

Son of Man

“Beautiful Savior! Lord of all nations!
Son of God, and Son of Man
Glory and honor, praise adoration
Now and forever more be Thine!”

--*Fairest Lord Jesus*, v. 4

Ask most church-going people what the fourth stanza of this hymn means, particularly the second line, “Son of God and Son of Man” and you’ll likely get this response: “Son of God” shows his divinity while “Son of Man” reveals his humanity. The hymn shows, in using the two distinct phrases or titles for Jesus, that he is both God and man, human and divine. While the question of Jesus’ dual nature is not in question here, this line of reasoning misses the point, a point which the hymn confuses. The phrase “Son of man” is not, by the time we find it on the lips of Jesus and in the Gospels, a term communicating mere humanity. While the notion of “frail humanity” lurks in the background, Jesus’ use of the phrase “Son of man” seems to have been fueled by a reading of OT texts which denote the enthronement and vindication of God’s chosen. The aspect of humanity is there, to be sure. But the phrase “the Son of man” as Jesus uses it communicates both humanity and divinity all in the same breath.

The study of “the Son of man” concept is massive (even more massive than the literature on the Suffering Servant) and complex.¹ Those reading with knowledge of the field and its literature will likely find this discussion simple and inadequate for solving the problem. My aim here is *not* to provide a thorough discussion of every aspect of the problem, nor to propose new solutions to tired and wanting questions. What follows here is a simple introduction to the phrase “the Son of man” as it was used by Jesus during his ministry and the OT setting from which his use of the term was likely drawn.

“Son of Man” in the Old Testament

The phrase “son of man” appears in the OT a number of times, each reference conveying the idea of a human being. Many of the occurrences appear in the form of Hebrew parallelism (similar, subsequent phrases which communicate the same idea with slightly different language) in which the phrase “son of man” is used to further explain the concept of humanity. Consider these examples:

1. Mosaic Literature

“God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.” (Num. 23:19)

*“If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his eyes,*

¹For a brief historiography on the modern research into the subject see Delbert Burkett, “The Non- titular Son of Man: A History and Critique,” *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 504-521. Burkett summarizes two of the major views proposed (that which sees the term as circumlocution for “I” and that which sees the term meaning only “a man”) and offers brief critique. Though not complete, it is a satisfactory introduction to the literature.

*how much less man, who is but a maggot—
a son of man, who is only a worm!” (Job 25:5-6)*

In both of these examples the phrase “son of man” is used to reinforce the notion of humanity. “God is not a man . . . (God is not) a son of man.” God is not like men, and therefore is not prone to whimsical mood swings and unreflective thought. Job’s use of “son of man” is a repetitious qualification of “man” in the previous line. “Man” and “son of man” are set against the heavenly bodies, and if their illuminated purity is not impressive in the eyes of God, how much less is the purity of men?

2. The Psalms

The phrase “son of man” also appears in the Psalms with this undercurrent of humanity. Ps. 8 describes man as the crown of God’s creation. Made a little lower than the angels, man has nevertheless been granted dominion over the created order.²

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
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 heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
you put everything under his feet. (Ps. 8:3-6; cf. Ps. 144:3)*

A psalm of Asaph in the period of the Exile uses the phrase “son of man” to refer either to the anticipation of the returning king of Israel³ or to Israel herself restored to God’s right hand of favor shortly after her punishment.⁴

*Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name. (Ps. 80:17-18)*

Whether Asaph is referring to the king or to the nation of Israel, humanity is in view in the phrase “son of man.” An interesting development to note, however, is the concept of the “son of man” sitting at the right hand of God. As we will note later, this is precisely the point at which

²Michael Goulder, “Psalm 8 and the Son of Man,” *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 18-29, suggests that the usage of the phrase “Son of man” in the Gospels and subsequent ideas of Jesus’ suffering and vindication can be found here in Psalm 8. As I will demonstrate below, the background of the phrase “Son of man” largely comes from Daniel 7, not Psalm 8.

³Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1996), 144-145.

⁴Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 315-316; Cite Zorn here; F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 387-389.

the key text regarding the Son of man concept is developed: a human being who shares the throne of God.

3. *Ezekiel*

The phrase “Son of man” appears more than 90 times in the book of Ezekiel. The occurrences are too numerous to mention here, and contribute little to our study of Jesus’ use of the term. God continually addresses Ezekiel “Son of man,” but it appears that he does so to remind him of his humanity. Ezekiel was sent to a stubborn and rebellious Israel (Ez. 2:3-5), and his instructions not to be afraid of them (Ez. 2:6-8) needed to be rooted in the certainty that Ezekiel wasn’t composing the message. He was simply the human agent through whom God delivered the message. God sat in judgment over Israel, and Ezekiel was simply the human being chosen to deliver the message of judgment and restoration by a righteous God.

One thing must be noted before we move on. Curiously, Ezekiel uses a comparative phrase “like that of man” in his description of the throne room of God.

Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. (Ez. 1:26)

Ezekiel and Daniel are the only prophets in the OT to use this comparison form (“one like a son of man,” Dan. 7:13) when describing human-looking figures in and around the throne.⁵ Both use the comparative form “like” to describe heavenly beings near the throne who have human appearance. Ezekiel sees the form of God himself (Ez. 1:28) while Daniel envisions one who is in every way equal with God.

The Son of Man in Daniel 7

The source from which Jesus seems to draw his use of the term “Son of man” is Daniel 7. Understanding the original context of Daniel’s vision has proven elusive and the meaning of the phrase “Son of man” as it is found there has led to mass confusion and little agreement in biblical scholarship regarding the exact nature of the phrase and the meaning attributed to it in the Gospels. Because of the complex problems associated with it, it seemed best to isolate this discussion from the study of the OT uses and devote an entire section to it altogether. The best course will be to exegete Dan. 7, grasping a comprehensive overview of the entire chapter (in conjunction with Daniel’s previous visions) and then extract the overarching point. The approach here is very similar to that taken in the exegesis of the Suffering Servant: see the big picture, grasp the main points, and transfer the meaning appropriately.

