

THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE  
TITLE 'THE SON OF MAN' AS USED IN  
THE GOSPELS<sup>1</sup>

One of the most puzzling and intriguing features of the Gospels is the constant recurrence of the title 'The Son of Man' as the characteristic self-designation of Jesus. Yet, strange and even enigmatical as it is to Christian ears, an examination of all pertinent texts leads to the conviction that, for some at least of those amongst whom Jesus lived, this title must have held some special significance.

*Use of the Title in the Gospels*

This must surely have been so in the case of the scribe who wished to follow Jesus (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58), of Nathanael (John 1:51), Nicodemus (John 3:13, 14), Zaccheus (Luke 19:10), and of the 'man born blind' (John 9:35). And when addressing the Scribes, Pharisees and other representatives of 'official Jewry'—'the Jews' of St John—Our Lord seems to have taken special pains to insist that it was the Son of Man who had power to forgive sins<sup>2</sup>; the Son of Man who was Lord of the Sabbath<sup>3</sup>; that it was the flesh and blood of the Son of Man that they must eat and drink if they would live (John 6:53); that it was the Son of Man who would be seen enthroned at the right hand of the Almighty.<sup>4</sup>

When, after the Transfiguration, Jesus devoted himself in earnest to the instruction and formation of his Apostles and disciples, it was always the Son of Man who must be delivered up and crucified<sup>5</sup>; the Son of Man who must depart and return at an hour they did not expect.<sup>6</sup> They had been told that they were to consider themselves blessed should the world hate them because of the Son of Man (Luke 6:22): now they were told that they would one day be acknowledged by this same Son of Man before the angels of God (Luke 12:8).

In view of this insistence, it is not unduly surprising that Jesus should have greeted his betrayer with the words: 'Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?' (Luke 22:48)—or that St Stephen, arraigned before the Sanhedrin, should have described his vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God in these words: 'At this very

<sup>1</sup> Paper read to members of the Catholic Biblical Association of Australia, Sydney, 2 April 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 5:24; Mark 2:10; Matt. 9:6

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 17:22; 20:18; 26:2; Mark 8:31, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 26:24; 24:44

moment, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand' (Acts 7:56).

All in all, this title 'The Son of Man' is used sixty-nine times by Jesus Christ in the Gospels.<sup>1</sup> In every case he claims it as a personal title, proper and exclusive to himself. 'No title applied to him in these Gospels is so widely and so richly attested.'<sup>2</sup>

### *Origin of this Title*

At first sight it might seem easy to trace the origin of this title. We might expect that the Old Testament would provide the answer. But far from giving us a solution, an investigation of the Old Testament only serves to magnify the problem. The title never occurs in the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, and the exact equivalent in Hebrew or Aramaic is nowhere to be found in the original text.<sup>3</sup> An examination of classical Greek literature, and of Hebrew and Aramaic non-Biblical writings proves equally fruitless.

One source remains: the apocryphal books of the Old Testament period. An important work in this class of literature is the *Book of Enoch*. This is a veritable 'hotchpotch' of religious writings by numerous anonymous authors,<sup>4</sup> and in it there are to be found three

<sup>1</sup> N.B.—It is also used twice by 'the crowd' in John 12:34. This title occurs in only one other place in the New Testament: Acts 7:56

