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The Son of Man: Jesus, Eschatology and Mission

The question of the interpretation of the son of man sayings has been a debated area in contemporary New Testament scholarship. Here Andrew Angel provides an introduction to the arguments some of the key writers in that debate: the classic work of Albert Schweitzer and the contemporary debates between Tom Wright, Andrew Perriman, Maurice Casey and Eddie Adams. In explaining the points at issue and in offering his own proposal, he consistently draws out the implications of different understandings of Jesus' sayings and their eschatology for Christian mission today.

One of the thornier issues in the study of the historical Jesus must be what has become known as the son of man problem. There are many problems associated with the interpretation of the son of man sayings in the synoptic gospels, not least those which are designated apocalyptic. Chief amongst these must be the fact that Jesus appears to have promised that the son of man would appear on clouds before the generation of Jesus' audience passed away (Matt. 24:29-35; Mark 13:24-32; Luke 21:25-33) and that this clearly did not happen. The fact that a similar saying connects the coming of the son of man to the establishment of the kingdom of God (Matt. 16:27-28; Mark 8:38 – 9:1; Luke 9:26-27) suggests that Jesus' proclamation of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God was mistaken. Needless to say, there has been considerable scholarly debate surrounding the subject and as yet no consensus has been reached as to the solution to the problem.¹

Perhaps it is simply that I am not looking in the right places but I rarely find books or articles which examine the son of man sayings of the synoptic Jesus in the context of an exploration of the mission of God in the world today. This may be because of the seemingly intractable nature of many of the problems associated with academic study of the synoptic son of man sayings. In this article, I explore how the synoptic son of man sayings might contribute to the understanding of the nature of mission. After giving some background to the issues in briefly reviewing the ideas of Albert Schweitzer, the focus turns to a recent suggestion from Andrew Perriman which builds on the writings of N.T. Wright. We then turn to some recent scholarly work on the son of man problem by Maurice Casey and Edward Adams which challenges Wright and Perriman before I offer my own tentative suggestion and conclusions.

¹ For surveys of the debate see Beasley-Murray 1993; Burkett 1999; Casey 2007: 1-55.

Albert Schweitzer: The Quest of the Historical Jesus and Reverence for Life

Schweitzer's Jesus

Albert Schweitzer, as both New Testament scholar and Christian missionary, provides us with one model of what the son of man sayings might contribute to Christian mission. He argued that Jesus was an eschatological prophet. Like other Jews of his time, he expected there to be a period of tribulation prior to the arrival of the messiah and the kingdom of God. Like John the Baptist, he expected and proclaimed the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus believed that at the coming of the kingdom he would be revealed as the messiah, which Schweitzer claims is both a supernatural figure and one that Jesus equated with the son of man of Dan. 7:13. On sending his disciples out to proclaim the imminent arrival of the kingdom to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Jesus predicted that the son of man would come before the mission of his disciples to Israel was complete (Matt. 10.23). This did not come to pass. The delay in the pre-messianic tribulation and coming of the son of man led Jesus to the view that God would spare believers the tribulation if Jesus took it on himself. Looking at the death of his cousin, the Baptist, Jesus came to the conclusion that he would undergo a similar fate at the hands of the authorities. Thus, Jesus took this tribulation on himself in his clash with the authorities and subsequent death, hoping that this would force God into bringing about the longed for salvation of the covenant people. This hope also failed to come to pass.²

However, the early Christians became convinced that Jesus had been raised from the dead because some of their number had visions of a risen Jesus. They believed he was in heaven, from whence he would return in glory as the messiah and establish the kingdom of God. So, for example, Stephen sees Jesus in heaven as son of man at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55-56). Moreover, the early Christians believed their experience of speaking in tongues to be a sign that the coming of the kingdom was imminent.³ It was only with Paul that the idea of the kingdom of God as a present reality arose. Realising that the era of the resurrection was one with the era of the kingdom of God, Paul concluded that the kingdom must be in some way present because Jesus has risen from the dead. The kingdom of God was being realized invisibly until the day when it was fully realized and manifested. Thus, the kingdom is both present and yet to come when Jesus hands over the kingdom to God. The Spirit is not simply manifest in signs such as speaking in tongues but in the transformation of those who belong to Christ, not least in their learning to live according to love.⁴ This is the gift of Jesus and Paul to all future generations, the idea of living for the kingdom of God by striving to live a life informed and shaped by love.⁵

