

THE JOHANNINE SON OF MAN:
ITS APOLOGETIC NATURE IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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CHRISTOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
DECEMBER 11, 2010

Introduction

That the Fourth Gospel¹ differs greatly from the Synoptics is well known. One primary difference between the two is their content. Much of what is found in John does not appear in the Synoptics.² In his article “Let John Be John,” James D. G. Dunn argues that any profitable exegesis of John must be done with John’s historical context in mind.³ If John is not placed within its historical context, argues Dunn, then the gospel is open to misapprehension because it is not “heard in its own terms.”⁴ An appreciation of the content that distinguishes John from the Synoptics, then, begins with an attempt to understand the Gospel of John in its historical context.

According to Dunn, the peculiarity of the Fourth Gospel’s content is bound up with its Christology. Some Christological titles that appear in John are Christ/Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, God, and *Logos*.⁵ The most distinct of these is Son of Man, Jesus’ only self-referential term.⁶ Although it occurs in all of the gospels—referring primarily to “Jesus’ present

1. The terms “Fourth Gospel,” “Gospel of John,” and “John” will be used interchangeably.

2. Craig L. Blomberg, “Gospels (Historical Reliability),” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 296.

3. James D. G. Dunn, “Let John Be John: A Gospel for Its Time,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 294–95. By “historical context,” Dunn means “the cultural and theological situation(s) which called for this complex document to be written” (294).

4. *Ibid.*, 295.

5. These terms are taken from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 23–29. The title Son of David is found in Kärkkäinen but is excluded here because of its absence in John. Frank J. Matera observes five Christological titles in John 1:19–51 alone: Lamb of God, Son of God, Messiah, King of Israel, and Son of Man. *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 219.

6. I. Howard Marshall, “Son of Man,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 776, 781. Marshall observes that the only place where others besides Jesus use the term is in John 12:34, but they do not directly refer to Jesus as the Son of Man.

authority,” “his suffering and resurrection,” and “his glorious coming”⁷— and functions in similar ways, the term Son of Man in John is unique. In its Johannine context, Son of Man is apologetic and connected primarily to Jesus’ preexistence and origins, both in terms of mission and of heavenly dwelling.⁸ The phrase is nuanced in three particular ways: (1) it is employed against the Jewish leaders and their understanding that Jesus is none other than an earthly human being; (2) it is connected to the Prophet-like-Moses motif, which is bound up with the Father’s sending of the Son; and (3) it serves as one of the bases for the Fourth Gospel’s prologue.

This paper will examine the usage of the Son of Man in John as the term pertains to its apologetic thrust. The first point of examination will be the background of the Son of Man. The paper will then cover John’s historical context and its composition. Finally, it will investigate the majority of the uses of Son of Man throughout the Fourth Gospel.

The Background of the Son of Man

The origin of the phrase Son of Man is hardly debated today. The consensus is that the phrase is a direct translation from the Hebrew and/or Aramaic.⁹ If one accepts that Jesus’ primary language was Aramaic, then the appearance of the phrase on Jesus’ lips in all four gospels follows naturally.¹⁰ As important as the origin of the phrase is, equal attention must be given to the development of the Son of Man concept in its Jewish context. On this issue, the

7. Kärkkäinen, 26.

8. The latter point here is picked up in Matera, 232, as well as in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 742.

9. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 726.

10. Dunn argues convincingly that Son of Man was a phrase that Jesus himself spoke. His argument is summed up as follows: (1) Jesus is never addressed directly as the Son of Man by a third party in the gospel narratives or in the worship of the church; (2) the Son of Man phrase never stands apart from the Jesus tradition, and in the tradition, the phrase must have originated with Jesus; and (3) Son of Man is associated with suffering yet it coexists with the unlikely partner of the motif of the kingdom of God. *Jesus Remembered*, 737–739.

twentieth-century scholarship on this issue has been found lacking, so attention will be given to more recent studies.