The setting for the book of Daniel is the Babylonian Exile.⁶ In the midst of the Exile faithful Jews were pressured by pagan authorities to compromise their faith, some of whom were epitomized early in the book by Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In the stories recorded in Daniel, at every point along the way, the Israelites in question remained faithful to Yahweh and were vindicated for their faithfulness. These four young men, chosen to train in the

⁵For the evidence here see Thomas B. Slater, “One Like A Son of Man in First-Century Judaism,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 190-193.

⁶The prevailing opinion is that the Exile is the literary setting, not the historical setting. I make no such distinction here. For concise, readable, opposing views see both Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1964] 1994), 421-447, and John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 87-90.

king's court, refused the (presumably) idolatrous food of Babylon in order to remain faithful to the Mosaic food laws (Dan. 1:1-16). Their reward was strength and health superior to their Babylonian counterparts, the ability to comprehend the literature of the day, and an intelligence which Daniel claims was "ten times more" than the king's best attendants (1:17-21). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were pressured to bow to the image of Nebuchadnezzar in worship, but refused (3:1-23). Consequently they were visited by a heavenly being who protected them from the furnace of fire and Nebuchadnezzar rescinded his decree, gave allegiance to Yahweh, and gave the young men social advancements (3:24-30). After this Babylon was overrun by the Persians, and the new king Darius issued a decree that prayer to anyone but him would be punished. Daniel continued to pray to Yahweh faithfully and, though he was thrown to the lions, was vindicated by their astonishing lack of desire for fresh meat and the respect of both Darius and his successor, Cyrus (6:1-28).

Interspersed among these stories of faithful Israelites is a series of dreams whose interpretations escape everyone but Daniel. Twice he interprets dreams for Nebuchadnezzar which explicitly remind the king that he is not ultimately in control of Yahweh's people, but that Yahweh's kingdom will never be destroyed (2:1-49, 4:1-37). Though it suffers momentarily, it is by Yahweh's design and for the greater good of his people. Daniel interprets one dream for the Babylonian king Belshazzar which also announces the end of his reign and the eternal dominion of the God of Israel (5:1-31). Daniel 7-12 is then a series of visions that Daniel receives unto himself that either require divine help in understanding or escape Daniel's ability to understand altogether.

Daniel 2-7 seems to represent a literary unit in the original manuscripts. While the remainder of Daniel is in Hebrew, chs. 2-7 are written in Aramaic and seemingly go together.⁷ There may even be a chiasmic structure to these chapters.⁸ This section of Daniel is concerned with the encroaching pressure of the pagan influence to worship the king and the interpretation of dreams that clarify exactly who is (and who is not) to be worshiped. Against that backdrop the vision given in Daniel 7 begins to unfold.

Daniel sees four beasts, monsters that come up from the sea and onto the land. From the vantage point of an Israelite, the Mediterranean sea is likely in view and the only direction for the monsters to attack is in the direction of the Holy Land. The first he sees is that of a lion (which then turns into the semblance of a man), the second a bear, the third a winged leopard, and the fourth a wicked beast whose countenance is beyond comprehension (Dan. 7:1-7).⁹ As the fourth beast rises with its ten horns another "little horn" comes into view and speaks "boastfully," even blasphemously, among God's people (7:8, 11). Attempts to identify the "little horn" have yielded little consensus. The identification of this person naturally flows from the

⁷Archer, 434, suggests that these chapters contain oracles dealing with Gentile affairs, while chs. 8-12 are written in Hebrew solely for a Jewish audience.

⁸Maurice Casey, *The Son of Man—The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: SPCK, 1980), 8-10.

⁹Though John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 163, suggests that the circumstantial evidence represents the elephant used by the Greek and Seleucid empires.

identification of the four beasts and menacing figures such as Antiochus IV¹⁰, Domitian¹¹, and “Antichrist.”¹²

That there is no consensus on the vision’s meaning is not surprising. The meaning of the vision escaped Daniel himself. He asked for help and was told that the beasts represent kingdoms yet to come upon the world, and that the little horn will “oppress the saints,” attempt to alter the “set times and laws,” and exercise temporal dominion over the saints for “a time, times, and half a time” (the equivalent of three and a half years; 7:19-25).¹³ As the “little horn” wages war against the saints the Ancient of Days (God) comes and pronounces judgment upon him and grants favor to His people (7:21-22). In the end God is worshiped and his people are vindicated through their suffering.

As the beasts emerge to attack the faithful, the heavenly court sits in judgment of them (present world kingdoms represented by the beasts). Yahweh rules the universe, and he will not share his throne with Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece or Rome (the likely culprits represented by the beasts). The visions that Daniel previously interpreted for the kings articulated exactly this point: neither Nebuchadnezzar, nor Belshazzar, nor Darius will prosper apart from the blessing of Yahweh. Their attempts to subjugate His people to their rule will ultimately fail.

In between the giving of the vision and its interpretation Daniel sees the throne-room of God Almighty. What he sees there is not one throne, but “thrones” (7:9).

*"As I looked,
thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened." (Dan. 7:9-10)*

What Daniel sees here is, without question, the throne-room of Yahweh. He describes him as the “Ancient of Days” with a chariot of flaming wheels (reminiscent of Ezekiel’s description of the throne; Ezek. 1:15-18, 25-28). Yahweh leads the court as the heavenly counterpart awaits his judgment. When the books were opened the fourth beast with its horns was slain, and presumably the “little horn” along with it. Then Daniel sees the approach of the “one like a son of man.”

¹⁰Goldingay, 157, 174-176; Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday Books, 1977), 211-217.

¹¹Paul T. Butler, *Daniel* (Joplin: College Press, 1970), 270-275.

¹²E. J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [1949] 1978), 156-164; Gleason L. Archer, *Daniel*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 84-95.

¹³“time” = 1 year; “times” = 2 years; “half a time” = half a year.

"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." (Dan. 7:13-14)

One item that should be noted here for later discussion is that Daniel describes him as "one *like* a son of man." As all the other characters in the vision are symbolic representations and not literal, so this figure is "one who looks like a man." He stands in contrasts to the beastly kingdoms. Whereas they are brutish and violent, this personage has the qualities of a man: sane, rational, articulate, and the crown of God's creation.

