

**JESUS FREQUENTLY REFERRED TO HIMSELF AS “THE SON OF MAN”,
THOUGH THE TITLE IS NEVER USED FOR HIM OUTSIDE THE GOSPELS. WHY
DID HE USE THIS TITLE AND HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND IT?**

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1 Introduction

In the Gospels, the “Son of Man” is the title which is most commonly used by Jesus in referring to himself. He occasionally refers to himself as the “Son of God” and also “prophet” and “Christ” but never the “Messiah”. In this essay we seek to assess why Jesus uses the title “Son of Man”, and what we can understand more broadly from his use of it.

2 Contexts for the Son of Man as used by Jesus

Exploring contexts in which Jesus uses the Son of Man provides a first set of clues as to why he used the title, as well as providing essential background for how we should understand the title.

The Course Volume¹ points to three contexts in which the Son of Man is used, firstly Jesus’ earthly life, stressing his humanity, humility and lowliness, such as Luke 9:58 “Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Second, there is Jesus’ suffering as in Mark 9:31 “He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” Note that this verse also foreshadows the Son of Man’s resurrection. Third, there is Jesus’ exaltation and glory as in Mark 8:38 “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.””

Ladd² notes that not all scholars accept all three types of saying as genuine. Nevertheless, he aligns himself with the “conservative” wing who accept all three, not least given that Jesus alone uses the term to designate himself, (because this makes it less likely that some types of sayings are added by later believers). We consider this to be convincing.

Drane³ offers a slightly different breakdown, with his first context being like the personal pronoun “I”, and indeed the synoptic Gospels use both in the same context such as in rebuking James and John in Mark 10:45 Jesus says “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many””, while in Luke 22:27 “I” replaces “Son of Man”: “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” A second is where Jesus claims the right to authority to speak in the name of God such as Mark 2:10 “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” and Mark 2:28 “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”.

Third is again Jesus’ exaltation and glory but also his return as in Luke 12:40 “You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” and subsequent role in future judgement as in Matthew 10:23 “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.” In John’s Gospel this is extended to Jesus’ descent from heaven also John 3:13 “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man.”

Fourth there is again suffering, but with the additional insight that Jesus claims his suffering is prophesied in the Old Testament as in Mark 9:12 “Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?” or set alongside suffering prophets in the Old Testament in Luke 11:30 “For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this

¹ Introducing the New Testament B, 002/B/2

² Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, 149

³ Drane, Introducing the New Testament, 66-67

generation” Jesus uses Son of Man in John’s gospel to underscore his teaching regarding the Eucharist – linked to his suffering - in John 6:53 “Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Then linking Drane’s third and fourth categories is the concept of “lifting up” in John, seen on the one hand to refer to suffering on the cross in John 12:32 “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” but on the other to exaltation in John 13:31 “Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.”

I would contend that some other categories of usage can be discerned, notably that Jesus as the Son of Man is one in whom his followers are bidden to have faith in Luke 12:8 “I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God” Again, Jesus links the concept to his desire to bring salvation to Israel in Luke 19:9-10 “Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Jesus also uses Son of Man to distinguish himself from the traditional assumptions about a triumphant Messiah as in John 12:34 “The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?”” We will return to this important aspect in more depth below.

Besides those suffering in the Old Testament such as Jonah, Jesus links himself to those who were closest to God such as Jacob in John 1:51 “He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” As noted in Ladd⁴, this passage may be a suggestion that Jesus as Son of Man has come to establish communication between heaven and earth.

Taking the texts and categories as they stand, we can provide an interim view that Jesus used the term to signify his humanity, his suffering, one who seeks to bring salvation, his (past and) future exaltation and return as judge. He puts himself in the line of the prophets such as Jonah and seeks to disabuse of notions that he is a triumphant Messiah of the type the Jews expected. But we need to dig deeper before the conclusion is well founded. We shall look first at usage in the New Testament outside the Gospels, then at common usage in Aramaic, before turning to the most crucial background, the Old Testament instances.

