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Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

The Greek expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, usually translated “the Son of Man,” plays a key role in the christology of all four canonical Gospels. While it appears in about fifty different sayings in the New Testament, all but one of these occur in the Gospels. There the expression almost always occurs on the lips of Jesus. Since Jesus always speaks of the Son of Man in the third person, one could infer that he is referring to someone other than himself. In most of the sayings, however, it is clear that Jesus uses the phrase to refer to himself.

This expression has been a central issue in New Testament studies since the beginning of modern scholarship. Because it is used almost exclusively by Jesus, many scholars have seen it as a key to Jesus’ own self-consciousness. In the nineteenth century, for example, H. J. Holtzmann affirmed,

Nothing can be more certain than that he himself chose it as the most apt . . . to designate what was typical of his personal nature, what was characteristic of his appearance and calling. Therein is contained the entire importance of the name. (H. Holtzmann 1865: 213)

Today scholarship can no longer take for granted that Jesus actually used this expression in the way the Gospels describe. We know now that the Gospels often attribute to Jesus ideas and sayings that actually originated at a later time, in the life of the early Christian church. Even if Jesus did not use the expression, however, it remains important for understanding the origins of christology. Its frequent occurrence in the Gospel tradition shows that it represented an important strand of thought in the early Christian community. If it does not tell us about Jesus himself, it does tell us what the earliest Christians believed about him.

But what exactly does it tell us? That is the problem. The Gospels

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never explain the phrase, and though it has been the object of intensive study since the Protestant Reformation, scholars have come to no agreement on even the most basic questions concerning it. What does it mean? Where does it come from? To whom does it refer? Is it a title or not? Does it tell us something about Jesus or about the faith of the early church?

Occasionally, scholars have thought that the problem was solved. In 1906, for example, Albert Schweitzer asserted,

Broadly speaking . . . the Son-of-Man problem is both historically solvable and has been solved.

(Schweitzer [1906] 1968: 283)

The history of scholarship since Schweitzer has not vindicated his confidence. Scholars now ask whether the problem is in fact solvable.<sup>1</sup> Research in this area has been described as “a veritable mine field” (Boring 1982: 239). How far scholarship has come from Schweitzer’s view is illustrated by Reginald Fuller’s assessment of the current state of the question:

The problem of the Son of Man is a can of worms. No one can write anything about it which will command general assent or provide a definitive solution. (Fuller 1990: 721)

The failure of scholarship to provide a definitive solution to the problem does not stem from lack of effort. Scholars have proposed widely divergent theories to account for the expression, in the process creating a vast literature on the subject. As W. D. Davies remarks,

Study of the mysterious synoptic title, “the Son of man,” has become a specialized field of its own wherein scholarly discord reigns supreme . . . the ever-mushrooming literature on the Son of man offers a host of conflicting and sometimes confusing claims and counter claims.

(Davies and Allison 1988–91: 2.43)

Because of the scope and complexity of the literature, most writers on the subject survey only the most recent works or discuss only a few aspects of the problem. The need now exists for a comprehensive historical overview of the debate with an evaluation of the

<sup>1</sup> Higgins 1969; Schweizer 1975: 103. For a reply to Higgins, see Hooker 1979.

current state of the matter. This is the need that I propose to fill in this study.

### **Previous surveys of research**

Early surveys of opinion on the “Son of Man” problem appeared in commentaries, usually at Matthew 8.20, where the term first occurs in the New Testament (e.g. Wolf 1725; Köcher 1766). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wessel Scholten wrote the first major monograph devoted to the topic and gave a comprehensive survey of views from the patristic period to his own time (Scholten 1809: 141–209). At the end of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Appel could still write a comprehensive survey of this sort in twenty-seven pages (Appel 1896: 1–27). After that time, as the scholarship on the subject proliferated, scholars began to limit their surveys to the most recently published works. One exception was Mogens Müller, who wrote extensive excursuses on important aspects of the debate (M. Müller 1984a). Still, no comprehensive survey of the subject has been written in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

As the twentieth century comes to a close, the time seems appropriate to remedy that lack. The present study sketches the main lines of the debate from the patristic period to 1996. It thus supplies a guide to the complex issues and developments that have led to the current impasse.