In *King and Messiah as Son of God*, John J. Collins devotes a chapter to the title Son of Man.¹¹ In this chapter, Collins explores the way the extra-canonical ancient Jewish texts 11QMelchizedek, *The Similitudes of Enoch*, and *4 Ezra* 13 take the Son of Man motif in Daniel 7 and expound on it in creative ways. As I. Howard Marshall notes, the *Similitudes* and *4 Ezra* take Daniel's Son of Man and consider the figure as messianic, in contrast to Daniel 7:13 itself where the one in view is to be understood as "like a man."¹² Of the three, only *4 Ezra* is most relevant to the paper. However, something must be said of the *Similitudes* because of its Son of Man figure that is treated extensively.

The *Similitudes* is a set of parables that is not found with the rest of *1 Enoch* in the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹³ While some have dated the *Similitudes* toward the close of the first century BCE, Collins places them no later than the middle first century CE.¹⁴ These parables allude to Daniel's Son of Man, "initially introduced as one 'whose face was like the appearance of a man,'" but at the same time, appropriate to this figure an importance beyond what is found in Daniel.¹⁵ Most significant is the worship that is given to the Son of Man in the *Similitudes*. Collins's two

11. Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, "Messiah and Son of Man," in *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messiah Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 75–100. The introduction states that the author of this chapter is John J. Collins (xii). The chapter has an abundance of references that one can follow for further study.

12. Marshall, 778.

13. Collins and Collins, 87.

14. Ibid. Even if the *Similitudes* were written within the time that Collins proposes, this is well before the time of the composition of the Fourth Gospel. Furthermore, the likelihood is great that the notion of the Son of Man found in the *Similitudes* existed before it was documented; concepts are often formed in the mind and discussed verbally before entering into written form.

15. Ibid., 89–90.

mentions of this in the article indicate that the worship of the Son of Man is substantial. In the chapter's conclusion, Collins articulates succinctly that "at the least, [such worship] acknowledges the superior status and power of the figure who is honored, in this case the Messiah, Son of Man."¹⁶

The text of *4 Ezra* 13 portrays the Son of Man as "a preexistent, transcendent figure."¹⁷ Two interesting features stand out in this chapter. The first feature of this text is that although the Messiah is preexistent, transcendent, and "to reign gloriously," the Son of Man dies in the end.¹⁸ This resonates to what we find about Jesus in the gospels. The second feature is the extent to which *4 Ezra* aligns itself to the "traditional, Davidic messiah."¹⁹ Additionally, a resurrection motif is also present in text.

The Son of Man concept examined in its Jewish background reveals continuity from Judaism to Christianity. Even though Daniel's "one like a son of man" is probably not a messianic title, its adaptation and close association with the coming Messiah indicates that in Jesus' time, the messianic expectation included one who is known as the Son of Man. Thus, for Jesus to be the Son of Man reveals his messiahship.

The Historical Context of John

As many scholars have recently posited, the composition of John is directly partnered with the historical Johannine situations. Raymond Brown perhaps leads the way here with his

16. Ibid., 100.

17. Ibid., 86–87, 97.

18. William Horbury, "Jewish Messianism and Early Christology," in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 21.

19. Collins and Collins, 97.

The Community of the Beloved Disciple. Other major contributors to this discussion are J. Louis Martyn, Barnabas Lindars, and Paul N. Anderson. Because it is most recent, Anderson's work will be examined here as well.

In his *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Brown presents an updated view of the history of the Johannine community and the development of the Fourth Gospel.²⁰ He sees four different stages of development. The first is the stage of the pre-written gospel. In the second stage, the evangelist pens the Gospel of John. At the third stage, 1 John and 2 John are written against a docetizing group. The final stage is where 3 John and the final redaction of the Gospel takes place.

