IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

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THE SON OF MAN IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: THE MAN OF DESTINY

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The extensive scholarly discussion of the Greek phrase *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, 'the Son of Man', to be found in the Synoptic Gospels predominantly on the lips of Jesus, has not produced any solid consensus about the background of, the development to be traced in, or the sense to be given to, this phrase.[1] The present study consciously builds upon recent studies on the 'Son of Man', but seeks to take the discussion a step further forward. In particular, an approach to the understanding of Jesus' use of Son of Man will be developed on the basis of (i) Aramaic idiom, (ii) the use of Daniel 7:13 in the formulation and expression of Jewish eschatological hopes, and (iii) the success with which various views which have been proposed can be matched to the range of sentiments expressed in terms of the Son of Man idiom in Synoptic Gospel texts.[2]

As a piece of unidiomatic Greek, the phrase which we are investigating is universally recognised to be an over-literal translation of an underlying Semitic idiom. The indefinite Hebrew form *ben adam* ('[a] son of [a] man') is used as God's address to Ezekiel the prophet, e.g. Ezekiel 2:1: 'Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you' (cf. also Dan 8:17). The same form in Psalm 8:4 is set in poetic parallelism with the normal word for 'humankind' (*adam*): 'What is man

that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?' In Psalm 80:17 the parallelism is with the normal word for 'man' (*ish*): 'But let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, the son of man whom thou has made strong for thyself!'

Each of these uses has occasionally been claimed as the starting point for the Synoptic Gospel usage, but this is quite unlikely. A more profitable starting point is the corresponding Aramaic phrase *bar enash*. This is the phrase that occurs in Daniel 7:13: 'I saw in the night visions, and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.' This verse is clearly echoed in the present form of a number of the Synoptic Gospel Son of Man sayings and it will be to this text that we must return later in the discussion.

At this point, however, we must review a number of important studies of the Aramaic phrase which is used in Daniel 7:13, and variants of it; studies which may have a potential for illuminating the Gospel usage. (The phrase occurs with some variations of form, the important ones being the dropping of the initial syllable, *e*, and/or the addition of a suffix syllable, *a*.)

After documenting the use of our phrase to mean 'a human being' and also as an indefinite pronoun ('someone'), Geza Vermes, in a now classic study, [3] goes on to draw attention to a series of Rabbinic texts in which he claims that the phrase functions as a circumlocution for 'I'. He has certainly identified a use of the phrase in which the speaker intends the phrase to refer to himself, and since this appears to be what we have in the Gospel usage, such a discovery is potentially of great importance.

Joachim Jeremias[4] soon protested that Vermes had claimed too much. We do not have a true circumlocution for 'I', since in none of the texts does the expression have the sense 'I (and no other)'.[5] A series of other scholars have raised essentially the same objection, but have recognised in Vermes' study an important foundation for further work.

Joseph Fitzmyer[6] has raised a quite different objection to Vermes' conclusion. Fitzmyer, in fact, accepts Vermes analysis of the idiom in the one case of the Cairo Targum B to Genesis

4:14, but he points to the absence of the initial Aramaic syllable *e* in every instance cited by Vermes in support of the use as a surrogate for 'I'. This contrasts with Fitzmyer's observation that in all the Aramaic evidence prior to the Second Revolt (that is before AD 131/2) the longer form is used. Fitzmyer warns against using what is, therefore, late evidence for identifying first century Aramaic idiom. There is no such dating problem in the case of the use of the idiom to refer generally to 'humanity (anyone)' or indefinitely to 'someone'.[7]

Not everyone has been persuaded that, given the quite scant earlier Aramaic sources, we should entirely rule out later sources for identifying likely first century idiom. This relaxation of criteria seems yet more reasonable if it is not Vermes' unique idiom which is being claimed, but rather a use of one of the more widely established idioms (general or indefinite) in a context where self-reference is involved. Maurice Casey[8] has been able to support this relaxation by pointing to an eighth century BC text (Sefire 3:14-17) in which an indefinite use of *bar enash* involves self-reference ('anyone of us'). Casey, Barnabas Lindars[9] and Richard Bauckham[10] have each developed, on the basis of a critical use of Vermes' results, an understanding of the Aramaic idiom reflected in the Gospel usages.