Daniel sees "one like a son of man" approaching the throne, riding on the clouds. Daniel is not told his identity, and it seems that of all the elements in the vision, Daniel is less concerned to identify the "one like a son of man" than he is to determine the identity of the "little horn." Some scholars have identified this "one like a son of man" with the Jewish people. The enthronement of this person communicates, in this view, the vindication by Yahweh of his people who suffer at the hands of the persecutors.¹⁴ The interpretation given to Daniel suggests that the Jewish people will be vindicated and "given the kingdom" after the "little horn" is defeated (7:26-27). The identification of the "one like a son of man" at this point becomes more about the vindication of the Jewish people rather than about the one who sits on the vacant throne. We will see below that Jewish writers later believed that the empty throne was yet to be filled, suggesting that the vindication of the Jewish people after the "little horn" crisis hadn't quite brought this vision to any ultimate fulfillment.

Two significant points arise from the description of "one like a son of man" that will help us in our study. The first is *the direction of his coming*. The "one like a son of man" comes riding on the clouds. Christian scholars have long identified this scene with the return of Jesus at the second coming. But the direction hinted here seems to be less "downward" than "upward." Riding on the clouds he *approaches* the Ancient of Days. In other words, his direction is *toward* the throne, not *away from* it.

The second is that *this figure shares the throne with Yahweh*. He was led into the presence of God and treated as an equal. He was given honors and attributes normally reserved only for Yahweh: authority, glory, sovereign power, eternal dominion, an everlasting kingdom, and the worship of people everywhere. Thrones were set in place as this vision began to unfold. Yahweh takes his seat, leaving the reader to wonder about the purpose of the other throne. This vacant throne caused much speculation after Daniel's vision about exactly who would come to occupy it.¹⁵ So far we have no clues regarding the identity of the "one like a son of man," but Daniel clearly sees one who is ushered into the presence of God and treated as God's equal. The one enthroned alongside Yahweh is a concept that has its origin in the Psalms, is envisioned explicitly here in Daniel, and developed by writers in the subsequent Jewish literature.

¹⁴E.g., Casey, 24-27, 43-48.

¹⁵J. J. Collins, "The Son of Man in First-Century Judaism," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 448-466 (esp. pp. 457-459) provides an excellent discussion of how the vacant throne in Dan. 7 naturally led to speculation in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra as to who would occupy the seat beside Yahweh.

The Influence of Daniel 7

We have seen that the phrase “son of man” was normally used in the OT to refer to human beings, to reflect upon frail humanity and communicate flesh-and-blood origin. Daniel uses that background to describe one “like” a son of man, a flesh-and-blood human being in contrast to the beastly figures rising from the sea around him. As the beasts are defeated and the little horn persecutes God’s people, this human being is seated next to Yahweh as co-regent. Though the phrase “son of man” would continue to be used as a way of expressing humanity in the sacred literature of the day, there were a few who used Daniel’s *concept* of one sharing God’s throne to develop themes of encouragement and faithfulness among His people.

A detailed examination of the Son of man concept in the inter-testamental literature is impossible here and outside the purview of our purpose. But a few citations are necessary to demonstrate that there were at least *some* in the period before the NT that saw the possibility of an individual sharing the leadership of Israel alongside Yahweh, even being invested with divine prerogatives to accomplish the task. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls was found a tractate containing speculation surrounding the mysterious Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20). Little is known about him from the text of Genesis, but the Scrolls portray him as presiding over the final judgment, pronouncing both blessing for the saints and eternal torment for his demonic adversary, Satan (11QMelch).¹⁶ Toward the end of the first century appears *Ezekiel the Tragedian*. This work describes a dream of Moses in which he approaches the throne of God. As he does, God stands up, hands his crown and the scepter of his rule to Moses, and invites Moses to sit on his throne and watch the stars fall beneath his feet (lines 68-82).¹⁷

The two works from this period which garner the most attention from scholars, particularly because of their employment of the term “son of man,” are 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra. 1 Enoch 37-71 (otherwise known as the *Similitudes of Enoch*) are part of a larger composite, so that one cannot date the entire book, but must focus on the date of individual sections. The *Similitudes* probably arise from the early to mid-first century (60-70 A.D.). This section of 1 Enoch refers repeatedly to the “son of man” and says of him that he sits on a throne, serves as judge, gathers the faithful to himself, reveals the true God, rules the universe, and receives worship as if he were God.¹⁸ Fourth Ezra was written at the end of the first century and decries the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans. It too, like the *Similitudes*, refers to a “son of man” figure and describes him as pronouncing judgment, gathering the faithful, and riding upon the clouds.¹⁹ Scholars generally agree that the *Similitudes* and 4 Ezra were dependent upon Dan. 7:13-14 for their development of the “son of man” figure.²⁰

While we aren’t yet able to say that the ancient Jews were universally awaiting a ruling figure from heaven called “Son of Man,” we are in a position to say that *some* Jews saw in Dan. 7:13-14 the possibility of a co-regent with Yahweh, one who shares the throne with him and all its responsibilities. When they articulate this theme, they seem to be dependent upon Dan. 7:13-14 and the description given there of the one who is seated at Yahweh’s right hand. The theme is

¹⁶Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 361.

¹⁷James H. Charlesworth, Ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday Books, 1985), 811-812.

¹⁸For the description and correlating references see Slater, “One Like a Son of Man,” 195.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 196.

²⁰4 Ezra 12:11-12 specifically names Daniel as a source. For evidence of dependency upon Dan. 7 for the visions in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha see the discussion in Morna Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 33-74. For evidence on 4 Ezra see David A. DeSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2002), 334-335.

not unknown to the OT, and is not developed solely with Dan. 7:13-14 in view, but expresses in visionary terms what was poetically stated in the OT texts regarding men like David (that he would receive the inheritance of the nations and rule them with an iron scepter, Ps. 2:7-9) and David's "Lord" (that he sits at Yahweh's right hand and pronounces judgment over His enemies, Ps. 110:1-7). While there was no expectation of the "Son of man" at this time, there was a growing speculation over the possibility of someone sitting at his right hand, occupying the empty throne, and being treated as his equal.

