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## **“Son of Man”**

(ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου)

**Jesus frequently used this phrase to describe Himself and His ministry. Rather than referring to an end-time figure or simply “a human being,” Jesus drew the idea from Daniel 7:13-14, with its images of authority, suffering, and enthronement.**

“Son of man” was Jesus’ favorite self-designation. It appears 81 times in the Gospels, mostly on Jesus’ lips. The meaning of the phrase has fascinated and perplexed scholars for the better part of the last century. Early twentieth century scholars focused their attention on a divine, apocalyptic figure known as “The Son of Man” who appears in *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra*, texts thought to have influenced Jewish expectation of the Messiah. The absence of any such figure in other Jewish texts, though, has caused a reassessment of the apocalyptic figure. Further study of the linguistic background is now squarely focused upon the translation of the original Aramaic phrase (“one like a son of man,” כְּבֶר אֱנוֹשׁ), its Greek equivalent found in the Gospels (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), and its connection with Daniel 7:13-14 (with its images of enthronement, authority, and suffering).

### **I. Apocalyptic “Son of Man”**

When Jesus said, “whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26, RSV), he seemed to be pointing to someone other than himself. In attempt to understand the meaning of the “Son of man” reference, scholars of the early to mid-twentieth century posited an apocalyptic figure, a divine non-terrestrial being who would appear at the end of time to complete the work of judgment and bring final salvation to God’s people (W. Boussett, *Kyrios Christos*, 31-55; S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 348-353; H. Tödt, *Son of Man*, 22-31).

A supra-terrestrial being who assisted God in the eschatological judgment also found expression in texts like *1 Enoch* 46-71 and *4 Ezra* 13. In both of these texts, an authoritative heavenly figure appears at God’s side to judge the world and bring salvation. Both *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra* were deemed to play a major role in the Jewish concept of the Messiah.

Because the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37-71, which contain the “Son of Man” sayings) were not included in the copies of 1 Enoch found at Qumran, it is doubtful that it was written early enough to influence early Jewish expectation of the Messiah. The author of 4 Ezra dates his own work to around 100 AD (3:1), making it too late to influence Jesus’ use of the phrase. Apart from these texts, there is no apocalyptic “Son of Man” figure found in the extant Jewish literature, and the phrase was not popular enough to become a confessional title of Jesus in the early church. The late origin of these texts, combined with the absence of any titular use of the phrase, suggests that “Son of Man” wasn’t a well-known title in early Judaism for a heavenly redeemer figure (R. Leivestad, “Exit the Apocalyptic Son of Man,” 243-267).

## II. The Aramaic Background

A more plausible source comes from Daniel 7:13-14, where “one like a son of man” comes riding on the clouds of heaven. Since Daniel 2-7 is written in Aramaic, scholars have turned their attention to the translation and meaning of the phrase in its linguistic context.

The three scholars most noted for their work in this area are M. Casey, B. Lindars, and G. Vermes. Each of them interpreted the Aramaic phrase “son of man” (בֶּרֶךְ אֱנוֹשׁ) as simply a “human being.” Casey conjectured that it meant something like “a son of man,” or “a human being” (*Solution*, 56-81). For him, the phrase denotes what is true of all human beings and only became an official title in the Gospels because it was notoriously difficult to translate into Greek (“Idiom and Translation,” 164-182). Lindars further argued that “son of man” refers to a class of people to which the speaker belongs. “This is true of everyone, but especially me” (*Jesus Son of Man*, 1-28). Vermes found in the Jewish rabbinic literature a pattern of self-reference, where the phrase “a son of man” was used to refer back to the speaker (*Jesus the Jew*, 160-191). Their particular varieties all center upon a similar idea: “son of man” simply means “a human, particularly *this one*” (i.e., “me”).

Several Old Testament texts support this idea, employing the phrase “son of man” in the sense of “a human being” (Num 23:19; Job 25:5-6; Pss 80:17-18; 144:3). Psalm 8 is particularly noteworthy: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:4).