Casey's argument is that the authentic Son of Man statements are those in which Jesus makes a general statement about humanity, but in a way that invites a specific application of this general truth to himself. Lindars offers a more subtle analysis, and proposes to find a way between Vermes and Casey. He postulates an idiomatic use of the generic article as the key to Vermes' Aramaic texts and, as well, the key to Jesus' use of the Son of Man expression. To understand Lindars we need first to attend to the presence, as was mentioned above, of the suffix syllable *a* in some of the texts adduced by Vermes. Originally this functioned much as the definite article ('the') in English but gradually lost its force so that forms with and without this suffix came to be used interchangeably. Vermes and most other scholars have assumed that this interchangeability was already well advanced in the time of Jesus. Lindars thinks this is not the case, even in the later Rabbinic period, at least with the particular idiomatic use of the generic article with 'Son of Man' which it

is his concern to establish.[11] (By 'the generic article' Lindars means not quite what this expression normally means in grammar, but the use of the suffix to 'denot[e] a particular but unspecified member or group of members of the class' identified by the word or phrase to which the suffix is attached.)[12] The particular idiom which Lindars claims to have identified is the use of this generic article in speech as an indirect means for the speaker to refer to himself. The use of the suffix indicates that the speaker has a specific person in mind, and the context encourages the hearer to identify that person with the speaker himself.

Bauckham considers (rightly in my view) that the texts to which Lindars appeals do not successfully demonstrate the existence of this distinctive idiom, and opts for a much simpler suggestion. Unlike Casey, Bauckham shares Lindars' sensitivity to the presence of the suffix as potentially affecting meaning, though, as we will see, this creates difficulties for his own position. Casey saw Jesus as achieving self-reference by making a general statement about humanity; Bauckham sees Jesus as achieving self-reference by making indefinite statements ('someone'), which he invites his hearers to recognise as pertaining to himself. Bauckham thinks that Jesus will have needed to use the form without suffix to indicate the indefiniteness. The Gospel forms are of course all definite, and this is taken by Bauckham as reflecting the translator's wish specifically to avoid Jesus' original ambiguity.[13]

My own scrutiny of the Aramaic texts used in the discussion suggests that there may indeed be an idiomatic distinction between uses of the phrase with and without the suffix (as maintained in different ways by Lindars, Fitzmyer and Bauckham, but denied by Casey). When a general truth is being expressed the suffix seems to be uniformly present; when an indefinite statement is being made, that is, a statement about an unspecified 'someone', then the suffix is uniformly absent. To the statements of this view only one precision needs to be added. As in other languages, the use of 'someone' in a negative statement produces a statement of general validity: that is, the statement is true of 'nobody'; or, said another way, the negation is true of any and every person. It may be precisely the failure to analyse clearly

the nature of the negative cases that has allowed the view to become so widespread that, already in the New Testament period, no distinction of meaning is achieved by the presence or absence of the suffix.

Both Casey and Bauckham offer us thoroughly believable Aramaic idiom—'everyone, and therefore me'; 'someone, could it be me?'—(though we must not lose sight of Bauckham's need to have the Synoptic Gospel texts slightly distort the original idiom) which seem to have overcome the difficulties identified in the original proposal of Vermes, and to which the objections which may be set against the view of Lindars do not apply; but neither the idiom identified by Casey nor the idiom identified by Bauckham is automatically to be applied to the Gospel uses. The claims of the competing idioms need to be tested by their capacity to best account for the actual texts which we have, and Aramaic idiom alone may not prove adequate to the task of accounting for the Synoptic Gospel phenomena.