Brown's second and fourth stages indicate that John is written partly in response to the historical situations. A deeper look into these stages reveals that stages two and four address the issues found in the stages before them—primarily stages one and three, respectively. For instance, the Fourth Gospel, penned in the second stage, not only appears to anticipate a Hellenistic audience, but it also addresses the first stage's "debates with Jews who thought that Johannine Christians were abandoning Jewish monotheism by making a second God out of Jesus (5:18)."²¹ Similarly, the presentation of Jesus eating a fish in John 21, which Brown understands to be a product of the fourth stage, appears to go against the docetism that appears in the third stage.²² While Brown's approach here is more simplistic than in *Community*, the approach appears to be too simplistic. Nevertheless, Brown illustrates the parallel development of the written Gospel with its historical situations.

20. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 374–76.

21. *Ibid.*, 374.

22. *Ibid.*, 376.

In a full-length work that argues for the inclusion of the Fourth Gospel in historical Jesus studies, Anderson notes seven different crises that influence and shape the content of John; in conjunction with these crises, Anderson posits that John was composed in two stages, which is similar to Brown's compositional theory but differs by what is included in each stage.²³

According to Anderson, the historical context of the Johannine situation can be divided into three periods. The first period occurs in Palestine, the second and third are in Asia Minor.²⁴ In the first period (c. 30–70 CE), two situations are present: “rejection of northern perspectives by the Jerusalem-centred authorities,” and a de-emphasis on John the Baptist as the Messiah.²⁵ In the second period (c. 70–85 CE), two situations are found again: the advancement of the messiahship of Jesus against the Jewish synagogues, and the Domitian persecution. The last period (c. 85–100 CE) has three circumstances: Gentile Christians who sought to justify submission to emperor worship, dialogue with “rising institutionalism in the Christian movement,” and finally a “dialectical interaction with other gospel traditions.”²⁶

Within these periods, one can trace the formation and development of the Fourth Gospel. Anderson's understanding here is similar to that of Brown. Anderson locates the composition of the first edition of John in the later part of the second period. In view of the developing Johannine tradition tension with the Jewish leaders and the emphasis on Jesus' messiahship, the purpose of the first edition would be to move the audience “to *receive Jesus* as the Jewish

23. Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 193–99.

24. *Ibid.*, 63.

25. *Ibid.* Anderson's first period is parallel to Brown's first stage.

26. *Ibid.*

Messiah/Christ and Son of God.”²⁷ This invitation is seen in John 20:31 where the Gospel’s purpose is made explicit. The third stage is the period in which the epistles are written and the finalization and circulation of John’s Gospel occurs. The finalization includes the addition of the poetic elements of the Prologue, the incorporation of John 6 between John 5 and John 7, the discourses that include the Holy Spirit (John 15–17), and lastly, the second ending (John 21).²⁸ With the addition of the second ending, a second purpose becomes discernable: to evoke the audience “to *abide in Jesus* as the Son of God.”²⁹

The historical situation and compositional development of John are parallel. This parallelism indicates that the Gospel of John was composed to address certain late first-century crises. If both of these aspects are correct, then an apologetic purpose is discernible from the text and from some of the terms within the text.

Johannine “Son of Man”

To recall, the distinction between the Synoptics’ and John’s usages of Son of Man is noticeable to warrant examination only of John’s use here. Only thirteen occurrences of the term Son of Man appear in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23; 12:34a, 34b; 13:31). Of these thirteen, only eleven refer directly to Jesus; the other two are directed to Jesus in the form of two questions about the Son of Man’s fate and identity (John 12:34a, 34b). According to Kurt Aland,³⁰ the eleven Johannine Son of Man references to Jesus

27. Anderson, introduction to the third printing of *The Christology of the Fourther Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), lxi.

28. *Ibid.*, lxii.

29. *Ibid.*

have no parallel in the Synoptics. The only Johannine ones that have any sort of parallel with the Synoptics are the two questions concerning the Son of Man, but even these parallels are not direct. That the Johannine Jesus' uses of Son of Man have no parallels in the Synoptic gospels is significant for understanding the Gospel of John.