"The Son of Man" in the Gospels

Jesus uses the phrase "Son of man" as one of his favored self-expressions. He refers to himself as "the Son of man" more than 80 times in the Gospels, and very seldom is the expression used by others as a reference to Jesus. Aside from the question on the lips of the crowd asking, "Who is this Son of man?" (Jn. 12:34), only two people outside the Gospels refer to Jesus as "Son of man" (Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:13, 14:14). So the bulk of our discussion here is focused upon whether or not Jesus' use of the phrase "Son of man" as we find it recorded in the Gospels derives from the imagery in Daniel 7. Before we can do that, we must stop for a minute and consider the modern state of "Son of man" research.

1. The Climate of Modern "Son of man" Research

Pick up any book or article written since 1970 on the topic "Son of man" and you'll find inordinate and confusing discussion on the exact phrase as Jesus used it. In the days of old Jesus-scholars saw Jesus against the backdrop of the first-century Greco-Roman world. If Jesus cast out demons and performed miracles, then he must have been seen by as a Hellenistic or pagan magician.²¹ If his followers practiced rituals similar to those of the Cult of Isis or the Cult of Cybele, then he must have come to start a Greco-Roman mystery religion. But scholars in the last several decades have been largely focused on reversing this trend and rightly seeing Jesus as a member of ancient Israel, steeped in *Jewish* culture, not Greek and Roman culture. Sure, there were some Greco-Roman elements to be found in first-century Palestine, but those were incidental and did not form the foundation of Jesus' identity and ministry. At the most basic level, Jesus was a Jew, and the things he said and the actions he performed are to be understood against the backdrop of first-century Judaism.

That being said, Jesus' native language was likely Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew). This was the common language among the Jews of his day, and the places he went largely comprised of Aramaic-speaking people. But Jesus probably also spoke Greek. He spent time in the Decapolis, the Greek-speaking area just east of the Jordan Valley, and on occasion went to Gentile areas where Aramaic would not have been spoken (e.g., Tyre and Sidon, Gergasa/Gerasa, Mt. 8:28, 15:21-28; Mk. 5:1, 7:24-30; Lk. 8:26). Jesus' closest disciples wrote Gospels in both Aramaic²² and Greek²³, suggesting that he and his disciples were at least bi-lingual in this respect.

²¹E.g. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), who saw Jesus as a Jewish magician, teaching and practicing magic like those outside Judaism in the first century.

²²The earliest evidence tells us that Matthew's gospel was originally written in Aramaic and then later translated, with some difficulty, into Greek. See Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.24.5-6; 3.39.14-16; 6.25.3-6; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1. Mark records a number of Aramaic words in his Gospel which suggests he may be using an Aramaic source (cf. Mk. 5:41, 7:34, 14:36, 15:34).

²³Mark's Gospel, though containing some Aramaic words, is written in Greek. So are the Gospels of Luke and John.

Given the likelihood that Jesus spoke both of these common languages, scholars have spent the last several decades trying to decipher which language lies behind the phrase “Son of man.” It stands to reason that if we can decipher the original language behind “Son of man,” we might be able to discern what the source of the expression is, and that may help us understand what Jesus meant by it. The first option is Greek, since the Gospels as we have them are written in that language. All of the occurrences of the phrase “the Son of man/Son of man” as they appear in the Gospels exist in Greek. Does this help us understand the meaning of the term? Perhaps. There are two factors to consider. First, the phrase as it appears on the lips of Jesus is nearly always with the definite article: “*the* Son of man.” It’s as if Jesus is pointing to a particular concept or identity that his hearers would have readily understood. The term in Dan. 7:13-14, as we have seen, is “one *like* a son of man.” The fact that the phrase shows up with the definite article may hint toward understanding the term in light of a *specific* background, not simply against the notion of “a human being.”²⁴ Secondly, nowhere else in all of the extant Greek literature do we find the phrase “the Son of man.”²⁵ It was a Jewish concept and not readily used by Greek-speaking authors. The original language behind Jesus’ expression seems to be something other than Greek.

The other major option is Aramaic, and it’s here that we find the concentration of the material. If Dan. 7:13-14 lies behind Jesus’ use of the term “the Son of man” (and I think it does), then we must give strong consideration to the possibility that he used the Aramaic form of the phrase. Dan. 2-7 (as we have seen) is written in Aramaic, and the form of the phrase as it appears there (*bar enash*) is Aramaic. If Daniel is the background behind the term, then it’s reasonable to assume that Jesus used the Aramaic form of the term.

If he did, then there are considerable factors to weigh in the term’s meaning. Picking up on the Aramaic background, scholars have recently sought to examine the use of the term as it appears in other Jewish literature of the day. They believe they have discovered that the phrase means “a human being,” or possibly a way to refer to a man and his friends.²⁶ Think of the English expression, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” In that English expression the phrase “a man” normally refers to the speaker and has the force of “I have to do what is necessary.” Others believe that the Aramaic phrase is nothing more than a self-reference (what is called “circumlocution,” a way of referring to one’s self), so that when Jesus says, “the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head,” it means that he himself is homeless. He’s speaking of himself in that regard, and the term is a self-reference which places some distance between him and the subject matter.²⁷ Most of these studies are founded on the identification of Daniel’s “one

²⁴C. F. D. Moule, *The Origins of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 11-22; cf. also his “‘The Son of Man’: Some of the Facts,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 277-279.

²⁵Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 291-292.

²⁶Maurice Casey’s presentation is representative of this view. According to Casey, the Aramaic form was too difficult to render accurately into Greek and suffers from mistranslation by the Gospel writers. See Casey, “Idiom and Translation: Some Aspects of the Son of Man Problem,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 164-182. If the phrase were that difficult to translate into Greek, we would expect to find variations in the form of the phrase. As it stands, we do not. The phrase “the Son of man” is remarkably uniform in the Greek text of all four Gospels. That Matthew and John, (at least, and perhaps Peter, whose speeches lie behind Mark’s Gospel), who both likely spoke Aramaic *and* Greek, had difficulty translating this phrase from one language to another seems implausible.