Unsurprisingly, Schweitzer was asked many times what the implications were for Christianity today of his understanding of Jesus as this eschatological prophet who mistakenly predicted an imminent arrival of both the son of man and the kingdom of God.⁶ He readily admitted that his Jesus of history was not amenable

2 Schweitzer 1954b: 348-95; Schweitzer 1968: 68-130.

3 Schweitzer 1968: 131-9.

4 Schweitzer 1968: 154-67.

5 Schweitzer 1968: 181-3.

6 Schweitzer 1954a: 52.

to the modern church. The Jesus of history, according to Schweitzer, neither reflects nor supports its theologies or movements. Once properly understood as this great but mistaken eschatological prophet, he disappears back into the historical mists whence he came. However, this is not to say that Jesus means nothing to the contemporary church. A mighty spiritual force flows from him and streams into the present. Those who know Jesus (not as the historical person but as the Christ who is spiritually risen within people who strive for transformation in the world) experience this spirit.⁷ As Schweitzer writes,

He comes to us as One unknown...and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.⁸

Schweitzer was not only content to believe that both Jesus and Paul had been mistaken about the coming of the son of man and the arrival kingdom of God. He also believed that the honesty which belongs to the spirit of Jesus required Christians to acknowledge this fact.⁹

Schweitzer and mission today

On Schweitzer's view, mission becomes striving to follow the risen Christ and to discover afresh what it means to live the life of love to which Jesus called his disciples. It required hard thought as to how the essential teaching of Jesus might be expressed in the contemporary world as Christianity was in danger of becoming less spiritual and more irrelevant. For Schweitzer, the essential teaching of Jesus was his ethical and spiritual teaching which had to be stripped of its eschatological garb. He believed that this led to teaching a Reverence for Life which combined a mystical appreciation of all life forms and the place of humanity within the universe with an ethical attitude which sought to treasure, protect and nurture all life. This he believed to be the universalization of the love command that Jesus taught. He thought that if only Christianity could capture the vision of Reverence for Life, it might once again become a force for good in the world.¹⁰

Many found, and many will continue to find, disturbing the view that Jesus and Paul were both wrong about the return of Christ but that they allowed for great strides forward in the history of ideas from which modern Christianity can benefit. After all, the doctrines of the second coming of Christ, the judgment and the resurrection are credal. As Dale Allison comments,

I myself do not know what to make of the eschatological Jesus. I am, for theological reasons, unedified by the thought that, in a matter so seemingly crucial, a lie has been walking around for two thousand years while the truth has only recently put on its shoes. But there it is.¹¹

Many have disagreed with Schweitzer's presentation of Jesus as an eschatological prophet who was mistaken in his proclamation of the kingdom. For example, Aramaists (in an argument we return to below) have argued that it would not have been possible for Jesus to say anything in Aramaic that could be translated 'the

7 Schweitzer 1981: 397-401.

8 Schweitzer 1981: 401.

9 Schweitzer 1954a: 54-9.

10 Schweitzer 1954a: 194-231.

11 Allison 1994: 668.

son of man' and could have specified one particular son of man.¹² Thus Jesus would not have uttered the words in Matt. 10.23 – a lynchpin for Schweitzer's thesis. Nevertheless, his thesis, albeit in modified form, lives on.¹³

Tom Wright and Andrew Perriman: On the Other Side of the Parousia

Wright's Historical Jesus

One scholar who accepts Schweitzer's contention that Jesus was an eschatological prophet, but who would radically rewrite what that means in terms of both the meaning of his message and the accuracy of his prophecy, is Tom Wright. In the face of studies that suggest that by the Aramaic phrase we translate as 'the son of man', *bar (e)nash(a)*, the historical Jesus could have meant little more than 'someone in my position', Wright asserts that it must have been possible for Jesus to refer to a particular son of man in contemporary Aramaic and that that he did refer specifically to the son of man of Dan. 7:13.¹⁴

