

8. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'SON OF MAN'

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His royal authority is everlasting, it won't pass away, and his kingdom will never be destroyed

(Dan 7:13-14).

Jesus was the name given by Mary to her baby, meaning 'the Lord saves'. Earlier we saw that Jesus was also known as the Messiah, or the Greek form Christ, meaning 'the anointed one'. In this chapter, we will look at another title that Jesus used for himself: the Son of Man. This is a messianic title taken from Daniel 7, and it is used only by Jesus, except for Acts 7:56 where Stephen, at his martyrdom, saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, which immediately reminded him of the Son of Man vision in Daniel, and so he called Jesus the Son of Man. Jesus used the title to speak of himself in the third person, enabling him to speak about the Messiah without explicitly claiming to be the Messiah himself. He used the 'Kingdom of God' expression in the same evasive way. Unfortunately, the church at times has missed the significance of Jesus being the Jewish Messiah. 'Christ' has become a personal name, and Jesus' future reign on Earth gets interpreted in a vague, heavenly or spiritual, non-literal manner. He is no longer the eagerly awaited Jewish king. The terms 'Messiah', 'Kingdom of God', and 'Son of Man' are pervasive throughout the Gospels and cannot be ignored. To do so is to miss the point of why the Gospels were written (Jn 20:31).

‘Son of Man’ itself is a vague expression. What could ‘Son of Man’ refer to? It is Jesus’ most common title for himself and used 81 times in the Gospels. It is obvious from Mark 8:38 that Jesus used the title to refer to himself, and he meant it as a messianic title.

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes with the holy angels in his Father’s glory.

And again in Matthew 16:13, 15

When Jesus arrived in the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples: Who do people say the Son of Man is? ... He asked them: As for you, who do you say I am?”

The Greek word for ‘man’ is ἄνθρωπος which means human being rather than a male. John Piper, in a paper called “Why is Jesus called “Son of Man”? makes the following observations: “Let me give a common understanding and then a more sophisticated historical understanding. The common understanding is that “Son of God” implies his deity—which it does—and that ‘Son of Man’ implies his humanity, which it does too. He was a son of man, that is, a human being. And he is the Son of God, in that he has always existed as the Eternally Begotten One who comes forth from the Father forever. He always has, and he always will. He is the Second Person of the Trinity with all the divine nature fully in him. The more sophisticated and important historical insight is that the term ‘Son of Man’ doesn’t merely align him with humanity. It is taken from Daniel 7 to which chapter John alludes frequently and where the Son of Man is a very exalted figure. It was Jesus’ favorite self-designation.”

Jesus didn’t refer to himself often as the Son of God, but rather, as the Son of Man. He said, for example, that even the Son of Man didn’t come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people (Mk 10:45). He frequently called himself the Son of Man. The reason he did so was that ‘a son of man’ is a phrase that could be interpreted as ‘a human being’ and would cause no offense. But those with ears to hear could hear Daniel 7, in which he was claiming a very exalted role in the history of redemption. And he meant to do it.

Jesus’ conversation with the man born blind is an example (Jn 9). After healing him, he heard that he had been thrown out of the synagogue.

Jesus knew that he must have expressed some faith in him, so he sought him out and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man? The man asked who he was so that he might believe in him. He had already told the Pharisees that he believed Jesus was a prophet, but he didn't know more than that. When Jesus told him that he was speaking to the Son of Man, the man born blind immediately believed in him, called him Lord, and worshipped him.

Jesus was very subtle in that he revealed his identity to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, but he didn't reveal it so blatantly that everybody would come and make him king. He had to be very careful in disclosing his identity. He performed miracles and then told people not to tell anybody. He would make claims that were explicit in certain settings and implicit in others. Only when he was on trial for his life, and the Jewish high priest asked him in Matthew 26:63 if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, did Jesus respond, saying: You have said so. And I'm telling you that from now on you'll see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven. He confessed his deity and messiahship before the Jewish Sanhedrin even though he knew he would be crucified for it.