²⁷Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 81-90. (This is not his major presentation, but is a concise, up-to-date presentation of his argument.) But the evidence is beginning to lose its force. Vermes based his research on citations from the rabbinic literature which is now being shown to represent a Judaism too late and too different from first-century Judaism to be of any value to this study. See Paul

like a son of man” as the Jewish people (or even an angel, say Michael²⁸) who are vindicated in the midst of their affliction by the beasts. And if the “one like a son of man” is the Jewish people, they reason, then subsequent uses by Jesus cannot refer to an exalted figure seated at the right hand of God and must refer to the Jewish people.

These ideas, in my opinion, miss the larger point. Rather than quibble about the specific origin and meaning of the phrase (as most modern scholars are prone to do), I think it best that we back away from the trees and see the forest, and consider the overall picture of Daniel’s vision rather than simply the phrase “one like a son of man.” The overarching pattern of Daniel’s vision, as noted above, is one of vindication amidst suffering and trial, of the Jewish people being vindicated in spite of, and simultaneously in the midst of, persecution at the hands of those in power. Those in power will be different in Jesus’ day than they were in Daniel’s, but the overarching pattern is there of one who is enthroned at Yahweh’s right hand.²⁹

That’s not to say that the studies done by scholars in the last several decades are of no value. They contribute to our understanding of various aspects Jesus’ use of the term “the Son of man.” But none of them accounts for the totality of the evidence. We must consider their contributions and assess them against the evidence given by the totality of Scripture.

2. *The Three Uses*

There are, in my opinion, three categories of uses of the Son of man sayings in the Gospels.³⁰ Assuming that Dan. 7 is the background, the majority of the sayings can be categorized as *enthronement* sayings. In these sayings the assumption is that Jesus speaks of himself as the one enthroned at the right hand of Yahweh. Once that idea is granted, the particulars in each statement naturally follow. Granting that Jesus saw himself as the enthroned “Son of man,” it becomes easy then to understand how that phrase could become a *self-reference*. If Jesus saw himself as Daniel’s vindicated “Son of man,” then it’s not difficult to see how he could continually refer to himself by that title. Finally, there are a series of “Son of man” sayings which include the idea of *suffering*. The suffering motif is not foreign to Daniel’s vision and likely draws from it (along with the Suffering Servant Song) to develop the notion of the “Son of man” suffering at the hands of the beasts while simultaneously knowing that vindication is at hand.

a. Enthronement Sayings

The first category of “Son of man” sayings evokes the imagery of the enthronement of Daniel’s “one like a son of man.” We have already noted several other OT passages which hint in this direction and noted that the literature being produced just before and after the NT suggest the possibility of Yahweh sharing his throne with one of his anointed emissaries. Jesus’ use of the phrase “Son of man” in these sayings suggests that he had this enthronement in mind.

If the “one like a son of man” is seated next to Yahweh and is given power, dominion, and the worship of every race of people (Dan. 7:13-14) then it’s reasonable to assume that this

Owen and David Shepherd, “Speaking Up for Qumran, Dalman and the Son of Man: Was *Bar Enasha* a Common Term for ‘Man’ in the Time of Jesus?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 81 (2001): 81-122.

²⁸Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 98-107; cf. also his “Son of Man in First-Century Judaism,” 448-451.

²⁹N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 291-297; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 360-371.

³⁰These categories are similar to, but not taken from, those listed in I. H. Marshall, “Son of Man,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 780-781.

person has the *authority* of Yahweh (Dan. 7:14). Several sayings in the Gospels hint toward Jesus' equality with the Father. To the Jews who were plotting to take his life Jesus replies that belief in him and his teaching will bring eternal life and refusal to do so will bring condemnation. Jesus can make this kind of distinction because the Father "has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man" (Jn. 5:27).³¹ In the dispute which ensues after the bread miracle Jesus warns the crowd to work "for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (Jn. 6:27). His equality with the Father is evidenced by His fixing his "seal" upon him.³²

In a few instances Jesus uses this notion of equality with the Father to settle disputes about the interpretation of the Law. On one occasion Jesus was questioned about his healing of a paralytic on the Sabbath. He claimed not only to be able to heal the man, but also to have the authority to forgive his sins. Jesus responds that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mk. 2:10; Mt. 9:6; Lk. 5:24). Jesus even claims the ability to forgive those who sin against him, for "anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven" (Mt. 12:32). When questioned about picking grain on the Sabbath (which involved a technical dispute about whether picking heads of grain amounted to reaping a harvest, clearly forbidden on the Sabbath), Jesus claims that the Sabbath is not to be bowed to and worshipped, but was made for the benefit of man. His actions are determined by his own interpretation of the Law, and his interpretation is seen as authoritative, for "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:28; Mt. 12:8; Lk. 6:5). Only Yahweh has the right to do the things that Jesus is doing: forgive sins and settle disputes about why the Sabbath was given. Jesus assumes that this authority has been given to the one who sits at Yahweh's right hand, and because he identifies himself as the "one like a son of man," it's easy to see why he claims to have that authority. That authority will be manifest to all when he finally takes up the throne he rightfully calls "his" (Mt. 19:28), at which time his identity will be plainly understood (Jn. 8:28).

Jesus makes one statement about his identity that has usually been understood as a self-reference, but more likely hinges upon a twist of the enthronement idea we've been discussing. A teacher of the law came to Jesus and made a vow to follow him wherever he went. Jesus warns him that "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58). Many have seen this as an enigmatic self-reference, i.e., "I have no place to call home." But I think it's best to see this as an ironic twist on the "Son of man's" enthronement. If Jesus has identified himself as the "Son of man," and if that "Son of man" is seated at the right hand of the Father, then it's a bit odd to find that "Son of man" homeless during his earthly ministry. Jesus' statements in confrontational situations are often designed to shock the hearer into truth (e.g., as he requires the rich young man to give away all his possessions, Lk. 19:21-22), and this statement is no different. The contrast between the one enthroned at Yahweh's right hand now having no place to lay his head causes the hearer to sit up and take notice of the seriousness of the commitment to follow Jesus.

³¹I am aware of the problem posed by this use of the non-articular phrase "Son of Man." I would respond by saying that one of the characteristic features of John's writing involves the absence of the definite article for particular, definite nouns, the most obvious example being John 1:1, where the phrase "and the Word was with God" involves the anarthrous use of the word "God." It is a major point of contention with Jehovah's Witness theology that they treat the word "god" as indefinite simply because it is anarthrous.