3 The Son of Man in the rest of the New Testament

We should note that the title is inaccurate in suggesting that the “Son of Man” only occurs within the Gospels. These additional New Testament references help us to understand how Jesus’ followers understood the meaning of “Son of Man”.

Notably, in Stephen’s final words before being stoned he states in Acts 7:56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”, thus following the link to Jesus’ heavenly exaltation. This is also the case for Revelation 1:13-14 “among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.” The occurrence in Revelation 14:14 links exaltation to the last judgement “I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one “like a son of man” with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.” Further background to Revelation is provided by Daniel 7:13, discussed in Section 5.

⁴ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 282

In Hebrews 2:6-8 it is written “But there is a place where someone has testified:” What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour and put everything under his feet.” This quotes from Psalm 8 and in the first instance is referring not to Jesus but to mankind whom God has put as stewards in charge of his creation, but who are in slavery to sin. I understand the author to be reapplying the verse to Jesus in 2:9 “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” Jesus, the perfect Son of Man has truly fulfilled the Psalm by suffering while not sinning and thereby saved mankind from the necessity of condemnation.

4 Common usage

Generally in this essay we are seeking to use the Bible to give meaning to the phrase “Son of Man” and clarify Jesus’ use of it. But we should also cite views that Jesus spoke Aramaic but the Gospels were written in Greek, which could have led to excessive attention being paid to the expression. For example, Drane suggests that “The actual Aramaic words “son of man” might well have had no specific meaning but were possibly just a circuitous way of saying “human being”⁵” Rowland calls it “a well-known circumlocution for the first person singular used either as an indirect self reference or to refer to humanity in general including the self”⁶. However, Ladd points out that it is “never used elsewhere in the Gospels as a periphrasis for humanity”⁷.

Perhaps linked to this in the Old Testament is use of son of man as a dismissive term to refer to humanity in contrast to God, as close to animals, see for example Psalm 144:3-4 “O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.” Also there is Job 25:6 “how much less man, who is but a maggot-- a son of man, who is only a worm!” In the mouth of Balaam in Numbers 23:19 the son of man is inconstant, a liar “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.”

On the other hand, Jesus did not waste words, and as Drane also suggests, “with no ready made significance, Jesus would then have been free to make it mean exactly what he wanted it to mean”⁸. It would thus avoid the preconceived ideas set out by the term Messiah, that Jesus explicitly avoided (although he accepted the synonym “Christ”) as noted above. See for example the debate in Mark 8:27-33 where Peter uses that term but Jesus has to rebuke him for rejecting the idea that God’s chosen one “must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again”.

5 The Son of Man in the Old Testament

The reference to the son of (common) man usefully introduces the Old Testament usage of “Son of Man” which would have been in Jesus’ mind in selecting this phrase to refer to himself. It would also inform us of connotations for Jesus’ hearers.

⁵ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, 65

⁶ Rowland, *Christian Origins*, 179

⁷ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 145

⁸ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, 65

There are at least three Old Testament usages that help us to illuminate the categories provided in Section 2, and give us an understanding of Jesus' choice of the term itself. One is as a prophet, referred to for his humanity and the distinction between him and the divine source of their message. This is most common in Ezekiel, where God uses the term in commissioning and giving oracles to the prophet. See for example Ezekiel 2:3 "He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me" This usage is also present in the angel Gabriel's address to Daniel in 8:17 "As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "S on of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end." God also uses it in Ezekiel when performing a miracle – the clothing in flesh of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37:9 ""Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, `This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live." Following this point, Jesus clearly linked himself to the prophets as for Jonah noted above and as in Luke 3:34 ""O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you" Although the parallel with Ezekiel 37:9 is not perfect, he also worked his miracles in God's name as John 10:25 "The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me".

The second usage is Isaiah's suffering servant, who will achieve glory and be vindicated. There is a difficulty that Isaiah himself does not employ the term "Son of Man". However, the link from Jesus' use to Isaiah's servant is quite explicit as for example in Luke 22:37 Jesus says "It is written: `And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. " thus quoting Isaiah 53:12 which also states "I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong; he poured out his life unto death....For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." The suffering servant, we thus note, is to die, to redeem sinners and also to be resurrected and exalted because of his suffering. Equally, Mark 9:11 "And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased"" comes from Isaiah 42:1 where "son" is replaced by "servant". Again, in Mark 10:45 quoted above, Jesus shows the disciples that as Son of Man he came to serve and give his life as a ransom – akin to the "guilt offering" of Isaiah 53:10.