Jesus is the king in the kingdom of God, but in the Gospels, he did not want to openly declare that he was a king, until he did so before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Mt 27:11). Rather he spoke about the Son of Man, a veiled way of talking about himself.

The Son of Man in Daniel 7

The messianic prophecy from which this title sprang is certainly Daniel 7:13-14 quoted above. This prophecy is about a world ruler whose kingdom, given to him by God, would last forever. By using the title 'son of man', Jesus was claiming to be this exalted person. The Greek expression is definite, he was *the* Son of Man, the son of man that people had heard about, the one spoken about by Daniel, the one whom many interpreted to be the Messiah. This is a remarkable passage because it refers to a human being to whom God gives great authority, a person whom people of every language would serve and worship, and God gives the sovereignty of all the kingdoms under heaven to his people, the saints of the high places to govern (Dan 7:27, Mt 5:3, 5).

The context of Daniel 7 is apocalyptic. Daniel describes four beasts interpreted as kingdoms, and especially the last beast, which by comparing Daniel 7:25 with Revelation 13:5-7 can be identified as the Antichrist and his kingdom. In the interpretation of the dream, the saints of the high places (Eph 2:6) would receive the kingdom and possess it forever – yes, forever and ever (Dan 7:18). Then the angel interpreting the vision for Daniel said that the court would convene remove the authority of the fourth beast; it would be annulled and destroyed forever. Then the kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations of the earth would be given to the people who are the saints of the high places. Their kingdom will endure forever, and all authorities will serve and obey them (Dan 7:26-27).

By designating himself as the Son of Man, Jesus identified himself as the coming Messiah who would rule the world with his saints. Compare this passage from Daniel with what John saw in Revelation 20. John saw thrones, and those who sat on them were given authority to judge. He saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and the word of God, namely those who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and reigned with the Messiah for a thousand years (Rev 20:4).

The Coming of the Son of Man in Matthew

Daniel saw a vision of one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. This is an indefinite expression because it is the first mention of this prophecy. In the NT, this phrase from Daniel 7 becomes definite and messianic. The following seven verses from Matthew are all in the context of the Messiah, Jesus, coming down from heaven to rule the Earth at the end of the age.

Mt 13:41, 43 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they'll gather from *his kingdom* those who cause others to sin (stumblingblocks) and those who practice lawlessness. Then the righteous will shine like the sun (cf. Dan 12:3) *in their Father's kingdom*. The harvest at the end of the age begins with the Great Tribulation, a time when a good percentage of the world's unbelieving population will be killed through warfare and God's judgments. Receiving the Antichrist's mark will distinguish the evildoers from the righteous, including

nominal Christians. When the wicked are removed, the resurrected righteous will be glorified in their Father's kingdom. The Father's kingdom is the kingship from God, the earthly messianic kingdom.

Mt 16:27 The Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory and will repay everyone according to what he has done. The righteous will be rewarded during the Messiah's reign, according to how each one faithfully served the Lord during their life. The wicked are punished initially at Armageddon and finally at the Last Judgment.

Mt 19:28 When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne *in the renewed creation*, his disciples will sit on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel. Reigning with Jesus is a reward conferred on his disciples. The renewed creation is literally 'the rebirth', as the world will be almost destroyed during the Great Tribulation. In Acts 3:21, it's called 'the restoration of all things'. Jesus gives the same promise to those who conquer during the great tribulation (Rev 3:21). They'll share in Jesus' throne (rule), just as he conquered and shares in his Father's throne.

Mt 24:27 Just as lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus' coming will be observed in the sky. Every eye will see him (Rev 1:7). It may be what Ezekiel saw in Ezekiel 43:2.

Mt 24:30-31 The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the tribes of the land will mourn (ISV, following Zech 12:12) when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He'll send out his angels with a loud trumpet blast, and they'll gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to another. These verses hardly need interpretation, but the bewildering interpretations in some commentaries make a comment necessary. The expression 'Son of Man' taken from Daniel 7:13 confirms that this is a description of the second coming. Daniel 7:14 says he'll be given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All people, nations, and people of every language will do homage to him. The elect (cf. Mt 24:22) are God's chosen ones; the righteous. This accords well with what Paul said in 1 Thess 4:15-17:

We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who have died.... The dead who are

united to the Messiah will rise first, after which we who are alive and remain will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever.