³²The "seal" denotes both ownership and authority of the seal's owner. See Leon Morris, *John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1971), 359.

This authority, assumed in the background of the Danielic vision, gives foundation to Jesus' discussion of the "Son of man" descending on the clouds. Part of the quibble among scholars on this topic is whether the "one like a son of man" in Daniel is riding *toward* the throne or *away from* it. As I have noted elsewhere in this book, the ancients were less concerned with this kind of detail and were more focused upon the larger picture at hand. The evidence seems to show that Jesus referred to himself as the "one like a son of man" *riding on the clouds*, without excluding one direction or another. In fact, Jesus uses the notion of movement between heaven and earth as part of the larger picture in Daniel to talk about both his ascent to the throne of God and his return back to his people, and in one instance refers to both directions in the same breath: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man" (Jn. 3:13).

Let's start with the descent first. One of the more obvious statements about the "Son of man's" return comes at the end of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43). In his own interpretation Jesus says that at the end of the age "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. They will throw them into the fiery furnace" (Mt. 13:41-42). Pictured as a descent with the angels, Jesus refers to something future, not present in his ministry. One of the more obscure references occurs at the end of Jesus' parable about the persistent widow (Lk. 18:1-8). Given that the parable is about the quick justice God is going to give to his people and the emphasis on continued prayer until it happens, it's easy to see why Jesus would point to the interval between his first coming and his second coming and question, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:8).

Without question, the most confusion appears in the Olivet Discourse. One of the last extended conversations Jesus has with his disciples takes place across the valley from the Temple mount, on a hill called Mt. Olivet (or Mount of Olives). There Jesus instructs his disciples on what is to come in both the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming. I will deal with the inter-play of these two events in a later chapter and suggest a plausible manner of understanding which sections of the discourse refer to their respective situations. For now it is enough to say that the bulk of the reference to "Son of man" in the Olivet Discourse appear in Matthew's gospel, and each of them appears in the context of describing the second coming. "The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky" (i.e., the "sign" is the Son of Man himself) and everyone "will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (Mt. 24:30; Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27). It will be instant and visible to everyone, for just as lightning is seen across the whole expanse of the sky, "so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Mt. 24:27). The parallels with the Noahic flood are in view also, as the busyness of life blinds many to the impending destruction at hand: "the Son of Man will come at an hour you do not expect" (Mt. 24:44; Lk. 12:40; cf. Mt. 24:37, 39). "When the Son of Man comes in his glory" then, because of his shared authority with the Father (notice he calls it "his" glory) he will be the one to decide the eternal destiny of all men (Mt. 25:31). Clearly the Danielic vision of the "one like a son of man" riding on the clouds has assisted Jesus' description about the second coming.

We should not be so easy to dismiss the main aspect of Daniel's vision, though, as the "one like a son of man" ascends on the clouds to be seated next to Yahweh and share in his power, authority, and glory. I suggests that many texts containing descriptions of the Son of man's coming which have traditionally been viewed as referring to the second coming of Jesus might very well be made in reference to his vindication by the Father for suffering at the hands of the "beasts." The most obvious is the statement made in the presence of Caiaphas at Jesus'

trial. Caiaphas asked Jesus about his identity, specifically, whether he was the Messiah (“Christ”). Jesus’ response leaves no room for misunderstanding: “Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:69). His response, a conflation of Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 7:13-14, suggests *not* that they would see him return to earth in glory one day, but rather that, in spite of their mistreatment of him, they would see him, ala the vision of Dan. 7, ushered into the presence of the Father and seated at his right hand. In short, though they rage against him like beasts, he will be vindicated for what they are about to do to him.

This was not the first time Jesus had spoken this way. His statement, “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!” (Jn. 6:62) clearly suggests ascension to the throne rather than a descending to the earth. In the midst of the discussion of his impending death he mentions “the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory” and that there were some in his presence who would live to see it (Mt. 16:27-28). That he makes this reference in discussion about his death suggests that he intends the “coming of the Son of Man” to refer to his coming into glory, which is necessarily bound up with his suffering. This is the case with most of the “ascension” uses of the phrase “Son of man.” Using many of the same illustrations as he used in the Olivet Discourse, Luke’s record of Jesus’ description of his death (“the day the Son of Man is revealed,” 17:30), points toward its rapid fulfillment (appearing like lightning, 17:24), coming upon the Jewish leaders unexpectedly (17:26-27), and visible for miles around (17:37).

When does it happen? When does Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of Yahweh occur? If we take our clues from Daniel, that the “one like a son of man” comes into His presence riding on the clouds, then the most obvious answer is not the resurrection, but the Ascension (Acts 1:9-11). Jesus gave instructions to his disciples about their newfound responsibilities as leaders of the fledgling church and was then taken up into heaven on a cloud (Acts 1:9). In keeping with the ambiguity of direction in Daniel’s vision, the angel says to the disciples that Jesus would return in the same manner that he was taken up, suggesting both ascent and descent on the clouds as Daniel’s “one like a son of man.”

b. “Son of man” as Self-Reference

Once Jesus identifies himself as the enthroned “Son of man,” the one who is seated at the right hand of Yahweh, it becomes understandable that, continually referring to himself this way, he would on occasion use this term to refer to himself.³³ The backdrop of Daniel 7 hangs in the background, but does not form the primary referent for sayings of this nature.

Some of the most apparent self-references can be seen in Synoptic parallels where the Gospels record Jesus referring to himself as both “me” (or “I”) and “Son of man.” In one of his sermons Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of me*” (Mt. 5:11). On a different occasion Jesus preaches the same sermon but says, “Blessed are you when men hate you . . . *on account of the Son of man!*” (Lk. 6:22). A similar instance occurs in Caesarea Philippi as Jesus asks his disciples the question about his identity. Both Mark and Luke record Jesus saying, “Who do people/men say that I am?” (Mk. 8:27; Lk. 9:18) whereas Matthew’s Gospel reads, “Who do people say that the Son of man is?” (Mt. 16:13). Clearly Jesus used the term as a way of referring to himself and his disciples sometimes followed this pattern in their writing.

³³Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, p. 292-293 speaks of this as part of Jesus’ “idiolect,” his peculiar way of speaking.