But M. Casey and G. Vermes based their interpretations heavily upon sayings in the Jewish rabbinic literature (namely the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*), texts that often reflect traditions originating well after the Gospels. Noting this trend, P. Owen and D. Shepherd completed a major study of the Qumran literature (Jewish texts nearer the time of Jesus) and found that the use of “son of man” (בֶּרֶךְ אֱנוֹשׁ) as either self-reference or an idiom for a human being “is not attested in Middle Aramaic, nor in any phase of Aramaic pre-dating the time of Jesus” (“Speaking up for Qumran,” 121).

## III. The Influence of Daniel 7

Attention now seems to be shifting toward a re-examination, not only of the language employed in Daniel 7, but the context in which it is set and its overarching story. The

first-century historian Josephus noted that Daniel was popular among first-century Jews (*Antiquities* 10:266-268). If so, then Daniel's enigmatic figure provides a more plausible source for Jesus' "Son of man" sayings.

Daniel 7 is set in the midst of a literary unit (Dan 2-7) that is concerned with the encroaching pressure of pagan influence among exiled Jews to worship the king of Babylon. Daniel has a particular night-vision that reveals four beasts (a lion, a bear, a leopard, and an incomprehensible beast) rising up out of the Mediterranean Sea to attack Israel (7:2-7). The ten-horned fourth beast spawns another "little horn" (7:8), which rages against God and His people (7:19-25). As the beasts emerge to attack the faithful, the heavenly court is seated in judgment of them.

Multiple thrones are set in place as God ("the Ancient of Days") comes to take His seat (Dan 7:9-10). Daniel sees "one like a son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven" (Dan 7:13; NIV). The phrase, "one like a son of man," denotes a human-looking figure, different than the monstrous beasts. He approaches the throne, takes his seat beside the Ancient of Days, and is given privileges normally reserved for God: authority, glory, sovereign power, the worship of men of every language, and an eternal kingdom (7:14). This human being is ushered into the presence of God and is treated like His equal (or co-regent).

Daniel's vision is one of suffering and exaltation. As the beasts rage against Israel, the "one like a son of man" is ushered into the presence of God and enthroned (or vindicated). Though the "little horn" makes war against the saints of the Most High, they are simultaneously given the kingdom, with its sovereignty and power (Dan 7:19-27). Jesus may have used Daniel's "one like a son of man" to communicate ideas of suffering and victory that were absent from politically-charged terms like "Messiah" and "Son of David." Whether Jesus saw himself as *the* enthroned figure in Daniel's vision, or as the *representative* of "the saints of the Most High" (Wright, *People*, 291-297), He found in Daniel 7 a paradigm of suffering, enthronement, and authority that helps to explain many of the idiosyncracies of His speech.

#### **IV. Jesus' "Son of man" Sayings**

Once the background of Daniel 7 has been employed, Jesus' "Son of man" sayings come into sharper focus. While a thorough analysis of every saying here would be cumbersome, a representative sample will demonstrate the connection with the themes of suffering, enthronement, and authority that appear in the narrative of Daniel's vision.

##### **1. Authority and/or Enthronement**

If Jesus saw Himself against the story told in Daniel 7, then some of His sayings would naturally involve His authority to act on God's behalf. He claims that "the Son of man has the authority on the earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24) and that "the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28; Matt 12:8; Luke 6:5). Both of these sayings are preceded by a challenge to Jesus' authority. Evoking the "Son of man" language brings to mind the authority to act on God's behalf given to the figure in Daniel 7.

Jesus often employs “Son of man” language in contexts that refer to His second coming (Matt 13:41-42; 24:27, 30, 44; 25:31; Mark 13:26; Luke 12:40, 18:8; 21:27). However, Jesus’ use of Danielic imagery at His trial (Matt 26:64, “you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven,” NIV) seems less about His second coming and more about His vindication after suffering.