The third key Old Testament usage is a mighty figure descending from heaven, the eternal ruler and judge of earth and heaven, who shares God's power. We cite here Daniel 7:13-14 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." Similar images are present in apocalyptic texts in the Apocrypha such as 1 Enoch 37-71 with the addition of future judgement by the Son, as well as in the Revelation passages quoted above, which are explicitly about Jesus and have in mind Daniel's Son of Man.

On the other hand, whereas Daniel's figure can be seen as a single person – the Messiah exalted in glory – 7:18 suggests the vision is all of the suffering saints – God's chosen "But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever--yes, for ever and ever." One resolution may be that the Son of Man is the representative of the saints, or who frees them from persecution.

6 Theologians' views of the Old Testament references

Rowland suggests four possible theological interpretations of Daniel 7:13-14, linked to Jesus' use of the Son of Man. First, Daniel's figure is a symbol of "suffering Israel" to be vindicated

by God. Second, he is a heavenly being. Third, the Son of Man is a figure different from Jesus who would vindicate Jesus' ministry (a possible view of Mark 8:38 "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.") Finally, he could be the glorious heavenly figure in his future glory.

Fuller⁹ suggests that the fourth is closest to the mark, in that Son of Man is an office Jesus is destined to fill following his earthly activity – he is “not yet the Son of Man (which is essentially a triumphant figure) but he acts as the one destined to be so during his ministry and humiliation”. Rowland himself¹⁰ sees Jesus as both an apocalyptic and earthly Son of Man (with our insertions [] of comments), as “asserting a conviction that the vital role which he played in the proclamation of the kingdom of God [as a prophet] would continue in the final consummation when sorrow and sighing would flee away [possibly including his own suffering as a servant] and he would sit on a throne with his twelve closest followers judging the twelve tribes of Israel [as Daniel's glorious figure]” The main point this summary omits is the pre-existence which characterises the figure in Daniel, as well as the passage from John 3:13 cited above. It is also not explicit about Jesus' destiny of suffering and death.

An alternative summary, which we find convincing, is in Ladd who suggests that Jesus reinterprets Daniel's figure so that “the Son of Man is not only a heavenly, pre-existent being; he appears in weakness and humility as a man among human beings to fulfil a destiny of suffering and death...pouring the Suffering Servant into the Son of Man concept”¹¹. He sees a parallel between Jesus' role as Son of Man on earth as opposed to his glorious future with the kingdom of God about which Jesus preached. In the same way as the kingdom is to grow secretly even as the evil age continues, Jesus as son of Man lives among men incognito, whose ministry is not to reign in glory but in humiliation to suffer and die for them”¹².

6 Conclusion

We have drawn evidence from Jesus' own usage, and from the background of the Old Testament, as well as considering theologian's views of the latter. Drawing together our conclusions, we consider that the “Son of Man” was used by Jesus because it was a little used expression but with key biblical connotations, to enable him to convey the complexity of his mission, which was nevertheless foreshadowed comprehensively in the Old Testament. We can understand by it that:

- he came from heaven.
- he shares our humanity.
- he is a prophet proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God.
- he would not conform to the expectations of a military deliverer as Messiah.
- he will suffer here on earth as God's servant for the salvation of sinners putting faith in him.
- he was and will be the exalted royal one.
- he will come again to judge mankind.

Overall, this thus allows us to see the Son of Man as being indeed also a suffering servant of God whose death and resurrection would save believers from hell, who is alive now and sits on the right hand of God in glory, interceding on our behalf, who will come again to judge all.

⁹ Fuller, *Mission*, 107

¹⁰ Rowland, *Christian Origins*, 183

¹¹ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 155

¹² Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 156

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