<sup>2</sup> V. Taylor, *The Names of Jesus*, London 1954, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> The title we are discussing reads *ho huios tou anthrōpou*: in the LXX it is not uncommon to find the expressions *huios anthrōpou*, *huiōi anthrōpōn*, *huiōi tou anthrōpou* and even *hoi huiōi tōn anthrōpōn*. The Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents to the NT title would be *ben ha'adam*, *bar 'anašā*, but these are never found. The expressions *ben 'adam* and *bar 'enaš* (Dan. 7:13), *benē 'adam*, *benē ha'adam* and *benē 'anašā* do occur, but in no single instance do these terms bear any resemblance to a specific title. According to its original and customary usage, the typically semitic collective term *ben 'adam* is employed in the broadest possible sense to designate any member of the human race, i.e. a subject having a true human nature and possessing all the qualities peculiar to and proper to such a nature (W. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, Baltimore 1946, p. 291). Indeed, it connotes and even emphasises a certain weakness, fragility and inferiority inherent in that nature. The expression is usually found in the plural form, generally with the article in prose, but without it in poetry, designating the human race considered as a whole, or else a determined number of its members. When found in the singular, it is used in an indeterminate sense and in poetic literature. Of itself, this expression never signifies an individual son, properly so called, born of an individual man. The words *'iš* and *geber* are normally used to signify individual men.

<sup>4</sup> The final editor of the Book, as we know it, divided it into five sections. This arbitrary division was made, it would seem, in imitation of the Pentateuch. The sections are now generally given titles as follows: 'Liber angelologicus' (cc. 1-36), 'Liber parabolarum' (cc. 37-71), 'Liber astronomicus' (cc. 72-82), 'Liber visionum historicarum' (cc. 83-90), and 'Liber exhortationum' (cc. 91-105). Various 'Noachic fragments' are joined to these sections. The only unity which can be attributed to the Book viewed as a whole derives from the fact that Enoch is consistently introduced as the human instrument through whom the revelation allegedly contained therein was given to man.

parables. These are obviously the work of a single author distinct from those responsible for the remainder of the collection<sup>1</sup>; they have a unity proper to themselves and hence have become known as the 'Book of Parables' or the 'Book of the Messiah.' Indeed, this section is 'an essentially Messianic document. . . . In it the personal Messiah stands in the centre of the Messianic age.'<sup>2</sup>

'The Son of Man' in the Parables of Enoch

The first parable (cc. 37-44) announces that when 'the Righteous One' (38:2)—'the Elect One of righteousness and of faith' (39:6a)—shall appear, the sinners shall be punished and driven from the face of the earth. 'Righteousness shall prevail in his days, and the righteous and elect shall be without number before Him for ever and ever' (39:6b).

In the second parable (cc. 45-57), the office of 'the Elect One' now presented as 'the Son of Man,' is enlarged upon. The following texts are significant<sup>3</sup>:

46:1-5 And there I saw One who had a head of days,  
And His head was white like wool,  
And with Him was another being whose countenance had the appearance  
of a man,  
And his face was full of graciousness, like one of the holy angels.

And I asked the angel who went with me and showed me all the hidden things, concerning that Son of Man, who he was, and whence he was, (and) why he went with the Head of Days? And he answered and said unto me:

This is the Son of Man who hath righteousness,  
With whom dwelleth righteousness,  
And who revealeth all the treasures of that which is hidden,  
Because the Lord of Spirits hath chosen him,

And whose lot hath the pre-eminence before the Lord of Spirits in uprightness for ever.

And this Son of Man whom thou hast seen  
Shall raise up the kings and the mighty from their seats,  
(And the strong from their thrones)  
And shall loosen the reins of the strong,  
And break the teeth of the sinners.  
(And he shall put down the kings from their thrones and kingdoms)  
Because they do not extol and praise Him,  
Nor humbly acknowledge whence the kingdom was bestowed upon them. . . .

<sup>1</sup> R. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1913, p. 169. Cf. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, Oxford 1912, pp. 65ff. for a more detailed treatment, giving reasons.

<sup>2</sup> J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, London 1956, p. 289

<sup>3</sup> The text quoted herein is that of Charles (op. cit.)

‘ THE SON OF MAN ’ AS USED IN THE GOSPELS

48:2-7 And at that hour that Son of Man was named  
In the presence of the Lord of Spirits,  
And his name before the Head of Days.

Yea, before the sun and the signs were created,  
Before the stars of the heaven were made,  
His name was named before the Lord of Spirits.

He shall be a staff to the righteous whereon to stay themselves and  
not fall,  
And he shall be the light of the Gentiles,  
And the hope of those who are troubled of heart.