However, unlike Schweitzer, Wright argues that the language of apocalyptic did not refer to the end of the space-time universe in Jewish writings of the first century AD. Rather, this language was a complex metaphor-system which referred to events within history which were of such importance and magnitude that today we might refer to them as 'cataclysmic' or 'earth-shattering'. This apocalyptic language was used because it could spell out the theological significance of such events.¹⁵

Wright thus argues that the historical Jesus never predicted the end of the space-time universe in his apocalyptic son of man sayings. His saying in Mark 13:24-27 and parallels is not, as it has traditionally been thought, about the second coming. Rather, Jesus uses the picture of the son of man of Daniel 7:9-14 to make a statement about the defeat of the enemies of the true people of God and the vindication of the true people of God themselves. Originally, in Daniel, this had referred to the defeat of the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes who was oppressing those Jews who were faithful to Yahweh and the Torah. When the one like a son of man enters heaven it is to receive vindication from the Ancient of Days and this refers to the liberation of the Jews faithful to Yahweh from the oppression of Antiochus. Jesus reuses the motif of Dan. 7:13 to depict the event in which the followers of Jesus would be rescued and the enemies of Jesus punished. Wright argues from the context of the son of man saying in Mark 13.24-27 and parallels (the prediction of the destruction of the temple and the disciples' question as to when this would take place) that the event at which God would vindicate Jesus and his followers would be the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁶ This event did take place in AD 70, within the timeframe of a generation specified in Mark 13:30.

Wright is aware that he runs the risk of drawing criticism from two fronts: from the godly who might accuse him of trying to re-interpret a clear reference to the second coming and from the scholarly who might accuse him of trying to avoid the difficulties of Schweitzer's conclusions. However, like Schweitzer, Wright maintains that his interest is in historical truth.¹⁷ Incidentally, the suggestion that

12 See, for example, Lindars 1983; Vermes 1967.

13 For example, Allison 1994.

14 Wright 1996: 517-8. Studies suggesting that the historical Jesus must have meant something like 'someone in my position' include Casey 2007; Lindars 1983; Vermes 1967.

15 Wright 1992: 280-338.

16 Wright 1996: 339-67, 510-9.

17 Wright 1996: 342.

he is in any way arguing that Scripture does not refer to the second coming of Jesus would be unfair given that he sees a clear reference to this in Acts 1:11.¹⁸ Nonetheless, this does not mean that others have not drawn this conclusion on the basis of Wright's work.

Perriman on Jesus' past parousia and our present hope and mission

Andrew Perriman accepts both that the historical Jesus could use an Aramaic term meaning 'the son of man' and that he used it to refer to the son of man of Dan 7:13. Using the work of Wright as a foundation, he suggests that Jesus spoke of the son of man to refer to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem which took place in AD 70.¹⁹ He argues further that the New Testament, particularly the writings of Paul and the book of Revelation, look towards the parousia of the Lord. He interprets this as the fall of the Roman empire and the elevation of Christ to a position of universal authority above Caesar, an event the contours of which are less sharply defined. However, given the end of Roman religion and power, this event now lies in the past. Perriman thus argues that the parousia of the Lord is a past event. The coming of the son of man preached by Jesus and the parousia of the Lord written about by Paul constitute the first two eschatological horizons of the New Testament. The third is the recreation of the heavens and the earth. As the first two horizons now lie in the past, the Christian hope now consists in waiting upon the recreation of the heavens and the earth. Perriman argues that this ought to lead to significant shifts in the focus of evangelical theology and praxis. He writes

At the risk of gross oversimplification, I would suggest that, whether we realize it or not, we are currently engaged in the development of a new paradigm by which the post-Christendom, post-modern people of God may embody the re-creational initiative which is at the heart of what we call – somewhat inappropriately – 'mission'. This cannot be done simply by attempting to imitate the New Testament church: we are in a proper sense *beyond that*.²⁰

Perriman suggests that terms such as 'gospel', 'salvation', 'redemption', 'evangelism' and 'the kingdom of God' – terms he acknowledges to be the common currency of mission in evangelical circles – are not terms that apply to the church throughout the ages but are locked into a particular moment in the history of the church.²¹ They belong to the story of Jesus proclaiming repentance to the Jewish nation in the light of the imminent judgment upon the nation which would take the shape of Roman invasion and the destruction of the temple. This found fulfilment in AD 70. Repentance in the light of imminent judgment therefore ought no longer to be the starting point for any Christian theology. Beyond the first two horizons of New Testament eschatology, the focus of the Christian hope is now the recreation of the heavens and the earth and so the starting point of Christian eschatology and missiology ought to be this hope of the new creation.