John’s use of the “Son of man” motif has been regarded as qualitatively different than that of the Synoptics, reflecting a more exalted Jesus than He who suffers. But John’s Jesus also employs “Son of man” to denote elements of enthronement and authority. Jesus declares that “no one has gone into heaven except he who came from heaven, the Son of man” (John 3:13, NIV). He has the authority to judge because He is “Son of man” (5:27), and God has placed his seal of approval on Him (6:27). Only when the “Son of man” is “lifted up” will his disciples understand His identity (8:28).

## **2. Suffering**

M. Hooker (*Son of Man in Mark*, 81-173) has shown that Jesus’ “Son of man” sayings often contain hints and allusions to His suffering. When Jesus compares His own death to that of Jonah (Matt. 12:40) and a “ransom” given for all (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28), He employs the language and imagery of the “Son of man.” At His arrest, Jesus perceived that the “Son of man” was being betrayed into the hands of sinners (Mark 14:41; Matt 26:45). His predictions of suffering are often coupled with references to His subsequent vindication (Matt 17:10-13, 22-23, 20:18-19; Mark 8:31, 9:11-13, 31, 10:33-34; Luke 9:22, 44, 18:31-33), hinting that the story of Daniel 7—with its “one like a son of man” enthroned amidst the raging beasts—was a fitting metaphor for Jesus’ crucifixion and subsequent resurrection.

John’s Gospel also bears this out. Jesus told Nicodemus that as the snake was lifted up in the desert, “so the Son of man must be lifted up” (3:14). Just before Jesus went to Gethsemane, He told His disciples, “Now is the Son of Man glorified” (13:31), and His glorification was intricately bound up with His suffering (12:23-24, 34).

## **3. Self-Reference**

If Jesus saw Himself as the “Son of Man” figure of Daniel 7, and found this a fitting metaphor for His ministry, then He would have naturally spoken of Himself in these terms. L. Hurtado calls this part of Jesus’ “idiolect,” His own unique way of speaking (*Lord Jesus Christ*, 292-293). When Jesus contrasted His ministry with that of John the Baptist, He contrasted the peoples’ reaction to them both saying, “John came neither eating nor drinking . . . the Son of man came eating and drinking” (Matt 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34, NIV). Jesus’ question about His own identity appears as both “Who do men say the Son of man to be?” (Matt 16:13) and “Who do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18).

The Jesus of John’s Gospel also refers to Himself as “Son of Man” (1:51, 6:53). Jesus asked the man born blind, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” (9:35). When the blind man indicated his desire, Jesus replied, “He is the one speaking with you now” (9:37).

The work done by Casey, Lindars, and Vermes held at its core that some of Jesus' use of the phrase "Son of man" was circumlocutory, referring back to Himself (either as a human or as a person within a special class of humans, if not "me" altogether). These conclusions are not incommensurate with Jesus' use of the phrase, but likely stem from His identification with the imagery of Daniel 7 and not from Aramaic semantics.

### **V. The "Son of Man" in the New Testament**

Though "Son of man" was Jesus' favorite self-designation, it never became a confessional title among His disciples. The only time "Son of man" appears as a title comes from the dying martyr Stephen: "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). By this time in Acts Jesus has been taken up on the clouds, headed toward the right hand of God (Acts 1:9), and Stephen's evocation of "Son of man" language hints at his trust in Jesus' ability to vindicate him through his suffering.

John twice describes Jesus as "one like a son of man" in Revelation (1:13; 14:14). The initial reference evokes the imagery of Daniel 7: woolen hair, white raiment, and blazing fire (Dan 7:9-10; Rev 1:13-15). John uses language explicitly employed in Daniel's description of the Ancient of Days to describe Jesus. He links Jesus to the Danielic figure, as the one enthroned at the right hand of the Father—indeed, as God's equal. His authority to harvest the grapes of the earth (Rev 14:14) flows naturally from the authority given to the figure in Daniel who shares the throne of God.

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**See Also:**

Daniel, Book of  
Synoptic Gospels  
Gospel of John  
Books of Enoch  
Books of Ezra  
Apocalyptic