On a couple of situations Jesus explicitly uses the first person pronoun and the term “Son of man” to refer to himself *in the same sentence*. After a long debate with the crowd over the bread miracle Jesus says to the crowd, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats *my flesh* and drinks *my blood* has eternal life” (Jn. 6:53-54). Preparing his disciples for his imminent death he says, “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” (Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26). Jesus later stated it in positive fashion, “whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8). That Jesus is referring to himself and “the Son of man” in the same sentence led scholars a generation ago to believe that Jesus was speaking of himself and someone else, a future coming “Son of man” distinctly separate from Jesus. But that position has largely been abandoned as making little sense of the obvious evidence that Jesus used this term frequently as a self-reference.

Self-references can also be identified by understanding the context in which they are used. Jesus’ encounter with Zaccheus, a man who has lost his way as a faithful Jew, ends with Jesus’ statement, “the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk. 19:10). In response to the “muttering” of the people (a term Luke normally uses to denote those who are disgusted with Jesus’ actions; cf. Lk. 15:2) he states that the salvation of one like Zaccheus is precisely why he was sent. As question arises about Jesus’ relationship to John the Baptist and his ministry Jesus proclaims, “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners”’” (Mt. 11:18-19; Lk. 7:33-34). In context Jesus is clarifying his relationship with John and pointing to the hypocrisy of his critics, in proclaiming John too ascetic and Jesus too lax. The contrast between John and Jesus shows that Jesus is referring to himself as “the Son of man.”

Jesus’ statement about Jonah being a sign to his generation is sometimes confused in its two separate references. Matthew’s record of the conversation suggests that the suffering of Jonah in the fish for 3 days (with subsequent regurgitation!) will be a sign to those who are looking for one (Mt. 12:39-40). This is inherently about his suffering. But Luke’s analysis of the sign of Jonah (which likely arises in a different context in Jesus’ ministry) suggests that as the Gentiles repented at the preaching of the Jewish prophet Jonah, “so will the Son of Man be to this generation” (Lk. 11:29-30). The Gentile connection is there also in Matthew, but in connection with the suffering Son of man motif. The context of Luke suggests that Jesus is using “Son of man” as a self-reference.”

Still other references have no other plausible background than Jesus speaking of himself with the phrase “Son of man.” After healing the man born blind, the man returns to Jesus only to find Jesus asking him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (Jn. 9:35). Jesus later identifies himself as “the one speaking with you” (Jn. 9:37). A less obvious (and albeit debatable) text in this category is Jesus’ statement about the Son of man coming in the midst of the disciples’ evangelistic ministry. Some have taken Jesus’ statement, “you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Mt. 10:23) as a way of referring to the ongoing ministry to the Jewish people. The coming of the Son of man then would refer to the Second Coming, and Jesus’ statement would be seen as a hint that the work of spreading the message about Jesus the Jewish Messiah to his own people will be (or should be) ongoing until that time.³⁴ It may be that in the midst of Jesus’ specific training of the Twelve and their subsequent

³⁴Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 175-176.

ministry in the areas around Galilee that Jesus' refers to their reconvening after the mission. In other words, they will do their evangelistic tours, in whatever small groups they form, and when they catch up with Jesus again, they will not have finished the Jewish mission.³⁵ If this is the correct interpretation, this is both a warning to the urgency of the mission (i.e., "there isn't much time") and a way of referring to Jesus' arrival (in which case the "coming of the Son of Man" is the equivalent of "when I get back").

c. The Suffering of the Enthroned "Son of man"

There is still yet a third category of "Son of man" sayings that center around Jesus' sufferings. The pattern is most clear in Mark's use of the "Son of man" sayings where nearly every reference to "Son of man" involves suffering.³⁶ The vision of Daniel 7 still forms the background, as the one enthroned at Yahweh's right hand is also the one who suffers affliction at the hand of the beasts who come from the sea. Jesus will not suffer at the hands of the Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, or the Greeks, but he will suffer at the hands of the Romans who were antagonized by the Jewish leadership. They too function as beasts in the metaphor, for they also are opposed to God's will revealed in the ministry of Jesus.

We have already noted one of the suffering "Son of man" texts, namely that of the sign of Jonah (Mt. 12:40). Containing a hint of Luke's emphasis upon the offer of salvation to the Gentiles, Matthew's presentation of the sign of Jonah is set in a different context and explicitly mentions the "Son of Man" being in the heart of the earth for three days (and, like Jonah, regurgitated!). One of the earliest uses of the "Son of man" motif in connection with suffering is found in Jesus' earliest ministry in Jerusalem. He says to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up" (Jn. 3:14). This follows on the heels of the enthronement statement that the Son of man came from heaven and will return there (Jn. 3:13). In the second statement crucifixion is plainly in view (i.e., "lifted up"), suggesting that Jesus knows that suffering lies in his fate if he is identified as "the Son of man." Just before he goes to Jerusalem for the last time Jesus tells his disciples that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). The ransom in view is his own life, and the connection between the giving of his life and the use of the phrase "the Son of Man" is simple to understand if the suffering and vindication of Daniel's "one like a son of man" is in view.

Jesus then makes numerous predictions of his imminent death and resurrection before he celebrates his last Passover in Jerusalem. Each prediction of suffering involves the use of the phrase "the Son of man." The first comes on the heels of Peter's confession as Jesus explains to them that "the Son of Man 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" (Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22). When questioned Elijah's coming just prior to the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus gives assent to the teaching. He believes that John the Baptist was the "Elijah" who was to come. And just as they did to "Elijah" (i.e., John) a great deal of harm, so also is it written that "the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected" (Mk. 9:11-13; Mt. 17:10-13). After the healing of a boy with a notoriously difficult demonic presence Jesus pulls his disciples aside and adds confusion to their already foundering faith by saying, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life" (Mt. 17:22-23;

³⁵Though this is not his view, see the discussion of this option in D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, Ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 250-253.

³⁶Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 81-173.