The primary story of the faith was, Perriman argues, never the story of eschatology and judgment. That story is the story of Abraham. Before Abraham, Genesis 1-11 pictures humanity disobeying God and so refusing to live in the blessing which God intended for it. God called Abraham to become the new humanity and so provides a way in which it would be possible to give to all

¹⁸ Wright 2001: 256.

¹⁹ Perriman 2005: 50-66.

²⁰ Perriman 2007: 6.

²¹ Perriman 2007: 4-5.

humanity the blessing for which it was created.²² This is the story which underpins the story of eschatology and judgment and the one which the church now needs to recover given that the story of eschatology and judgment has ended.²³

This means that contemporary Christian mission ought to be founded on the original story, the story of God's response to a creation in crisis. The mission of God is to create a new and authentic humanity and so the mission of the church is to be a community seeking to become this alternative and authentic humanity.²⁴ Just as the people of Abraham are a dispersed people, so the church exists as 'multiple prophetic experiments in the reinstatement of creation'.²⁵ Each seeks to tell the story of recreation within its context in an authentic manner, embodying the concrete outworking of compassion and justice, respect and thankfulness for the natural environment, a passion for creativity in the image of the creative God.²⁶

Perriman notes that these are the values of the emerging church and argues that such congregations, in their openness to others and their focus on discovering the wholeness of all creation in Christ, are living out the calling of the church in the post-biblical generations who are faithfully awaiting the completion of the new creation.²⁷

Maurice Casey and Eddie Adams: Questions that Demand an Answer

The theses of both Wright and Perriman are, however, open to criticism in relation both to what Jesus said and what he meant by what he said.

Casey and first-century Aramaic

Firstly, Wright and Perriman fail to account for how Jesus might have said something like 'the son of man' in Aramaic. Maurice Casey has recently defended the idea that it would have been impossible for the historical Jesus to say anything like 'the son of man' in Aramaic, the language he almost certainly spoke.²⁸ Casey argues that the Aramaic term, *bar (e)nash(a)* could not have been used with the meaning 'the son of man' at the time of Jesus.

Before looking at his argument, a word about the use of brackets is in order. If a noun is *indefinite*, Aramaic leaves it in the *absolute* state, e.g. *enash*, 'a man'. To make a noun *definite*, Aramaic puts it in the *emphatic* state by adding an aleph, transliterated 'a', to the end of the noun, i.e. *enasha?*, 'the man'. By the fourth century AD, the difference between these two states had broken down, so both *bar enasha??* and *bar enash* mean 'a son of man' (*bar* being the Aramaic for son – or, indeed, *bar nash* or *bar nasha*).²⁹ There was no difference in meaning. The brackets around the aleph at the end of the phrase thus reflect the fact that in fourth century Aramaic the phrase might occur with or without a final aleph.

²² Perriman 2007: 12-14.

²³ Perriman 2007: 141-4.

²⁴ Perriman 2007: 148-9.

²⁵ Perriman 2007: 150.

²⁶ Perriman 2007: 150-1.

²⁷ Perriman 2005: 15; Perriman 2007: 1-2, 152-4.

²⁸ Casey 1997.

²⁹ In later Aramaic the aleph, transliterated *e*, was often dropped from the front of *enash*, leaving it as *nash*. So the phrase in which we are interested might occur as *bar nash*, *bar nasha*, *bar enash* or *bar enasha*. For convenience, scholars use brackets around the relevant vowels, *(e)nash(a)* to save writing out all the possible permutations of this phrase when discussing it.

