesus' belief of Himself as God's Son (without, however, any use of the term "Son"), "in his humble life on earth", had as background some implicit metaphysic of pre-existence. In other words, although Higgins shares so much with Tödt, he evidently stands theologically in a very different line: and while Tödt, so evidently of Bultmann's lineage, can give his understanding of Son of Man and of Jesus' theological significance, Higgins succumbs to the British tendency to demand a solid basis for belief in Jesus in Jesus' own beliefs. But *if* radical investigation of this category *is* right in its conclusions (of which Tödt is evidently quite convinced, but Higgins perhaps uncertain), it would seem that such a demand cannot be met by historical investigation. This does not necessarily lead to theological capitulation, however, for it remains possible for a scholar in the Catholic tradition to accept theological and devotional affirmations as the teaching of Holy Church, while retaining his independence of dogma as an historian, justifying this equilibrium with an apologia on the lines of Alfred Loisy. Higgins, however, has not chosen this line of argument, which seems viable on his premises, and leaves the late Robert Casey as the sole representative of this approach in the ranks of Anglican theologians. In sum, while the book contains much detail of exegesis and argument which is of value, in its final impression it leaves a sense of dissatisfaction, especially when compared with the work of Tödt, and it is, in my view, precisely in its theological implications that this uncertainty has its root.

The name of R. H. Fuller is familiar to those who have followed discussion of "Son of Man" over recent years, through his book, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*⁵, which was of high significance in the context of British scholarship in its day. There Fuller essayed an approach which began from the radical form-critical criteria of Bultmann, but sought to demonstrate the logic of a resultant picture of the eschatological prophet Jesus, who saw in his own ministry the prolepsis of the saving work of the Son of Man: and understood his own ministry in the terms of the Servant-songs of Isaiah. He has now presented his maturer views in the context of a book of wider scope, *The Foundations of New*

⁵ S.C.M. Press, 1954.

Testament Christology.⁶ There is a great contrast between the earlier and the later work in respect of style and "feeling", although on the common ground covered they coincide in many respects. The earlier work carried the reader along in its argument, presented with all the excitement of new discovery: the later work is almost dry in its summarizing. This is not to deny the value of the work with its rich bibliographical references and its summaries: it is however to suggest that there is little here which is Fuller's own fresh contribution to the discussion. He has now, very much under the influence of Tödt, concluded that Jesus was in no way influenced by the Servant conception: but saw His work as that of the last prophet, preaching in an eschatological context, whose work would be vindicated by the coming of the Son of Man at the End. Both the "present" sayings and the "suffering" sayings are rejected, although Fuller, like Higgins, will see I-sayings behind certain sayings of the Son of Man's present activity—in his case, behind the sayings of Matt. 8: 20 and 11: 19. Sayings about the present and the future Son of Man which are considered to have been created by the primitive Palestinian church are treated in the chapter on the Kerygma of the earliest church, together with the sayings of the Son of Man's suffering: the lines followed here are very close to those in Tödt's work, while Hahn's work (*Christologische Hoheitstitel*)⁷, not infrequently mentioned by Tödt, is also laid under frequent contribution. This work is not to be discussed here: it has recently been translated into English.

Higgins and Fuller, then, although arriving at conclusions somewhat more patient of combination with traditional Christology than those of Tödt, share with him the basis of their discussion, namely the identification of "The Son of Man" as an eschatological figure, and the conviction that it is of primary significance for the understanding of the gospels and the thought of Jesus that we start from those sayings in which Jesus differentiates between Himself and the Son of Man. On this ground any application of the term to Jesus Himself is deemed impossible by Jesus himself. The investigation of Morna Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark*,⁸ pursues other lines. In the first place, she argues strongly for the linking of the term as used in the Gospels with its occurrence in the book

⁶ Lutterworth Press, 1965 (paperback edition in Collins' Fontana Library, 1969).

⁷ Göttingen, 1966; E.T., *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (Lutterworth Press, 1969).

⁸ S.P.C.K., 1967.

of Daniel, for her a simile and not an apocalyptic concept. The Son of Man indicates one who is the Elect of God and is obedient to this calling: because of this he has authority and, at present rejected, may anticipate vindication at last. This pattern she finds to be the pattern in Mark: the sayings as we find them in the Gospel have their consistency in their part in this pattern. Scholars have misled themselves, in her view, in seeing the Son of Man as an eschatological term, and then first subdividing sayings according to their conformity to this norm or divergency from it, and then rejecting those which diverge. The eschatological aspect of the Son of Man is for her secondary, both in the Jewish and in the New Testament tradition: when we perceive the primary significance, then the inner consistency of the whole group of sayings attributed to Jesus becomes apparent. Moreover, the psychological problem discerned by some in Jesus' alleged identification of Himself with such a figure of apocalyptic is removed. For she goes on to argue that the consistent picture is not Mark's alone but derived from earlier tradition; and that this is reliable and to be attributed to Jesus in its main lines, she argues on the grounds that firstly, the early church appears on the evidence elsewhere to have made no use of the term, and secondly, that it was appropriate to Jesus to make use of it, anticipating vindication as He was; but after His vindication the church needed other terms, since the regal and judicial aspects of the Risen Lord's status were not expressed by this term, which was thus now outmoded by circumstance. This is an impressive and interesting discussion. But I would discern flaws in her failure to discuss with the seriousness that they deserve the sayings which differentiate Jesus from the Son of Man: as I see it, her answer (e.g., on Mark 8: 28) is: "But they do not"—which is no answer at all. Another fault is her acceptance of the premise that there is a psychological difficulty in Jesus' seeing Himself as an eschatological figure. It is strange to see so many scholars still stumbling on this rock of offence, as those reviewed by Schweitzer did as historians, and as even Schweitzer himself did as theologian. No longer believing (for the most part) in futurist eschatology, we cannot believe that Jesus had such beliefs: and living in an atmosphere which denies the validity of metaphysical statements, we cannot ascribe to the Author of our faith self-identifications which involve metaphysical concepts. But these are not faults which are Miss Hooker's alone: probably even conservative scholars of our generation are afflicted in this respect.

The author of the fifth study to be passed in review here, .

Frederick Borsch, has also sought to find a consistency in the Gospel picture of the Son of Man and an historical situation in which such a picture could flourish; but he has not pursued his quest primarily in a new investigation of the gospel sayings as the others have done. He gives his book the title *The Son of Man in Myth and History*,⁹ and devotes the major part of it to a fresh examination of the term and other terms of allied meaning (The First Man, The Royal Man) in their origins and in the time of Jesus: and to find a milieu in which such ideas flourished in Jesus' day and could have been transmitted to Jesus, who then applied them to Himself and His mission. He surveys the occurrences of these terms and concepts over a wide stretch of time, from the role of the King in ancient ritual, Israelite and other, to Gnostic, Manichaeic and Mandaean speculations. Stressing the links of these myths and their accompanying rituals with various baptismal and lustral rites, he suggests that the channel by which the ideas of the Son of Man were transmitted to Jesus were baptizing sects within Judaism, the links between the movement of John the Baptist on the one hand and Jesus and early Christianity on the other being an indication of this. As he himself admits, there are two problems here: firstly the lack of evidence that any of the groups in Judaism which spoke or wrote of the Son of Man were baptizing sects, and, on the contrary, the equal lack of evidence that John and his followers spoke of the Son of Man, or gave adoration of, or identification with, this figure any place in their beliefs or practice. Another problem which the study does not solve is the failure of the wide range of thought-forms which it reviews to account for the sayings of the gospels which speak of the Son of Man present and active, and apparently possessing the dignity indicated by that title before he has passed through suffering. Here the author invokes a factor sometimes neglected in the type of study which we have surveyed, namely, the possibility of Jesus' originality and the combination in the formation of early Christianity of both myth and history. While this is a salutary emphasis, it is a pity that it comes in a book of which the central link in the chain of evidence is almost completely lacking. A link with the king-cults would provide much of the background for which the gospel sayings cry out, but sadly we cannot demonstrate the link: the speculations of some early Christian sects appear to have such links, but the evidence would suggest that they derived these from their environment and not from their heredity. The book is fascinating: but it

⁹ S.C.M. Press, 1967.

would perhaps not be altogether unfair, to compare this fascination with that which a book like Robert Graves's *King Jesus*¹⁰ arouses, different though the author's object and conclusion is.

"Who is this Son of Man?" demanded the Jerusalem crowds of the figure spoken of by Jesus, when the background of their own belief failed to give them understanding. The studies here reviewed give many particular insights for which the expositor of particular texts or passages may well be grateful: but they fail alike to give a wholly satisfactory total picture of the origin, use and meaning of the term in the writings with which they concern themselves. On the one hand, the radical views of Tödt (shared to a large extent by Higgins and Fuller) do take account of the sayings which they deem basic to their discussion, namely those which distinguish between Jesus as preacher and the Son of Man who figures in His message; I do not find a convincing explanation of this phenomenon in the works of other opinion. Yet plausible as Tödt's reconstruction of the growth of doctrine is, it would seem in its turn to founder on the reef of history: there is so little evidence that the early church, even the Palestinian church, used the term, much less that, over the twenty to thirty years in which the Gospel materials were a-forming, their use of it went through the evolution which Tödt's reconstruction claims to reveal. His work has the merit, like Bultmann's before it, of showing the limits beyond which the most radical investigator cannot go: but leaves the reader with the query whether the application of historical imagination should not rather be given to linking the thought of the sayings with Jesus, to whom they are ascribed, rather than with the church, which simply claimed to transmit His words. On the other hand, the studies of Morna Hooker and F. H. Borsch, much more conservative in instinct and conclusion, also have their faults: neither faces satisfactorily the distinction of Jesus and the Son of Man: and while they attempt the historical reconstruction which we have suggested is desirable, Borsch fails to satisfy because of the absence of his central requisite, and Miss Hooker because of her capitulation to the current antimetaphysical tendencies. There is clearly a problem of peculiar quality here if such learning and long application, on the basis of the equal learning and longer application of other generations, leads but to inconclusive ends.

It has been suggested from time to time in this survey that motives other than the purely historical lie behind the studies

¹⁰ London: Cassell, 1946.

considered: and this is not to the detriment of those who practise a theological discipline. If in that discipline we are satisfied with finding at theology's root the conclusions and opinions of men about one who held no such opinions of himself, then the radical way will satisfy us: and I consider that Tödt's work is so rounded and satisfactory from the formal point of view because he is himself so satisfied. But the flaws in the work of each of the others stem in my view from their adherence in varying ways to more traditional views of the place of Jesus in the formulation of the faith which is founded on Him. In each case we have as product an uneasy alliance of historical analysis with acts of faith centred on Jesus. These authors are by no means alone in this: it is the fault of the whole movement of "biblical theology". It may be that for the time being we can solve the problem only by a dialectic analogous to that which we find in Christology: there it has been found that to avoid heresy we must state side by side two apparently opposite facts of Christ's nature: Perfect God and Perfect Man. To expound this we must tell the story not once but twice, once the story of Jesus viewed in His divine nature, and once viewed in His humanity. Perhaps the most satisfying exegesis of the Gospels will be one which is content to tell the story twice: once, the story as the most radical methods of history and philology reveal it, which might be the story as Schweitzer saw it or Tödt sees it still; and then again, the story as the early church told it and as the church continues to tell it, the story to which the *sensus communis fidelium* bears witness, together with the *testimonium Sancti Spiritus internum*. By imposing such a discipline upon ourselves, we might hope to be better historians and better theologians, and perhaps even better members of the church.

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