Mk. 9:31; Lk. 9:44). Luke indicates that this teaching eluded them and that they were afraid of the explanation (Lk. 9:45). As Jesus makes his way toward Jerusalem just before Final Week, he instructs his disciples regarding the events about to unfold. “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise” (Mk. 10:33-34; Mt. 20:18-19; Lk. 18:31-33). Once his suffering and resurrection had taken place, the disciples remembered his teaching on this matter in connection with the “Son of man” concept (Lk. 24:7).

Two days before the Passover meal (that we now call the Last Supper) Jesus tells his disciples that his suffering is near: “As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (Mt. 26:2). The Passover meal is celebrated and in the ensuing monologue (the customary re-telling of the Passover by the patriarch of the family) Jesus tells his disciples that the time for the “Son of man’s” predicted suffering is at hand: “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31; cf. Mt. 26:24; Jn. 12:23). The saying sounds like an enthronement text, and on one level it is. But the glorification of the Son in John’s gospel is intricately bound up with his suffering. This is precisely the theme of the vision of Daniel 7.

Jesus is arrested in the Garden, and as Judas leads the guard to arrest him Jesus says, “Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Mk. 14:41; Mt. 26:45). At that moment the events of Daniel 7 that he had been so overtly predicting were coming to fruition in the presence of the disciples there in the Garden. Jesus confronts Judas with the same explicit indication: “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Lk. 22:48). Both of these statements could easily serve as circumlocution, Jesus referring to himself as “Son of man.” But having already identified himself as such throughout his ministry, and having predicted his suffering in terms of the Danielic vision, it seems appropriate to understand Jesus here warning Judas that he is one of the beasts instigating the process of the “Son of man’s” suffering and subsequent vindication.

There is much in Jesus’ speech patterns to suggest his imminent death. Not all of his predictions of suffering stem from the Suffering Servant Song in Isaiah. Many of them do, but predictions of his death and resurrection involving the use of the “Son of man” motif have a natural referent also in the vision of Daniel 7 where the “one like a son of man” is enthroned next to the Ancient of Days even as the beasts rage. Statements of this sort made by Jesus cannot simply be a matter of self-reference (meaning “I”) and suggest something more than enthronement. They bring the suffering and affliction motif present in Daniel’s vision (particularly that of the “little horn” causing suffering for the saints) into the ministry of Jesus to the point that Jesus either identifies himself as the *consummate* faithful Jew (i.e., “if this pattern is true of faithful Jews in Daniel 7, then it is also true of me personally”) or the *one enthroned alongside Yahweh in the midst of suffering* (i.e., “I am the one of whom Daniel 7 speaks”).

“Son of Man” in the New Testament

There are only three references to Jesus as “Son of man” in the rest of New Testament. The first appears on the lips of Stephen, stoned for his faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. He claimed to have seen Jesus having already, at that time, assumed his place at the right hand of the Father. As the indignation of the Jews rises Stephen says, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). His vision (assuming that he actually did

see the risen Jesus there) reveals that by the time of Stephen's execution Jesus had taken his rightful place at Yahweh's right hand.

John twice portrays Jesus as "Son of man" against the backdrop of Daniel's vision. In the introduction to Revelation John wants to remind his readers that Jesus still has authority over the churches he's about to address, and in doing so describes him, not by his proper name (Jesus), but in terms of the "Son of man" motif.

"and 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. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters." (Rev. 1:13-15)

John's description of Jesus here brings in other aspects of Daniel's vision beyond the two verses which describe the "one like a son of man" (Dan. 7:13-14). Earlier in the vision Daniel describes the Ancient of Days as having hair "white like wool" (Dan. 7:9), suggesting that John is now describing Jesus in terms that were used to describe Yahweh. Rather than attributing this to an evolving belief in Jesus' deity, I suggest that this is a natural implication of Daniel's vision: the one at Yahweh's right hand is a true and exact representation of Yahweh, so much so that he shares his authority, glory, power, and rightful worship. Having described Jesus in these terms, the reader then understands why John can attribute to him the authority to judge the earth (Rev. 14:14), a pattern already developing in apocalyptic texts like 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra at this time.

Conclusion

The phrase "Son of man" was, by the evidence, Jesus' most favored self-designation. He refers to himself as "Son of man" more than 80 times in the Gospels. Curiously enough, it was an expression that his earliest followers did not favor for him. They made sure to put it on his lips in the Gospels, but they didn't often refer to him as "Son of man." Paul never refers to him this way in any of his letters, and the expression takes on a totally different nuance in the early church fathers.³⁷ Outside the Gospels, it only shows up three times in the New Testament, all of which refer to the "Son of man's" authority.

The background of the saying, then, seems to be the vision of Daniel 7, particularly the overarching pattern of one suffering torment at the hands of the beasts and then (or simultaneously) vindicated by Yahweh, being escorted to his side, and assisting him in pronouncing judgment and blessing. This theme was picked up by writers outside the NT, and as it developed showed a tendency see this as an individual (Melchizedek at Qumran, Enoch in the *Similitudes*). Jesus' usage of the term is in accordance with these expectations, but is not dependent upon their development. He, like 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, used the background of Daniel's vision to suggest certain qualities about himself, his identity, and his mission. Sometimes it was about being enthroned next to Yahweh, having the authority to make decisions for Him that were left unanswered by the Law. At other times it involved the suffering of the figure in Daniel's vision as a necessary prelude to his vindication and enthronement. But at every point along the way we can see that the vision of Daniel 7 is the background behind the phrase.

³⁷Hurtado, 297, n. 92.

Which brings us full-circle, back to where we began. In the hymn *Fairest Lord Jesus* the phrase “Son of Man” is used to describe his humanity. In juxtaposition with the phrase “Son of God” it communicates two ideas about Jesus: that he was both divine and human. Now that we have examined Jesus’ use of the phrase “Son of man,” we are in a better position to understand that his use of the phrase “Son of man” was seldom about his humanity. Rather it was a subtle statement about his divinity, about his equality with the Father, and about his right to pronounce judgment on a whole host of issues and people.³⁸

³⁸William O. Walker, Jr., “John 1:43-51 and ‘The Son of Man’ in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 56 (1994): 31-42, suggests that John’s use of the phrase “Son of man” is a hybrid term that bridges the gap between the human “son of Joseph” (Jn. 1:45) and the divine “Son of God” (Jn. 1:49).