



Jesus as Son of Man

Dr Paul Tonson Ph D (Deakin) © 28 January 2024

We are resuming a focus on the figure and teaching of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. as presented in scripture, without attending to historical questions.

Paul's method has been to elaborate the names given to Jesus, firstly Lord, Rabbi and Master reflecting his regard as a wise and charismatic man among his fellows. Secondly, we considered the names Messiah and Son of God that have taken on a particular and unique construction but even in the NT demonstrate more universal meanings. Today we come to the name Jesus apparently frequently used for himself: Son of Man.

JESUS AS SON OF MAN

My point of departure for these addresses has been my own torturous journey finding that the conventional gospel of sin and salvation through a dying rising saviour is for me no gospel at all, BUT that the NT offers a different window upon Jesus as an exemplary figure whose self-giving Way I can take and whose vision and empowerment I also can share.

In the gospel the term Son of Man is in a different category from names such as Messiah, Son of God, or later, Saviour. No-one is looking for such a figure and the name does not become the subject of theological debate.

Nevertheless, **this term is the most important name for Jesus** because of its frequency and because it points to Jesus' self-understanding in relation to humanity.¹ By comparison, the evangelists recorded Jesus' caution about being called messiah (Mk 8:30) or in any way divine (Mk 9:9; 10:18) or even a healer in his own right (Mk 7:36).

The Hebrew Bible shows that Jesus found this name in the Psalms eg 8:4: 'What is man, that you are mindful of him? and the son of man, that you visit him?' The poetic doublet shows how the term refers to a human being in general.

However, in the book of Ezekiel from the 7th century, Son of Man becomes a name in the mouth of GOD for the prophet, no less than 93 times in oracles referring to Judah in exile in the sixth century BCE. Moreover, Ezekiel contains many echoes of Jesus' experience and teaching:

12:2 "Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house that has eyes to see but sees not; they have ears to hear but hear not: for they are a rebellious house."

17:2 "Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a **parable** unto the house of Israel"

Other texts refer to the vine, to a sharp sword, and to the suffering of the prophet.

[There is a different Son of Man tradition in Daniel 7:13 that refers to a divine figure of cosmic judgement: "... one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven..." This vision is quoted by Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin. Gospel texts referring to the apocalyptic Son of Man are separate from those foreshadowing death and resurrection and from the exemplary instances. They reflect a later more developed theology.]

Son of Man in the Synoptic Gospels - seven examples

Let us recall seven examples from familiar stories in which Jesus refers to Son of Man. I am exploring how in each case references to the Son of Man that sound like an individual actually refer to humanity generally.

In the story of the paralysed man let down through the roof, his healing is presented as proof "that the Son of Man has **authority on earth to forgive sins...**" (Mark 2:1-12). This reflects a modern viewpoint that a sense of forgiveness does have an impact on bodily health. On the surface it seems to give Jesus a special

¹ Son of Man appears 14 times in Mark, 11 in John and about twice as often in each of Matthew and Luke, more than twice as frequent as the other names we have examined.

role. However, elsewhere Jesus' asserts that the authority to forgive belongs to every human being, as in the Lord's Prayer and in John 20:23 [whose sins you forgive...].

The text: **'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve** [and give his life a ransom for many]' (10:45), parallels Jesus' exhortation to his disciples to become great by serving, not by lording over others. He himself did not care to be called "Lord, Lord..." (Matt 7:21f).

When his followers fail to observe fasting, Jesus speaks metaphorically of the need for freedom while the bridegroom is present. 'The sabbath was made for man' not the reverse. It is hard to imagine a more concise expression of Jesus' alternative viewpoint. This is followed by the assertion: **'The Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath'** (Mark 2:28). However, since the Sabbath was made for man, Son of Man here cannot refer to Jesus uniquely. Rather it implies that everyone must take responsibility as the Lord of their own pattern of rest, mindfulness and spiritual awareness.

To my mind, these texts reflect Jesus as one who taught the democratization of faith and spirituality. His parable asserts that the marginalized will be brought to the banquet regardless of religious orthodoxies that have excluded them. In Mark's son of man texts, **Jesus is an exemplary figure**, demonstrating forgiveness, service, and a non-legalistic attitude to religion.

The same is true of four further references found only in Matthew and Luke. For example:

"The Son of man has **nowhere to lay his head**" (Matt. 8:20). "The Son of man **came eating and drinking** ... a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt 11:18f). "For as Jonah was **a sign** to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of man be to this generation" (Matt 12:40).