Working from the historical and compositional theories of Anderson, this section will explore the apologetic uses of the Johannine Son of Man phrase in the first edition of John. The two indirect references will be excluded.

First Edition of John

To recall, the first edition of John is all of John, but without the prologue and John 6, John 15–17, and John 21. Thus, the references are John 1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 8:28; 9:35; 13:31. Barnabas Lindars does not see a connection between John 1:51 and Daniel 7.³¹ Continuing along the same line, any of the references could be read in such a way as to avoid any connection with Daniel 7. The stated purpose of the first edition (20:31), however, excludes such a disconnection. As shown earlier, the Son of Man title and the Messiah are made synonymous in John's time.

Assuming Lindars is correct about this particular non-connection, John 1:51 is unique. Except in the conversation between Philip and Nathanael, nothing is said explicitly about Jesus' origins, of which Daniel 7 would inform the audience. The disciple and the disciple-to-be seem to indicate that they believe Jesus to be nothing more than a human being from Nazareth. Jesus' response to Nathaniel and the Son of Man reference indicates to the audience that one will find more to Jesus than simply what his hometown is. Jesus, as the Son of Man, has angels that will

30. Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: English Edition* (New York: American Bible Society, 1982).

31. Barnabas Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man: A Fresh Examination of the Son of Man Sayings in the Gospels in the Light of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 149.

ascend and descend upon him; the implication here is that the Son of Man is more than an angel. Furthermore, the prologue has already given away Jesus' identity as the *Logos*. Thus, John 1:51 appears to address the north-south tensions, contrasting northerners like Philip and his belief against the Jewish leaders of Judea who have a difficult time believing in Jesus.

John 3 appears to have a similar thrust. The Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night to inquire of Jesus. The discussion between them has to do with being born again. The Son of Man phrase is connected with this new birth: whoever believes in the Son of Man will have everlasting life. Although Nicodemus looks as though he genuinely believes in Jesus (3:2), the apologetic is again aimed at the southern Jerusalem leaders. They apparently do not know about the new birth, as seen in Nicodemus' response, nor do they know about Jesus' origins: Jesus is the one who has descended from heaven (3:13). The lifting up of the Son of Man in 3:14 is connected to Jesus' being sent from God to save the world (3:17). Furthermore, John the Baptist's testimony in 3:34 identifies the Son of Man as the one who speaks God's words, and is directly connected to the Prophet-like-Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15–22. Lastly, the Son is "sent into the world," a phrase which is reminiscent of John 1:9.

These themes in John 3 are made more explicit in John 5. The chapter opens with a Sabbath healing, which often is a point of contention between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In John 5:18, the Jews understood Jesus claim to equality with God, and conversely, they reveal their misunderstanding of Jesus' origins, for throughout John they continue to assume Jesus is merely human. Jesus responds with a discourse on his relationship with the Father. As the Son of Man, Jesus is given authority to judge (5:27), and Jesus judges only by what he hears from the Father who sent him (5:30; 36). Toward the end of the discourse, Jesus refers to himself as the one of whom Moses wrote. This again points to the Prophet-like-Moses, particularly because the

word in the Septuagint that is used of the words given to the prophet (Deut. 18:18–19) is the same word that Jesus uses to refer to what he says (John 5:47).

Like John 5:27, John 8:28 occurs in the midst of a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees challenge the claim of Jesus to be the light of the world, accusing him of being his only witness (8:12–13). Jesus counters with an appeal to the witness of the Father (8:14–18). The Pharisees are presented as misunderstanding Jesus' words (8:27). Jesus then refers to himself as the Son of Man who is to be lifted up (8:28a), and who speaks what the Father has given him (8:28b). Additionally, Jesus reveals his heavenly origins (8:23), but because the Pharisees are enraged by Jesus' claims, they continue to mistake him for a normal human being—one who is a Samaritan and demon-possessed (8:48).

