

Jesus and the Son of Man
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One of the most elusive titles used by Jesus is “the Son of Man.” Countless articles and books have been written trying to decipher the significance of the epithet, which is mentioned in Daniel 7:13-14: “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

There are indications that early Jewish interpretation understood the figure to represent the people of Israel, because Daniel 7:18 speaks of the nation in terms similar to that just heard about the Son of Man: “But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever.” Yet, by the first century opinions had changed.

Although the Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71) were not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Michael Stone and Jonas Greenfield of the Hebrew University have suggested that they were written by the beginning of the Christian era. These chapters contain one of the first clear examples of a fusion of two distinct Jewish concepts. In 1 Enoch 46-48 the Son of Man is identified as the Messiah. Much of scholarship in this century has argued that the combination of these two roles in a single individual was a later Christian development, and thus scholars have challenged the authenticity of Jesus’ appropriation of both titles to himself. However, Stone and Greenfield’s assessment of the pre-Christian development of these ideas strengthens the likelihood that Jesus incorporated contemporary Jewish opinions concerning the Son of Man into his vocabulary.

New Testament scholars have also struggled with Jesus’ multifaceted use of the title Son of Man. There are occurrences of the term in which Jesus has no intent to refer to Daniel 7:13. Consequently, Oxford’s Geza Vermes has championed the view that Jesus never intended any eschatological significance in his use of Son of Man; it was merely a periphrastic way of saying “I”. On the other hand, David Flusser in his recent book, Jesus, proposes that on certain occasions Jesus did employ the term with eschatological intent. The stumbling block for modern interpreters seems to be the inability to find a single meaning for the designation which suits every context. Flusser contends that it is precisely Jesus’ intuitive genius which allowed him to adapt the title according to his purposes. Specifically, Jesus is witnessed employing the term in three distinctive ways.

First, Jesus uses the title in its basic Hebraic sense (ben adam) to speak of himself as a human being. When Jesus adopts the term in this manner, it signifies him simply as a representative member of humanity, i.e. as “the Everyman.” In a saying about the Sabbath which closely parallels the opinion of Israel’s Sages, Jesus asserts: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28; Mechilta on

Exodus 31:14). Contrary to some Christian interpretations, Jesus does not claim his right to do as he pleases on the Sabbath. Instead, he emphasizes that the essential purpose of the Sabbath was to be a blessing for mankind, and that it should not be lorded over them. The Hebraic parallelism (man/Son of Man) of the saying helps us to understand that Jesus was not speaking exclusively of himself, but as a representative of humanity (see also Matt. 8:20; 9:6-8).

Second, Jesus hints to his role in the future as the agent through whom divine judgment will be executed. As we have noted, this eschatological sense for the Son of Man is imbedded in contemporary Jewish expectation. Standing before the high priest, Caiaphas, Jesus reveals his exalted self-understanding that he would play a future role in God's judgment, "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69). The Son of Man's seated position is that for rendering judgment.

The judicial role for the Son of Man is heard in another pseudepigraphical work written towards the close of the first century BC. In the Testament of Abraham, the patriarch is the recipient of revelation about the future. Upon witnessing the events connected with the eschatological judge, Abraham asks from his angelic guide the identity of the judge.

And Abraham said, My lord Prince, who is this wondrous judge? . . . And the Prince said, Most holy Abraham, do you see the terrifying man who is sitting on the throne? He is the Son of the first man Adam, and is called Abel, and he was killed by the wicked Cain. He sits here to judge every creature, examining both righteous and sinners, because God has said, It is not I who judge you, but by man shall every man be judged . . . For all men have their origin from the first man; and so by his son they are first judged here (Test. Abraham 13: 1-8).

The reader should note that the play on words by which the Son of Man is identified as the Son of Adam (i.e. Abel) is not possible in Aramaic. Only in Hebrew can 'adam be both a noun (i.e. man) and a proper name (i.e. Adam). Many scholars assume that Jesus uttered the title in Aramaic, because it is preserved in Aramaic in Daniel 7:13. Yet, they overlook the fact that the only reason the term appears in Aramaic in this verse is because the entirety of Daniel 2:4b-7:28 is Aramaic. Nowhere in ancient non-Aramaic Jewish literature does the term Son of Man occur in Aramaic.

More importantly, the historical identification of the figure with Abel is the product of two underlying assumptions. The reason divine judgment is meted out through a human agent (i.e. the Son of Adam/man) is because mankind should be judged by one of its own. In addition, what is implicit but clearly understood is the appointment of an innocent victim to serve as the instrument of divine retribution. It is particularly this latter notion which is the genesis for Jesus' third use of the term Son of Man.

Jesus employs the title when he speaks of his own impending death. "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44). Yet, what is rarely asked by scholars is why Jesus would speak of his death employing an epithet which otherwise conveys the mundane meaning "human being," or belongs to the speculation of Jewish Apocalyptic concerning the judge of the End of Days. The common scholarly response is

that Jesus is simply speaking euphemistically. However, he could have used other terms to speak euphemistically. Why did he use the title Son of Man to speak of his death?

I have recently come to the opinion that Jesus intentionally employed this term in connection with his death because of its strong connections to future judgment. He embraced a Jewish idea which we only hear on a few other occasions in contemporary literature; namely, that the unjust death of an innocent individual (see Luke 23:47) will not go unnoticed by God, and can even precipitate the day of redemption with divine vengeance.

In the pseudepigraphical Testament of Moses, we are introduced to a man from the tribe of Levi. Taxo lived in a time of great sinfulness. So, he encouraged his sons to withdraw from ungodly influences and remain faithful to the Lord. He recognized that the Satanic forces of his day would likely inflict persecution and perhaps death. Yet, he believed that the innocent suffering of the godly would bring forward the day of redemption. “For if we do this and die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord. And then shall his kingdom appear throughout all his creation...Then shall be filled the hands of the messenger who has been appointed chief who will immediately avenge them of their enemies (Test. Moses 9:7-10:2).

Jesus’ creative use of the term Son of Man to speak euphemistically of his death, therefore, fused two different notions in contemporary Jewish thought: the belief that the unjust death of an innocent individual would be requited by the Lord, and that future judgment would be carried out by a human figure appointed by God. Jesus’ identification of himself with the title—in a context which was otherwise devoid of hope—indicates his confidence that even under the looming shadow of the Cross, he believed he would be vindicated by the Father. His choice of the title, Son of Man, further demonstrates his expectation that requital would be accomplished through himself, because God had appointed him to be the judge of the End of Days.

In a sophisticated manner, the aim of this conceptual fusion mirrors the message of the victorious stone at the conclusion of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Luke 20:9-18). According to the parable, the unjust death of the beloved Son is avenged by his Father. Jesus punctuates the parable with an illustration of the “rejected stone” from his citation of Psalm 118:22-23 and Isaiah 8:14-15, and an adaptation of the well-known (see Matt. 3:9; 7:9) Hebrew wordplay with stone (‘eben) and son (ben). While Jesus speaks of the inevitable positive outcome for the stone, the metaphor is intended to assert the certain, victorious justification of the Son. “Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him” (Luke 20:18).