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What Does “Son of Man” Mean?

There has been much scholarly debate concerning the meaning of the phrase “son of man (humanity)” which is also written as “Son of Man” when it is used as a virtual title that Jesus applies to himself.

The phrase is used in the Old Testament (primarily the books of Psalms, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and is applied to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, usually in a context of self-reference: Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” but others do not generally refer to him this way. Paul and other letter writers do not use the phrase except when quoting Old Testament Scripture.

The *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* has tried to sort out the confusion by indicating the phrase can be used with three meanings:

1. *As an idiomatic way of speaking of a human, or of humanity collectively.* The Hebrew phrase in question is *ben ’adam*, which the NRSV often translates as “mortal(s).” Sometimes, the phrase *ben ’adam* is used in synonymous parallelism with “human being,” as when the psalmist asks, “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps. 8:4); note that in Hebrew the word translated “mortals” is a singular expression (literally, “the son of man”), though it does seem to be used here in a collective sense (to refer to human in general). Likewise, in Psalm 80:17 the

reference to “the one whom you made strong” would be literally translated “the son of man whom you made strong.” In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is repeatedly addressed by God or by an angelic messenger as “son of man” (NRSV: “mortal”; e.g., Ezek. 2:1, 6).

The point is probably to suggest the prophet’s humanity (weakness and finitude) as contrasted with the divine majesty. In Daniel 7:13, the meaning of the phrase, “one like a son of man” (NRSV: “one like a human being”) is disputed. It may mean (as the NRSV suggests) that the symbol for God’s faithful people is a human, whereas the symbols for the previous kingdoms described by Daniel were beasts and monsters. Some scholars, however, would interpret the phrase in this verse in line with 2 below.

2. *As an angelic, supernatural figure often associated with apocalyptic scenarios of judgment.* This sense of the phrase is clearly evident in some Hellenistic Jewish writings of the Second Temple period (e.g., *1 Enoch* 37–91; *2 Esd.* 13). The son of man figures as God’s agent of judgment and salvation. Many scholars would read the references to the coming of the son of man in Daniel in this light:

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [lit. “one like a son of man”] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was

presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13–14)

It is disputed, however, whether the angelic concept of “son of man” had developed before the New Testament period; if it had not, then the “son of man” reference here would be understood along the lines of 1 above.

3. *When spelled Son of Man (in the NRSV and other English Bibles), a title for Jesus employed especially in the Synoptic Gospels.* With one exception (Acts 7:56) and apart from the citation of Psalm 8:4 in Hebrews 2:6 (NRSV, “mortals”) and an allusion to Daniel 7:13 in Revelation 1:13, the term is used exclusively by Jesus in reference to himself. It is customary to classify the references in the Synoptic Gospels under three headings: (1) sayings in which Jesus refers to his present activity during his earthly ministry (e.g., Matt. 8:20; 11:19; Mark 2:10, 28; 10:45); (2) sayings in which Jesus refers to his impending passion and/or resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:33; 10:45); and (3) sayings in which he refers to his future activity as Judge and Savior (e.g., Mark 8:38; cf. Luke 12:8; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 17:22–30).

In John's Gospel, "Son of Man" as a self-referent for Jesus has a more varied usage, the most characteristic being those sayings that speak of the exaltation of the Son of Man, an expression that makes a double allusion to the cross and resurrection/ascension (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34). John 1:51 looks like an original parousia saying (third category above) transferred to the present ministry (first category). John 6:53 speaks of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man and John 9:35 of believing in the Son of Man. Most interpreters would concur that some of the uses by Jesus were intended to identify him with the apocalyptic deliverer that had come to be associated with the "son of man" image in apocalyptic Jewish writings (and in the interpretation of Dan. 7:13–14 current in first-century-CE apocalyptic Jewish circles).

Article by Reginald Fuller, adapted by Mark Allan Powell, from *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. rev. ed., ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 984.

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