This gathering of the elect by the angels from the four corners of the earth is Jesus' picturesque way of portraying the resurrection of the righteous and the simultaneous rapture of the living saints.

Mt 26:64 Jesus told the Jewish high priest that from now on, he would see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven. Jesus brings together messianic prophecies (Ps 110:1, Dan 7:13-14), laying claim to both deity and messiahship. The Sanhedrin members would see him in these roles on judgment day.

Son of Man verses

The title 'Son of Man' was used by Jesus to show himself to be the Messiah of Daniel's prophecy. This term implies both divine pre-existence and a true humanity. In each context, it either points to the Messiah's present lowliness or his future glory. In Daniel's vision, God gives glory and the kingship of the earth to him who appears before him in human form, coming with the clouds of heaven so that all people and nations might honor him.

In the following 'Son of Man' verses, I have substituted the Son of Man with the Messiah, and added pronouns to show that Jesus was talking about himself. Those with discernment would have understood Jesus as referring to himself like that, while those who didn't believe that he was the Messiah might have thought that he was talking about someone else. Parallel verses are not repeated, and sometimes only the relevant sentence is given. I am not suggesting that Bible translations follow this format; Jesus expressed himself like this for a reason.

Mt. 8:20 Jesus said foxes have their holes and birds have their nests, as for *he, the Messiah*, he has no place to rest.

Mt 9:6 So that the scribes might know that *he, the Messiah* had authority on earth to forgive sins, he told the paralyzed man to get up, pick up his stretcher, and go home.

Mt 10:23 Jesus told his disciples that when they were persecuted in one town, they should flee to another one, because they won't finish going through the towns of Israel before he, *the Messiah* returns.

This verse implies that because of the persecution, described in 10:17-22, the towns of Israel would never be fully evangelized.

Mt 11:19 Jesus said *he, the Messiah*, came eating and drinking, and people said he was a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!

Mt 12:8 Jesus said *he, the Messiah*, is Lord of the Sabbath.

Mt 12:32 Jesus said: Whoever speaks a word against *him, the Messiah*, will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the one to come.

Mt 12:40 Jesus said, just as Jonah was in the stomach of a huge fish for three days and three nights, so *he, the Messiah*, would be in the center of the Earth for three days and three nights.

Mt 13:37 Jesus said the person who sowed good seed is *he, the Messiah*.

Mt 13:41 Jesus said, *he, the Messiah* would send his angels, and they'll gather from his kingdom all who are stumbling blocks and those who practice lawlessness.

Mt 16:27-28 Jesus said, *he, the Messiah*, would return with his angels in his Father's glory and repay everyone according to what they had done. He said some standing there would not die before they saw *him, the Messiah*, coming in his royal power.

This refers naturally to the transfiguration, which occurred six days later.

Mt 17:9 Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone about the vision until *he, the Messiah*, had been raised from death.

Mt 17:12 Jesus said Elijah had already come and people didn't recognize him and treated him as they wanted. In the same way, they would cause *him, the Messiah*, to suffer.

Mt 17:22 While they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus told them that *he, the Messiah*, would be betrayed.

Mt 19:28 Jesus said when *he, the Messiah*, sits on his glorious throne in the renewed creation, his followers will sit on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Mt 20:18 Jesus said they were going up to Jerusalem, and *he, the Messiah*, would be handed over to the high priests and scribes, and they would condemn him to death.

Mt 20:28 Jesus said that was the way it was with *him, the Messiah*. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Mt 24:27 Just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will the coming of *he, the Messiah*, be.

Mt 24:30 Then will the sign of *him, the Messiah*, appear in the sky, and all the tribes of the land will mourn as they see *him, the Messiah*, coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Mt 24:37 Just as it was in Noah's time, so it will be when *he, the Messiah*, comes.

Mt 24:39 They were unaware of what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. That's how it will be when *he, the Messiah*, appears.