We turn now to the possibility that 'Son of Man' was an existing title, taken up in the Synoptic Gospel usage. Rudolph Bultmann[14] made popular the view that there was in the Judaism of Jesus' day an expectation of the coming of a supernatural apocalyptic Son of Man from heaven, and that it is from this background that we must elucidate the Gospel usage of the phrase. This view has suffered steady erosion in more recent scholarship and has almost disappeared from more recent English language scholarship. The view has played a more prominent role in German language scholarship, and has been more persistent there.[15]

There are certainly no examples of an Aramaic use of 'Son of Man' as a title.[16] The claim that it was used as a title is based on more indirect evidence.

i. Three similar phrases are used in 1 Enoch (46:1-4; 48:2; 60:10; 62:5-9; 13, 14; 63:11; 69:27-29; 70:1-4; 71:14), and are applied to a figure who, having been established by God in heaven, is, in due course, revealed by God as eschatological judge and deliverer. While other parts of this composite work are represented by fragmentary texts at Qumran, this section of 1 Enoch (*The Similitudes*) has survived only in late Ethiopic

manuscripts. The absence from Qumran has led some to consider this section of 1 Enoch as composed only in a later period.[17] The arguments here are not decisive, and it is certainly possible to adopt the view that The Similitudes give us a window onto ideas that would have been quite possible in Jesus' environment. The more fundamental question is that of whether this text reflects a titular use of 'Son of Man'. The starting point in 46:1-4 with its clear allusions to Daniel 7:13 and the consistent use of the demonstrative ('this') with the Son of Man references show that the use is not titular.[18] This is now generally recognised. What we do have is an apocalyptic form of eschatological hope which makes use of Daniel 7:13 (but which certainly does not derive its shape centrally from that text); but we do not have a Son of Man title.

ii. 4 Ezra is a Jewish text generally dated around AD 100. It is known mostly from a Latin translation of a Greek translation, of what is probably a Hebrew original.[19] Chapter 13 introduces a dream figure of a man who comes up out of the sea and flies with the clouds of heaven (an obvious link with Daniel 13:7, and more clearly so when set in connection with other dependences on Daniel in chapters 11 and 12). 'Son of Man' would not be impossible in a Semitic original for this text, but is hardly necessary, and may not even be likely.[20] Even if 'Son of Man' were in the original, the translators have not seen this as a technical use, and, therefore, made any attempt to reproduce the idiom in translation. In original or in translation we have an image, based partly on Daniel 7:13, and not a title. This image is interpreted with reference to the messiah who has been referred to earlier in the book.

iii. The third main line of argument for an apocalyptic Son of Man is the claim that only such a Jewish tradition can make sense of the Son of Man references which we find in the Gospel texts.[21] Most of the more recent interpreters do not seem to find a compelling need to postulate such a background.[22]

The case for a titular use of Son of Man in the period of Jesus is far from compelling. But what is quite likely, is the existence

of a tradition of using the Daniel text, interpreted of an individual figure, as an ingredient in eschatological reflection. Given such a setting, the questions we must ask of the Gospel texts are: how much context would be needed to make a Son of Man statement a clear or even a veiled allusion to Daniel 7:13? Do we need more because the possibility of indirect self-reference is also idiomatically to hand? Or do we need less, because the text was playing an active role in contemporary eschatological reflection? We can go no further without attention to the Gospel texts themselves.

As we turn now to the Gospel texts, it may be in order to register the concern that too often the reconstructed Aramaic idiom or Jewish apocalyptic background has become an infallible determinant of the authenticity of the particular Son of Man texts.

The Synoptic Gospel data has traditionally been organised into three groups of texts: first, texts which refer to the time of the earthly ministry of Jesus (Mark 2:10, 28; Luke 7:34; 9:58;11:30[?]; 12:10; 19:10; Matt 10:23[?]); second, texts which focus on the coming suffering of the Son of Man (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41; Luke 11:30[?]; 22:48; Matt 12:40); and finally, texts which refer to a future role of glory for the Son of Man (Mark 8:38; 13:26; 14:62; Luke 12:8, 40; 17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8; 21:36; Matt 10:23[?]; 13:41; 19:28; 24:30, 37; 25:31). This listing is not complete. It does not list parallels; nor does it include some of the more obvious Matthean insertions of the idiom; and there are texts which do not fit the scheme, such as Luke 6:22.

Morna Hooker[23] has rightly warned that this very classification, and even the particular headings used to identify the categories, run the danger of influencing the subsequent study of the texts. For example, all the texts which certainly belong in the second category, except for those set in the immediate context of Jesus' betrayal, actually anticipate, in themselves or their immediate context, resurrection or glory; that is, they all anticipate both suffering and vindication, and so have more in common with the third category than is at first evident. Similarly, Hooker has pointed out that each of the Markan texts in the third category anticipates future glory against a background of

present difficulty, rejection or persecution, and rightly uses the term 'vindication' in connection with them. With more or less appropriateness the same term may be used in connection with a good number of the other texts in the third group.