In a further text, Jesus distinguished the Son of Man and therefore himself from the divine. "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven" (Matt 12:32). This is in harmony with the warning Jesus gave to a man who addressed him as good: "only GOD is good" (Mar 10:18).

In one sense, the title 'Son of Man' is like a patronymic, signifying humanity generally rather than the uniqueness of one person, just as in Genesis and Isaiah, the name Jacob represents Israel as a people. By using this title, Jesus affirms his mission, to be an exemplary role for others to **follow**.

The invitation to follow is explicitly the message at the beginning of the gospels as Jesus calls disciples: "Follow Me" (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13f). The narrative does not reference any ethical teaching nor any claims about the person of Jesus to justify or explain this call. In this text, Mark presents a lens for the reader of the gospel, to discover what following Jesus may mean and to decide whether to take that path.

[**Son of Man as a suffering servant** who will be rejected and die is the focus of seven Marcan texts. These texts do not call followers of Jesus to give up their lives but they do challenge them to not be ashamed of their faith in him (8:38). Three of these texts include a reassurance that the Son will rise on the third day, which may be more a commentary from Mark than from Jesus. We may not know whether Jesus predicted his resurrection but we do know that he foreshadowed a life of self-giving, even unto death. Moreover we have the metaphor of resurrection as an enduring sign of hope even against the inevitability of death.]

Exemplary elements in the Johannine account of Jesus

In the last session we noted the challenge presented by John's gospel to reconcile contrasting views of Jesus. On the one hand he is the divine logos, the only begotten Son of the Father. On the other hand he envisions that his oneness with the Father also will be the experience of his followers. Like Jesus they also will minister in the power of the Spirit, and they will do even greater things. John's gospel has the strongest affirmations of the exemplary Jesus.

[Note that the word logos occurs forty times in John, mostly where Jesus refers to "my word". It seems that the idea of Jesus as the divine logos is less about his own divine nature and more a metaphor for his role as an authoritative and enlightening teacher.]

Pauline theology

To complete our picture, we turn to the Letters of Paul, for whom Jesus is first and last (Messiah) Christ, risen from the dead, and a unique mediator between humanity and the divine (1 Tim 2:5). A distinct element of Paul's theology is his conception of a mystical union with Christ who is also the son of God "who gave his life for me" (Gal. 2:20).

It seems the exemplary Jesus and the democratization of faith are also implicit in Paul. He has a radical sense of the universal, embracing Jew and Greek, male and female, bond and free. He also presents the empowered human life within his Christology. But for Paul, this possibility arises only for those who are "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28; 5:22ff). Three examples:

Paul like Jesus affirms human experience of the divine in thought and action: "...it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12ff). Humans can possess the 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5). They can attain "the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

Paul also echoes the most universal elements of the Johannine tradition in his declaration: "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom 8:14). He affirms the spirituality of each individual: "When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:16).

A mindful and responsible individual journey of faith is found in Rom 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect".

Paul is in tune with the early story of the call of the disciples when he identifies himself as 'a follower of The Way' rather than as a Christian.²

What is the Good News for us to find in Jesus?

An exemplary understanding of Jesus with an affirmation that one may emulate his life to the full is good news for a contemporary reader in a post-enlightenment world. If discovering Jesus I am inspired by his charisma, his wisdom, his compassion, his dedication and his courage, I will leave my nets and follow his Way of self-giving with the conviction I can attain to the standard he has set.

This contrasts markedly with conventional teaching that Christians can make it only on the coat tails of Jesus as a mediator and vicarious saviour, that we cannot know God without him, we are guilty until he forgives, and we are on the way to hell until he ransoms us. There is for me no good news in this. Rather it means a sad resignation to something far less than the glory of a mature human being.³

To identify as people of The Way of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth is to return to the heart of the Torah, which means teaching about living. It is to believe with Jeremiah that the Torah can be internalized ['written on our hearts'] and we can all share the spiritual wisdom we need ['know the Lord'] without another to teach us (Jer 31:31-34).

This democratization of religion is surely the enduring and transforming 'power of the gospel' that the Christian tradition holds to share with all.

Jesus' exemplary life and death, not his resurrection, draws me.

Meditation / Discussion Questions:-

Are you inspired to emulate aspects of Jesus's life?

If so, in what ways?

² People of the Way, in Acts 18:24-28; 19:8-10, 23 (from Luke); 22:1-5; 24:10-23 (in Paul's speeches); Christians are named only twice: Acts 11:25f, 26:24-29;

³ This conception of discipleship parallels the reading of Gen 19: