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A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

THE SON OF MAN

In the Old Testament the phrase "Son of Man" is used to mean a human being, often with some degree of emphasis on the weakness and dependence of men, rather as in the English use of "mortal" as a synonym for man. Thus, Ps. viii.5: "Why should you deign to think of man, or care for the son of man"; or Job xxv.6: "Man is corruption, the son of man a worm". So also in Ezechiel, where again the primary intention seems to be to stress man's nothingness in contrast to the omnipotence of God; but it is used so often (more than ninety times) that it loses its effect and comes to mean little more than a variation for "man". In Dan. vii.13, 14 one "like the son of man" appears and receives from the Ancient of days a kingdom which shall not pass away. Here, the immediate reason for the expression seems to be to indicate the superiority of this figure, human in appearance, as distinct from the animal figures which represent the previous kingdoms; but the passage is so mysterious, but at the same time so clearly a prophecy of the kingdom in some sense, that it lends itself to later development.

In the New Testament, it is the title used by Our Lord most frequently of Himself¹; and in fact, it is used only by Our Lord, except for two cases: Acts vii.55, where St Stephen sees the "Son of Man" standing at the right hand of God, and Apoc. i.13 and xiv.14, in the last of which at least is clear reference to the passage in Daniel.

Before attempting a positive explanation, it will be as well to dismiss the two most common opinions on the point. The first is that "Son of Man" is a common Messianic title, derived from the prophecy of Daniel. But Lagrange² has shown that in fact this was not so; and moreover, if (as is agreed) Our Lord is careful to reveal His position gradually, how could He use "Son of Man" as a Messianic title from the earliest days of His career (Mk. ii.10, according to the most "historical" of the gospels)? We do not need to deny all Messianic content to the phrase; but surely it is more consistent with Our Lord's way of acting to avoid a title with obvious Messianic implications, and use one which would at the most discreetly suggest it. Then there is the explanation which goes to the other extreme, saying that it is merely equivalent to "man", in the weakest possible sense, and therefore when used by Our Lord of Himself means no more than the

¹ It is used in Matthew about thirty times, and since these cover all but about five of the uses in all the gospels, all quotations of the term are from Matthew.

² *Le Messianisme chez les Juifs*, Paris 1920, pp. 224-7.

personal pronoun "I" (rather as the Syriac "naphshi", my soul, meaning "myself"). It is certainly possible that occasionally one or other of the evangelists may have written this when Our Lord in fact used simply the pronoun; so in Mt. xvi.13 where we read, "Whom do men say that the Son of Man is?", the parallel passages of Mark and Luke have simply, "Whom do they say I am?" But throughout the gospel as a whole, it is used too often and too definitely to be merely the evangelist's idea of a personal pronoun—it must have some foundation in an equally significant use of it by Our Lord Himself.

Coming now to the actual texts we notice that they fall into two distinct groups—one stressing the humanity of Our Lord, the other His glory. In the first we find that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"—God though He is, He has become like the meanest of His creatures: "the Son of Man eats and drinks" just as other men do: so well is the other nature concealed that though an insult to the Holy Ghost will not be forgiven, "anyone who speaks against the Son of Man will be forgiven": though the apostles know He is the Son of the living God, to the world in general he is a man as they are: "Whom do men say that the Son of Man is?" So truly is He man that He is to suffer and die: "It is necessary for the Son of Man to be mocked and scourged and crucified".

"He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross: therefore God exalted Him. . . ." So we have the second series of texts: in all those texts in which the death of the Son of Man is predicted, it is equally clearly stated that the same Son of Man shall rise again: the same Son of Man who has nowhere to lay His head encourages His apostles by telling them that some of them will not die "till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom": He has "power on earth to forgive sins", and at the Last Day "the Son of Man will come in majesty, seated on the clouds of heaven, and all His angels around Him", to judge everyone according to their deeds. In this context also we can insert the isolated instances in *Acts* and *Apocalypse*, referred to above—the Son of Man, as judge, in the glory of heaven. And finally, one should note the significant text of Jn. v.27; God has given the Son "power to judge, because He is the Son of Man".

Now in the first series of texts, Our Lord is clearly identifying Himself with mankind; everything that is human He has accepted. He even says explicitly that it is all for our sakes. In the parable of the sower, He explains that the one who sows the seed is the Son of Man—surely, as Son of Man: only by becoming man could He do it. Similarly, the Son of Man has come to seek that which was lost; He has come to give His life a redemption for many.

But if that is true of the first series of texts, surely it must be true of the second also : if He is humbled "for our sakes", His glory equally must be "for our sakes" : if He is identified with humanity in its weakness, they must be identified with Him in His glory. This too is borne out by the texts. In Mt. XII.8 Our Lord concludes one of His disputes with the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath by saying : "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" ; Mark, in the parallel passage, has : "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath ; so that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath". Without going into details of exegesis, it does seem to suggest some participation by men in Christ's privilege as Son of Man. Notice, too, the text quoted from St John : Our Lord is judge precisely because He is man, because "He could feel like us, and be our true representative before God . . . because He himself has been tried by suffering" (Heb. II.17, 18 ; cf. v.7 ff.). And so Our Lord associates men with Him in the glory of His judgment : "When the Son of Man takes His throne in glory you who have followed me will sit with Him, judging . . ." (cf. Mt. XIX.28).

Man even in his natural state has a God-given dignity : "Man, the son of Man, is only a little less than the angels, crowned with glory and honour" (cf. Ps. VIII.5, 6). But left to himself he cannot achieve this full human dignity—that is the point of Romans I : "all have sinned and made void God's glory". God had to become man to attain for man man's destiny. "Sed non sicut delictum ita et donum" : He did more than that. For Our Lord, to become Son of Man meant humbling His divinity to our humanity ; but for men it means the fulfilment of human nature not only to its full human perfection, but to a dignity beyond the claims of humanity—"mirabilis reformasti". He is the first-born of all creation, He is the head, in Him all fulness dwells so that in Him all is restored.¹ It is God's will that everything should be fulfilled and perfected in Him.² The mystery of God's plan is Christ, that all men should be perfect in Him.³ He remakes us in the image of His own glory.⁴

St Paul speaks of the second Adam and the Mystical Body. Matthew says "Son of Man". But the mystery of our incorporation into Christ is present in Matthew's simplicity just as much as in Paul's mysticism.

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¹ cf. Col. I.15-20.

² cf. Eph. I.10.

³ cf. Col. I.27, 28.

⁴ cf. Phil. III.21.