Mt 24:44 So you too must be ready, because *he, the Messiah*, will come at an hour you are not expecting.

Mt 25:31 Jesus said when *he, the Messiah*, comes in his glory and all the angels are with him, he'll sit on his glorious throne.

Mt 26:2 Jesus said: You know that the Passover is in two days, and *he, the Messiah*, would be handed over to be crucified.

Mt 26:24 Jesus said *he, the Messiah*, was going away, just as it had been written about him, and woe to him by whom *he, the Messiah*, is betrayed!

Mt 26:45 Jesus told them to keep on sleeping and resting. The time was near for *him, the Messiah*, to be betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Mt 26:64 Jesus told the high priest that from then on, he would see *him, the Messiah*, seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.

Mk 8:31 Jesus began to teach them that *he, the Messiah*, would have to suffer greatly and be rejected by the Jewish leaders. He would be killed, and after three days, he would rise again.

Mk 8:38 Jesus said, if anyone is ashamed of him and his words in this adulterous and sinful generation, *he, the Messiah*, will be ashamed of that person when he comes with the holy angels in his Father's glory.

Mk 9:9 On their way down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until *he, the Messiah*, had risen from the dead.

Mk 9:12 Jesus told them that Elijah was coming first and would restore all things. Then he asked them why *he, the Messiah*, must suffer and be treated shamefully.

Mk 14:62 Jesus said: I am (*ἐγώ εἰμὶ*), and you will see *me, the Messiah*, seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.

Lk 6:22 Jesus said his disciples were blessed whenever people hated, avoided, insulted, and slandered them because of *him, the Messiah!*

Lk 11:30 Jesus said, just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so *he, the Messiah*, will be a sign to his generation.

Lk 12:8 Jesus said *he, the Messiah*, will acknowledge before the angels everyone who acknowledges him before people.

Lk 17:22 The time will come when the disciples will long to see one of the days of his reign, *he, the Messiah*, but they won't see it.

Lk 17:24 Just as lightning flashes and shines from one end of the sky to the other, so will *he, the Messiah*, be at his coming.

Lk 17:30 The day when *he, the Messiah* is revealed will be like that (sudden destruction).

Lk 18:8 Jesus asked whether, when *he, the Messiah*, comes, will he find people believing in him on Earth.

Lk 18:31 Jesus said that everything written by the prophets about *him, the Messiah*, will be fulfilled.

Lk 19:10 Jesus said *he, the Messiah*, came to seek and to save the lost.

Lk 21:36 Jesus told his disciples to be alert and pray at all times that they may be able to escape all that is about to happen and stand before *him, the Messiah*.

Lk 22:48 Jesus asked Judas if he was betraying *him, the Messiah*, with a kiss.

Lk 24:6-7 Jesus told his disciples that *he, the Messiah*, must be handed over to be crucified and rise on the third day.

Jn 1:51 Jesus told his disciples they would see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending on *him, the Messiah*.

Jn 3:13-14 Jesus said no one has gone up to heaven except him, the one who came down from heaven, *he, the Messiah* who is in heaven. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must *he, the Messiah*, be lifted up.

Jn 5:27 Jesus said God gave him the authority to judge because he is *the Messiah*.

Jn 6:27 Jesus said his disciples should not work for food that perishes but for food that lasts for eternal life, which *he, the Messiah*, will give them.

Jn 6:53 Jesus said, unless his disciples eat his flesh and drink his blood, *he, the Messiah*, they won't experience eternal life.

Jn 6:62 Jesus asked his disciples what their reaction would be if they saw *him, the Messiah*, ascending to heaven where he was before.

Jn 8:28 Jesus said: When you have lifted *me, the Messiah*, up, then you'll know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father taught me.

Jn 9:35 When Jesus heard they had thrown the beggar out, he found him and asked him if he believed in *him, the Messiah*.

Jn 12:23 Jesus told them the hour had come for *him, the Messiah*, to be glorified.

Jn 13:31-32 Jesus said that *he, the Messiah*, was now glorified, and God had been glorified by him. If God had been glorified by him, God himself also would glorify *him, the Messiah*, and he would do it quickly.