It is clear that by the fourth century AD the difference between the absolute and emphatic states had broken down. What is not so clear is exactly when this happened. At the time of Jesus, the difference between the states was in the process of breaking down. This makes it very difficult to state with any certainty whether or not the emphatic *bar (e)nasha* could have meant ‘the son of man’ and been used to refer to a particular son of man, like the one in Dan. 7:13.

Casey notes that in ordinary Aramaic, *bar (e)nash(a)* was simply a general term for ‘humankind’. However, he argues that a speaker might use the term *bar (e)nash(a)* to refer to himself, or to himself and some other people, the context making clear who was in mind. As evidence for his case, he cites thirty-four texts in which this term is used in this idiomatic manner. In some it appears in the absolute state and in others it appears in the emphatic state.³⁰ Of particular interest is the fact that the term does not seem to occur in Aramaic in the emphatic state with the meaning ‘the son of man’ and referring to a particular person. Casey therefore draws the conclusion that the historical Jesus would not have used the phrase in this way. Rather, given a number of sayings in the synoptic gospels that seem to presuppose the idiomatic usage (e.g. Mark 2:27-28; 9:11-13; 10:45; 14:21), it appears that Jesus used the Aramaic term to refer to himself or himself and others.³¹

When this Aramaic phrase of Jesus was translated into Greek, the translators faced a problem: were they to translate it as a *definite* (i.e. *ho huios tou anthropou*, the son of man) or as an *indefinite* noun (i.e. *huios anthropou*, a son of man)? Casey argues that it was best to translate it as a definite because the Aramaic idiom referred to one person, namely Jesus. It was therefore more appropriate to translate with a definite noun because this would make the reference to Jesus clear. This also had the effect of giving the early church a christological title which is what it needed.³²

Wright had defended his argument from the findings of Aramaists by claiming that what it was possible for the early church to say in Aramaic, it was possible for Jesus to say – assuming that the early church had been able to use some Aramaic phrase that was equivalent to ‘the son of man’.³³ The point that Casey makes is that the evidence suggests that it was not possible for *anyone* to use a phrase in Aramaic that would mean ‘the son of man’ and refer to a particular son of man. The church was only able to do this when it translated the Aramaic phrase into Greek. As Jesus spoke Aramaic, and not Greek, he would have not used any Aramaic phrase to refer to a particular son of man and so would not have spoken of the son of man of Dan. 7:13. If this is so, then the key plank in Wright’s argument has been withdrawn and, given that his thesis stands or falls with the assumption that Jesus spoke of the coming of the son of man, his thesis falls. And if his thesis falls, so does Perriman’s which is built upon it.

Adams and interpreting language of catastrophe

Secondly, a further, distinct challenge to Wright and Perriman comes from Edward Adams who has recently attacked the view that at the time of Jesus the language of cosmic catastrophe referred to events within history. He notes that Wright assumes that Jesus uses such language to refer to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in Mark 13:24-27 and parallels. He sets out to demonstrate that Wright

³⁰ Casey 2007: 67-81.

³¹ Casey 2007: 116-35.

³² Casey 2007: 261-2.

³³ Wright 1996: 518, citing Caird 1980: 139.

is mistaken by surveying the way in which this language is used within Judaism at the time of Jesus.³⁴ He surveys the language of cosmic catastrophe in a number of texts from the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. He concludes that the language of cosmic catastrophe is used to describe the events of the eschaton and events leading up to the eschaton rather than events of major religious and political importance within history.³⁵

Adams examines Mark 13:24-27 within the framework of his survey of cosmic catastrophe language in post-biblical Judaism. He argues that the language of the darkening of the sun and the moon and of the stars falling from heaven (in vv 24-27) does not refer to the fall of the Jerusalem temple but to cosmic disturbances which signify the end of time. These disturbances accompany the coming of the son of man, the Parousia or second coming (in vv 26-27). The disciples are told to watch for 'these things' because when they happen they will know that 'he is near' (v 29). So when Mark 13:30 talks of 'all these things' happening before that generation passes away, it refers to the things that the disciples must watch for, i.e. the cosmic disturbances. Logically, 'these things' cannot include the coming of the son of man itself as that event will take place when the disciples have seen 'these things' already. Adams therefore argues that no timeframe is set for the coming of the son of man, but only for the cosmic disturbances.³⁶ In the light of the unknown time and hour of the coming of the son of man, Christians are called to live lives of faithful discipleship and mission.³⁷ If Adams has interpreted the language of cosmic catastrophe correctly, then Wright and Perriman are again mistaken in their interpretation of the son of man sayings of Jesus and Perriman's eschatology for an emerging church is demonstrably wrong.