All who dwell on earth shall fall down and worship before him,  
And will praise and bless and celebrate with song the Lord of Spirits.

And for this reason hath he been chosen and hidden before Him,  
Before the creation of the world and for evermore.

And the wisdom of the Lord of Spirits hath revealed him to the holy and  
righteous ;  
For he hath preserved the lot of the righteous,  
Because they have hated and despised this world of unrighteousness,  
And have hated all its works and ways in the name of the Lord of Spirits :  
For in his name they are saved,  
And according to his good pleasure hath it been in regard to their life.

49:2-4 . . . the Elect One standeth before the Lord of Spirits,  
And his glory is for ever and ever,  
And his might unto all generations.

And in him dwells the spirit of wisdom,  
And the spirit which gives insight,  
And the spirit of understanding and of might,  
And the spirit of those who have fallen asleep in righteousness.

And he shall judge the secret things,  
And none shall be able to utter a lying word before him ;  
For he is the Elect One before the Lord of Spirits according to His good  
pleasure.

51:2-3 . . . in those days the Elect One shall arise,  
And he shall choose the righteous and holy from among them :  
For the day has drawn nigh that they should be saved.

And the Elect One shall in those days sit on My throne,  
And his mouth shall pour forth all the secrets of wisdom and counsel :  
For the Lord of Spirits hath given (them) to him and hath glorified him.

The third parable (cc. 58-71) continues in the same vein, repeating and developing the thoughts expressed in the verses already quoted. The following passage, however, is significant in that it expressly identifies ‘ the Elect One ’ and ‘ the Son of Man ’ :

‘ THE SON OF MAN ’ AS USED IN THE GOSPELS

62:1-2, 5 And thus the Lord commanded the kings and the mighty and the exalted,  
and those who dwell on the earth, and said :  
‘ Open your eyes and lift up your horns if ye are able to recognise the  
Elect One.’

And the Lord of Spirits seated him on the throne of His glory,  
And the spirit of righteousness was poured out upon him,  
And the word of his mouth slays all the sinners,  
And all the unrighteous are destroyed from before his face. . . .

And one portion of them shall look on the other,  
And they shall be terrified,  
And they shall be downcast of countenance,  
And pain shall seize them  
When they see that Son of Man  
Sitting on the throne of his glory.

Obviously this ‘ Son of Man ’ is no mere man ! Nor is he an angel, for he is clearly distinguished therefrom. It must be concluded that he is a supernatural being, for he is superior to all creatures, even angels. It would appear, moreover, that he is quasi-divine : his origin is heavenly, he pre-existed all creation, his advent is a kind of revelation, and he enjoys certain transcendental prerogatives as Supreme Judge seated on the throne of God, the just being saved in his name.

*Date of Composition of the Parables of Enoch*

The date of composition of this ‘ Book of the Messiah ’ now assumes a very special importance. The critics of the last century, especially those of the German school, were at one in asserting that it must have been written by a Christian author subsequent to A.D. 70. It is now generally admitted that the internal evidence alone shows beyond all reasonable doubt that the parables were written ‘ at the beginning of the first century B.C.’<sup>1</sup>

Forced to admit the Jewish origin of the Book, the more recent critics have adopted a new approach. Some<sup>2</sup> asserted that the term ‘ Son of Man ’ should be expunged completely from the text as the interpolation of an unknown Christian copyist. But as this title has no special significance for the Christian, for whom Christ is rather the Son of God, the Saviour, the Redeemer and Mediator, this suggestion

<sup>1</sup> J. Bonsirven, *La Bible Apocryphe*, Paris 1953, p. 46. Cf. J. Frey in *Dictionnaire de la Bible (Supplément)*, I, 360ff., for a more detailed treatment. It seems very probable that the parables were written during the period 95-76 B.C. by one of the leaders of the Pharisees then suffering so intensely at the hands of the ‘ slayer of the just,’ Alexander Jannaeus.

<sup>2</sup> J. Campbell, ‘ The Origin and Meaning of the term “ Son of Man ”,’ *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLVIII (1947), pp. 145-55

does not merit serious consideration.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that, while the term 'The Son of Man' is used constantly by Jesus and claimed consistently as a title peculiar to and proper to himself (when speaking to Jews!), it is never predicated of him by the Evangelists themselves, nor by the Fathers, nor by the early ecclesiastical writers.<sup>2</sup>

One final question remains: What was the origin of this expression which is obviously a specific title in the Book of the Messiah?

It is true that some elements of the doctrine contained in this book are discernible in the writings of the early Prophets, e.g. Is. 9:6, and Micah 5:1. But the full doctrine and the title proposed in these parables were undoubtedly evolved from consideration of the vision of Dan. 7:13-14.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'A Christian interpolator would have found here ample opportunity to refer to the sufferings of the crucified Christ—but there is no mention of them' (J. Klausner, *op. cit.*, p. 292).

<sup>2</sup> Nils Messel (*Der Menschensohn in den Bilderreden des Henoch*, Giessen 1922), however, proposed a difficulty which still influences the opinions of present-day scholars. It is now generally agreed that the 'Book of the Messiah' was written originally in Hebrew and translated, at an early date, into Greek. But, as no copy in Hebrew or Greek is now extant, we are dependent upon the Ethiopic version, of which some twenty-nine copies are known to exist today. Messel was able to point out that, in this Ethiopic text, not one but three expressions are proposed as translations of the alleged original *ben ha'adam*. These are *walda sab'e* ('*filius hominis*'), *walda b'esi* ('*filius viri*') and *walda eguela ema heya'u* ('*filius prolis matris viventium*'). Subsequent research, particularly that of Sjöberg (*Der Menschensohn in aethiopischen Henochbuch*, Lund 1946), has reduced this objection to its true proportions. Briefly, it should be noted (a) that there is little, if any, appreciable difference between '*filius hominis*' and '*filius viri*,' i.e. between *walda sab'e* and *walda b'esi*; (b) the expression *walda eguela ema heya'u* ('*filius prolis matris viventium*') only occurs in cc. 62-71, i.e. in the third parable, and perhaps in only one family of texts. It has been suggested that its presence could, perhaps, be explained as a result of the influence of the unusual Syriac expression *bar adar* which was used, apparently, in the earliest Syriac Gospel texts as an equivalent of *ho huios tou anthrōpou*; (c) the expression *walda sab'e* is admitted by all (even Messel) as authentic where it occurs; (d) in the passages quoted above, *walda sab'e* is the equivalent of the 'Son of Man' whenever it occurs, except for 62:5, where *walda b'esi* appears. Thus, in the texts cited, texts which contain the substance of the Messianic doctrine of the parables, it is logical to conclude that the original Hebrew expression must have been *ben ha'adam*, and the Greek translation *ho huios tou anthrōpou*. Indeed, the following words of Klausner seem perfectly reasonable: 'Whole chapters of the Book of Enoch prove beyond doubt that . . . "Son of Man" . . . was a regular title given to the Messiah before the time of Jesus' (*Jesus of Nazareth*, London 1947, p. 256).

<sup>3</sup> The context of Daniel suggests that the 'Son of Man' is to be understood in a collective sense. But, 'read apart from the framework in which it stands, it is capable of being presented as an individual of supernatural dignity and power' (V. Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, London 1955, p. 22).

Thus, assuming that the author of the parables had been accustomed to meditate on Daniel, it seems perfectly feasible that the doctrine and title proposed in the parables, should have resulted from his consideration of the vision of Dan. 7:13-14. In this regard it is interesting to note that 'on the basis of the number and nature of the fragments (found at Qumran), it seems that the most popular books of the OT were the Pentateuch (especially Deuteronomy), the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel' (Roland E. Murphy, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible*, Westminster, Md, 1856, p. 26).

From this same book we learn that 'the contents of the caves show that several

*Significance of Title as Used by Jesus*

The significance of this title as used by Jesus Christ now becomes apparent. Evolved and developed, it would seem, during the first half of the first century B.C., the messianic title 'Son of Man' must certainly have been known at the time of Christ by some at least of those who had frequented the schools of the Scribes and Pharisees. Hence it was that he could use this title from the beginning of his Ministry, and without explanation.

Why did he choose this title in preference to all others then currently employed to designate the Messiah? Taylor has suggested that 'it is the name chosen by him, in conscious preference, we must suppose, to the more colourless 'Christos' and the human and nationalistic title 'Son of David.' It expresses the idea of lordship, of rule over the Messianic community, and its associations are supernatural. Strange to the Gentile world, it embodies his conception of Messiahship, as the more familiar names could not do, and perhaps in particular the idea of a concealed Messiahship yet to be manifested in action. . . . And yet, even so the Son of Man concept is not wide and rich enough to express what Jesus believes concerning his person and work. That is why he interprets the idea in terms of the Suffering Servant, teaches that the Son of Man must suffer, and in this persuasion goes deliberately to Jerusalem to die. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Klausner is of the opinion that Christ 'used it expressly for the reason that while in Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, it had no exceptional meaning in the ears of the ordinary people, it had, for the more enlightened hearers, an added significance, as in Ezekiel and Daniel. By means of this title he partially divulged his Messiahship but more frequently concealed it. On the one hand, he hinted that he was a simple, ordinary man (the sense conveyed by the word in everyday Aramaic speech); and on the other hand he hinted that he too was a prophet like Ezekiel, who also had used the word. And, still further, he hinted that he was the 'Son of Man' in the sense in which his contemporaries understood the expression in the Book of Daniel, and as it was explained in the Book of Enoch—the 'Son of Man' who was to come 'with the clouds of heaven' and approach 'the Ancient of

<sup>1</sup> V. Taylor, *The Names of Jesus*, London 1954, p. 33

---

of the so-called apocryphal books of this period were held in some honour by the people of Qumran: the Book of Enoch, Jubilees, the Testament of Levi and others' (p. 25). Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the community of Qumran were acquainted with the title 'The Son of Man.' If this be so, why should not others, especially those who had frequented the schools of the Scribes and Pharisees, have had a like interest in and knowledge of these texts?

days,' and who was to possess the kingdom of the King-Messiah, the everlasting kingdom.'<sup>1</sup>

What are we to conclude? It seems certain that the title 'Son of Man' represented the most ideal, spiritual and transcendental concept of the Messiah to which Judaism ever attained. From the information available to us, it would not be legitimate to conclude that this title was known and used by all of Jesus' contemporaries. Nevertheless, too much should not be inferred from the question asked by the crowd in John 12:34: 'Who is this Son of Man?' It should be noted that, prior to asking this question they had argued: 'We have been taught by the Law that the Messiah is to remain forever. How, then, can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?' Their difficulty would seem to have been in reconciling their concept of the Messiah, 'The Son of Man,' with the teaching of Christ on this subject. After all, how can a King-Messiah be a Suffering Servant? Being, as it were, a 'neutral' title when compared with others more commonly used to designate the Messiah, it was not coloured by any materialistic or political nuance. To those who might hear it for the first time, its very mysteriousness would be an attraction in itself.

Hence it seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus found it the best suited of all titles then current for use as a starting point from which to endeavour to bring his audience, through systematic expansion and ennobling of this term, to the realisation that the Messiah was to be both Glorious Judge and Suffering Servant. And so, step by step, he would lead men to the conviction that he who was 'The Son of Man' was truly the Son of God.

IAN L. SANDERS, C.M.

*St Joseph's Seminary*  
*Eastwood*  
*N.S.W.*

<sup>1</sup> J. Klausner, *op. cit.*, p. 257