Other categorisations may shed useful light upon the Son of Man sayings. We may divide between those sayings in which allusion to Daniel 7:13 is clearly present, those in which it is clearly absent and in which the thought expressed does not immediately cohere with the circle of ideas in the first group, and those which, though they do not have a clear allusion to Daniel 7:13, would cohere well with the texts which do have such a definite allusion. Alternatively, we may distinguish sayings which involve a vindication of the Son of Man, from those which involve his vindication or (non-vindication) of others. We could, further, distinguish between sayings which affirm the authority and dignity of the Son of Man and those which speak of his humiliation. Finally, we might want to distinguish texts in which self-reference is unambiguous, from those in which this is not the case (and here we could distinguish between texts in which 'Son of Man' is clearly an individual and those in which corporate reference of some kind needs to be considered as a possibility).

How well do the suggested Aramaic idioms fit the actual 'Son of Man' sayings? Once the texts are isolated from their present context, Casey's view is effective for Luke 12:10, Mark 2:27-28, and 14:21. It is possible for Luke 22:48. For the passion predictions it is attractive, but depends heavily on a quite speculative reconstruction. His handling of Mark 8:38, Luke 7:34 and 9:58 is much less convincing. Bauckham's 'someone' is most effective for Mark 2:10, Luke 7:34, 11:30, and 12:8-9. Despite his desire to include some of the texts which allude to Daniel 7, the presence of such allusion seems at once to give a different role to the 'Son of Man' expression. In other cases, the actual idiom would seem to need to be able to carry more significance in itself than is provided for by Bauckham's approach.

Do the 'Son of Man' sayings which involve a future coming or role of glory presuppose a Jewish apocalyptic titular use of 'Son of Man'? In some of the texts it is certainly true that 'Son of Man' is meant to evoke thoughts of an eschatological figure

of glory. In most cases there is, however, an evocation of Daniel 7 imagery to facilitate this. What is clear is that the 'Son of Man' of Daniel 7 is be understood in a way which is reminiscent of the eschatological views associated with the use of the Daniel 7 material in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra (as discussed above). One particular point to note is the way that 4 Ezra 13:1-4 has the same application of the Daniel imagery of a coming with the clouds of heaven to a role upon the earth as is found in the Gospel tradition (in Daniel the coming is to God; though the transition is eased by the likelihood that the imagery of Daniel 7 involves the human figure coming to an earthly location where temporary thrones have been set up [7:9] in order for God to make a visit and establish the order of affairs that he has in mind). Notably absent in the Gospel texts is the emphasis in 1 Enoch on the prior presence of the human figure in heaven, before being revealed for his earthly role. It seems fair to claim for the Gospel texts a setting in the kind of Jewish thought exemplified in these texts, but not to claim that the Gospel texts reflect a fixed set of well defined expectations, or a titular use of 'Son of Man'.

Is it possible to bring together some kind of indirect self-reference (as in the Aramaic idioms which have been explored) and allusion to Dan 7? One can certainly do this with much greater confidence in the flow of a Gospel text, than when each of the component texts must be constantly under scrutiny as to its authenticity, and each must be treated largely in isolation from its present Gospel context. Nonetheless, a pattern may commend itself as being more fundamental to the texts than can be attributed only to a later redactor.