Implications for today

Both Casey and Adams comment on the relevance of their theses for contemporary people. Casey suggests that it would be good if the supernatural veneer with which the Christian church has covered Jesus were peeled off so that Christianity might become rather more like the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, and thus more of an option for honest and well-informed people.³⁸ Adams is careful to underline that holding the view that the second coming will include the replacement of the cosmos with a new cosmic order ought not to encourage Christians to be irresponsible ecologically.³⁹ However, neither builds a theology of mission out of their readings of the son of man sayings that they study. Nonetheless, if either scholar is correct, there are implications for Christian mission. Casey leaves us with a non-divine Jesus from whose teachings we might like to select the aspects we deem most relevant to our lives.⁴⁰ Adams, on the other hand, defends the plausibility of the reading of Mark 13:24-27 (and parallels) as a prediction of the Parousia (but without a timeframe for its fulfilment) which underpins the demand that Christians live lives of faithful discipleship and mission in the light of this future hope.⁴¹

34 Adams 2007: 5-10.

35 Adams 2007: 52-100.

36 Adams 2007: 147-64.

37 Adams 2007: 164-6.

38 Casey 1991: 178.

39 Adams 2007: 257-9.

40 Casey 1991: 178.

41 Adams 2007: 164-166,180-181.

Two Criticisms and a Tentative Suggestion

Having looked at the implications of the arguments of Casey and Adams on the son of man problem both for the work of Wright and Perriman and for Christian mission, I would like to offer some criticism of their work and a tentative suggestion of my own.

Critique of Casey

Casey has put forward a strong and well argued case. It rests on the assumption that the best way of translating the Aramaic term *bar (e)nash(a)* into Greek was to make it definite. However, this was unnecessary. There was a Greek equivalent to the Aramaic term in *huios anthropou*, 'a son of man'. This can be found in various texts from the time of Jesus (*Testament of Joseph* 2.5; Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 1.283; Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20.2; *Joseph and Asenenth* 18.9; *Epistle of Barnabas* 12.10). In these texts, the Greek *huios anthropou* has exactly the same meaning as the Aramaic term does in the only contemporary Aramaic texts to use the term (1QapGen 21.13; 11QTgJob 9.9; 26.2-3; Dan 7.13) and in the earlier text Sefire III.14-17 (c.750 BC).

Given that this is the case, it seems difficult to believe that the bilingual translators of the gospel traditions would have chosen not to use *huios anthropou*, unless they had a good reason for not using it. I would suggest that they did have a good reason for not doing this. This reason was that they believed that the Aramaic traditions were using *bar (e)nasha* in the emphatic state to refer to a particular son of man. Thus, with Wright and against Casey, I think it quite possible that Jesus used an Aramaic emphatic state to refer to the one like a son of man of Dan. 7:13.

Critique of Adams

Turning to Adams, he does not explore the background to theophanic language sufficiently carefully. A key difficulty in his argument is that he sets out only to review texts which use the language of cosmic catastrophe to refer to the eschaton. In setting up his argument, he writes

For the purpose of clarifying the most natural sense of such language in New Testament times, we must look to instances of it in eschatological contexts in post-biblical Jewish apocalyptic and related writings.⁴²

By limiting his study to such texts, he limits himself to the examination of material that will support his conclusion and he excludes from his study the examination of material which will contradict his conclusion. There are, in fact, Jewish texts of the period which use this kind of cosmic catastrophe language to refer to events within history. Josephus uses this language to describe battles in which God gave the victory to Israel (Josephus, *Antiquities* 5.60; 5.205; 6.27).⁴³ A number of texts also use this language of the giving of the Torah on Sinai (Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.80; 4 Ezra 3:17-19; Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 11.5; 23.10; 32.7-8).⁴⁴ It is therefore simply not correct to state that the language of cosmic catastrophe was used to refer exclusively to the eschaton in the period and so to assume that it is used in this way in Mark 13:24-27.