As with the other references, John 9:35 is clearly part of the evangelist's apologetics. Jesus is talking with the man that he just healed of blindness. The man had been questioned by the Pharisees and then put out for defending Jesus. Jesus' affirmation of the Pharisees blindness is apologetic, and serves to again highlight the north-south tensions and the advancement of Jesus' messiahship. In this particular scene, Jesus is worshipped (9:38), which is reminiscent of the worship given to the Son of Man in the *Similitudes*. Furthermore, the phrase "come into the world" (9:39) appears to be a point of contact with John 1:9 ("coming into the world").

John 13:31 speaks of the glorification of the Son of Man. It is the last reference in John's first edition. A clear indication of John's apologetic is present here. First, Jesus knows he "came from God and is returning to God" (13:3); this highlights Jesus' heavenly origins and preexistence. Secondly, that the Son of Man "is glorified" appears to recall John 1:14, where the prologue's composer—and probably the community—beheld the *Logos's* glory.

The apologetic nature of the phrase Son of Man is clear from the above passages. In addition, the analysis of the first edition passages has helped to confirm Anderson's historical and compositional theories. The two crises that are most explicitly confirmed are the tensions between the north and the south and the advancement of Jesus' messiahship. These two contexts are most prevalent where the Son of Man phrase appears.

Conclusion

The Son of Man title is significant for New Testament Christology. Its significance is twofold: the phrase is shared with the Synoptics, yet it also differs from them. Further significance is found in the title's apologetic nature in the Fourth Gospel. John's usage of the Son of Man clearly expresses the Gospel's intent to present Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This is accomplished in two ways: (1) the Gospel establishes Jesus messiahship as in line with the first-century Judaic understanding of the Messiah, and demonstrates this continuity between Judaism and Christianity through the Son of Man phrase; and (2) by its nuances of the Son of Man title, the Gospel argues for Jesus' messiahship.

Understanding the apologetic thrust of the Fourth Gospel requires an understanding of the Gospel's historical context and its literary development—the two cannot be separated. The historical context informs the Fourth Gospel's literary development, and the completed literature gives insight into the historical situations of the time. Once these two aspects are grasped, the apologetic nature of specific terms like Son of Man becomes apparent. By situating the John's gospel in its historical context through literary development insights, one can see that the title is not only associated with Daniel, but with Deuteronomy as well.

Because it requires one to understand the apologetic thrust of the Fourth Gospel and thus calls for consideration of historical and composition development, the Son of Man title has significance for historical Jesus studies. In this area, John has long been dismissed and ignored. A reversal of this trend may come from the observation that the Son of Man phrase is found in all the gospels, and is therefore part of the Jesus tradition. The appearance of the title in John more than a just few times indicates that John has access to this tradition; this consideration should give critical scholarship a reason for reassessment of whether John is a legitimate source in historical Jesus studies. No longer should John be overlooked because of its apparent stylistic consistency between Jesus, John the Baptist, and the narrator. Rather, the broad array of the sayings of the Jesus in John must be examined.

Lastly, the Son of Man title encourages one to consider the identity of Jesus. The term “son” indicates a relationship with a father. The term “man” indicates solidarity with humanity. The question has to do with the point that the title Son of Man makes. Dunn’s reminder to let John be John here is appropriate. In light of the entire Gospel, Jesus is human but more than human. Jesus is a prophet but more than a prophet. Jesus is a son but he is the son of the Father. He is glorious because he shares the glory of the Father.

From another angle, Jesus is God, just as the Father is God—therefore, Jesus comes from heaven. Jesus is the Prophet-like-Moses because he is sent from the Father, and so his mission also comes from the Father. As the Son of the Father, Jesus reveals the Father to all who believe. Like the man who once was blind but now sees, to experience who Jesus is and what he does compels the one who believes to worship the Son of Man.

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