I start from Bauckham's 'somebody', by noting that if the 'somebody' is both somebody with whom Jesus is potentially to be identified, and at the same time a 'somebody' of significance, whose precise identity remains yet unspecified, then considerably more of the texts begin to fit neatly into an approach like Bauckham's. To modernise, we might think of something like 'the Man of Destiny'. This would do justice to the way in which the 'Son of Man' seems regularly to be assumed to be a figure of authority and dignity, without being identified as any specific dignitary. This would also allow for the possibility of an added

precision being offered at a certain point or in certain contexts. This figure is, whatever else he may also be, the man of Daniel 7. Prior to that further explication, the usage would remain somewhat mysterious, and even with the further explication we are not to understand that the contours of the phrase are exhaustively given in the Daniel 7 imagery, or the traditions associated with it in its contemporary usage. At times there could be real doubt as to the application to Jesus himself. If he was to be taken as referring to himself, then the claim of the idiom would be no more precise than to be a figure of importance. But all the time the idiom would be open to the precision to come, provided in terms of the eschatological role identified in the link to Daniel 7, but not in the sense that 'Son of Man' is now recognised to have been all along a cryptic reference to Daniel 7:13. As is not the case with Bauckham, who needed to find an underlying form without the suffix, the usage suggested here would be better expressed with the form that uses the suffix. This is not exactly an existing Aramaic idiom. It would be a distinct coinage, well rooted in existing Aramaic idiom and in contemporary eschatological reflection, but remembered by the early church as *a characteristic and even distintive diction of Jesus*, in much the way that the anticipatory 'amen' was remembered or the use of 'Abba'.

Notes

1 This essay is based on an excursus which will appear in the second volume of my commentary on the Gospel of Luke: *Luke 9:21-24:53*, WBC 35b, (Waco: Word).

2 There is a distinct set of questions to be raised about the Johannine uses of 'Son of Man', but these will not be addressed in this discussion.

3 'The Use of *br nsh/br nsha* in Jewish Aramaic', Appendix E in M Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 310-328.

4 *New Testament Theology. Part One. The Proclamation of Jesus*, tr. J Bowden (London: SCM, 1971), p. 261 n. 1.

5 It may make this point clearer to cite one of Vermes' examples. 'It is said that Rabbi was buried wrapped in a single sheet, because, he said, "It is not as *br nsh* goes that he will come again." But the

Rabbis say, "As *br nsh* goes, so will he come again"' (from Vermes, p. 323).

6 'The New Testament Title "Son of Man" Philologically Considered', *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), pp. 152-53; 'Another View of the Son of Man Debate', *JSNT*, 4, 1979, pp. 58-64.

7 See examples in Fitzmyer, 'The New Testament Title', p. 148.

8 *JSNT*, 29, 1987, pp. 22-23.

9 *Jesus Son of Man. A Fresh Examination of the Son of Man Sayings in the Gospels in the Light of Recent Research (London: SPCK, 1983).*

10 *JSNT*, 23, 1985, pp. 23-33.

11 Fitzmyer, 'The New Testament Title', p. 154, also thinks that there was still, in the first century, more life than is normally allowed in the distinction between the forms with and without suffix.

12 As clarified in *JSNT*, 23, 1985, pp. 35-36.

13 *JSNT*, 23, 1985, p. 33 n. 23.

14 E.g. *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 5.

15 E.g. U B Müller, *Messias und Menschensohn in Jüdischen Apokalypsen und in der Offenbarung des Johannes* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1972); and the essays in R Pesch and R Schnackenburg, eds., *Jesus und der Menschensohn, Festschrift für A Vogtle* (Freiburg/Besel/Vienna: Herder, 1975).

16 E.g. Vermes, 'Use of *br nsh/br nsha*', p. 327.

17 J T Milik, *The Books of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), has argued that The Similitudes are actually a Christian work composed in Greek.

18 See the argument presented by Casey, *Son of Man*, pp. 99-112.

19 Cf. B Metzger, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed., J Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 519-520.

20 Cf. Casey's argument (*Son of Man*, pp. 124-26) based on the change in term for man in Latin between the vision and the interpretation.

21 See esp. C Colpe, '*Ho Huios tou Anthrōpou*' in *TDNT*, ed,. G Kittel and G Friedrich (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1972), vol. 8, pp. 429, and 433-437.

22 But see A J B Higgins, *The Son of Man in the Teaching of Jesus*, SNTSMS 39 (Cambridge: CUP, 1980).

23 *The Son of Man in Mark. A Study of the background of the term 'Son of Man' and its use in St Mark's Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 80; 'Is the Son of Man problem really insoluble?' in *Text*

and Interpretation. Studies in the New Testament for M Black, eds, E Best and R McL Wilson (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), pp. 159-160.