⁴² Adams 2007: 51.

⁴³ See Angel 2006: 184-8.

⁴⁴ Angel 2006: 166-82.

Furthermore, Adams' reading of Mark 13:30 is not convincing. On his own argument, the son of man (or the Parousia) is near after the disciples see the cosmic signs which will take place before that generation passes away.⁴⁵ However, Mark notes that the son of man (or possibly the Parousia) is not only 'near' but 'at the very gates'. This surely suggests an imminent arrival. Therefore Mark clearly states that the arrival of the son of man is imminent after certain events have taken place before the generation of Jesus' disciples pass away. It is difficult not to read this as setting a timeframe for the Parousia as within a generation or immediately afterwards. Adams' defence of the traditional reading does not provide protection against the charge of a failed apocalyptic prophecy.

A tentative proposal

It is, of course, notoriously easy to criticise and much harder to provide a solution to a problem and so I should like to offer a tentative suggestion of my own. There is plenty of evidence, *contra* Adams, that the kind of language used in Mark 13:24-27 is found in many contemporary texts and was often used at the time of Jesus to describe events within history.⁴⁶ I think it reasonable to suggest that Jesus used this language to refer to the destruction of the temple in Mark 13:24-27, not least because these verses form part of a discourse answering a question of when the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed and because they re-use prophecies against evil cities (Isa. 13:10; 34:4).⁴⁷ The event describes the judgment of God upon Jerusalem.

This reading of the eschatological discourse seems to explain the parallels in Matt 24:1-44 and Luke 21:5-36, not to mention the coming of the son of man in Matt. 10:23 and Luke 17:22-37. However, it does not explain the judgment scene involving the son of man in Matt. 25:31-46 because those gathered for judgment are all the gentile nations (Matt. 25:32). Thus, this event of judgment in Matthew 25 clearly cannot be identified with the event which marks the judgment of God on Jerusalem, namely the destruction of the temple. This would suggest that in Matthew Jesus envisages first a judgment on Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1-44) and then a judgment on the gentiles (Matt. 25:31-46). This would fit the fact that in Matthew Jesus inaugurates first a mission to Israel (Matt. 10:5-42) in which mission to the gentiles is prohibited (Matt. 10:5-6) and then a mission to the gentiles (Matt. 28:18-20).

My tentative suggestion is that this reflects the teaching of Jesus who expected first a judgment on Israel, which was to take place within a generation, and later a judgement on the gentiles which was bound by no such timescale. A similar tradition seems to be found in Rom. 2:5-11. If this suggestion holds water, then the church is living in a period after the judgment on Jerusalem but prior to the judgment on the gentiles and, against Perriman, part of its mission is to proclaim repentance to all nations in the light of this future judgment.

Conclusion

In all likelihood, debate about the meaning and historicity of the son of man sayings of Jesus will rumble on for some time to come. The problems, if not intractable, are certainly difficult and it would be dishonest to suggest that they have been solved.

⁴⁵ Adams 2007: 164-165.

⁴⁶ Angel 2006: 191-200.

⁴⁷ Angel 2006: 125-39; Hatina 1996.

At the heart of the problem lie the very important questions of whether Jesus predicted the final judgment within the lifetime of his hearers and whether there is any basis for the hope that Christ will come again. The answers we give to these questions will, in turn, affect our understanding of Christian mission. The answers we give will not be easy if we are to take seriously both scholarly examination of the historical issues and the idea that our lives are committed to following the Jesus who really lived on earth (rather than basing our lives on either of the somewhat docetic figures of the risen Christ of early Christian experience or the Christ of narrative readings of the text). As we seek to understand better the meaning of Jesus' sayings and how they inform our ministry and mission, it almost goes without saying that we need to engage honestly with biblical criticism and to minister with the humility appropriate to partial knowledge. Indeed, all this leads me to suggest – although with a wry smile – that this seemingly intractable problem might well be given to encourage our growth in humility as we seek to engage faithfully in ministry and mission.

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