### **Overview of the debate**

A brief overview of the “Son of Man” debate may help the reader to keep in perspective the more detailed chapters that follow.

The earliest interpretations of the expression *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* were based on the Greek form of the phrase and took “son” in a literal, genealogical sense (Chapter 1). Both patristic authors and Gnostics understood the phrase to identify Jesus as the son of some particular parent, such as Mary, Adam, or the Gnostic god Anthropos. This type of interpretation prevailed through the Middle Ages.

With the flourishing of Semitic studies after the Reformation, interpreters sought to identify the Semitic phrase that underlay the

<sup>2</sup> Surveys of research on “Son of Man” from 1725 to the present are listed in the appendix.

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Greek expression ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. They began to base their interpretations on the Semitic idioms *bar enash*, *ben adam*, or *hahu gabra*. New interpretations arose, three of which would become widespread: (1) “Son of Man” as an expression of Jesus’ humanity (without reference to a parent); (2) “Son of Man” as a messianic title derived from Daniel 7.13; (3) “son of man” as a nontitular idiom by which a man could refer to himself. Other interpretations that gained less popularity included the derivation of “Son of Man” from Ezekiel or the Psalms.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the interpretation of “Son of Man” as an expression of Jesus’ humanity predominated (Chapter 2). Interpreters usually saw an element of lowliness in the expression and sometimes contrasted the lowly humanity of this expression with Jesus’ divinity.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more and more scholars began to support the Danielic/messianic theory, until it became the dominant interpretation by the end of this period (Chapter 3). Often, however, interpreters saw a human element in the expression as well, supposing that it emphasized the humanity of the Messiah. A new perspective on the Son of Man’s humanity emphasized its superior or ideal quality rather than its lowliness. Typical interpretations of this period included “Son of Man” as the lowly human, the ideal human, the Messiah, the lowly human Messiah, and the ideal human Messiah.

In 1733 the explorer James Bruce found three Ethiopic manuscripts of 1 Enoch in Abyssinia, and translations became available in the 1820s and 1830s. In the Similitudes of 1 Enoch, scholars discovered a “son of man” that seemed to be a pre-existent heavenly being. They began to assume that Jesus took over pre-Christian apocalyptic ideas about this heavenly son of man. The human messianic Son of Man thus gave way to the heavenly messianic Son of Man (Chapter 3). This interpretation grew in popularity through the last half of the nineteenth century and predominated in the first six decades of the twentieth.

During the same period, new questions came to the fore. To whom did the expression refer: Jesus, someone other than Jesus, or some corporate entity that included Jesus (Chapter 4)? How many of the sayings went back to Jesus himself: all, some, or none (Chapter 5)? Scholars also explored a variety of other theories besides the messianic theory (Chapter 6).

The apocalyptic/messianic interpretation based on 1 Enoch came

under attack at the end of the nineteenth century and again in the last four decades of the twentieth. Various factors joined to cast in doubt the view that the title “Son of Man” or a unified Son of Man concept existed in pre-Christian Judaism (Chapter 7). At the same time, the interpretation of “son of man” as a nontitular idiom by which a man could refer to himself in the third person gained in popularity. Many scholars began to believe that Jesus used some such idiom to refer to himself and that the church subsequently misunderstood it as a messianic title derived from Daniel 7.13 (Chapter 8). Other scholars tried to revive the idea that a unified “Son of Man” concept existed in pre-Christian Judaism (Chapter 9).

At the end of the twentieth century, two interpretations predominate: the apocalyptic/messianic (in several variations) and the idiomatic/nontitular (also in several variations). Several other interpretations, however, can still be found in the literature. Progress has been made in a number of areas, and a measure of agreement has been reached on some issues (Chapter 10). Yet nineteen centuries of “Son of Man” study have led to no consensus concerning the meaning or origin of the expression. The Son of Man debate thus serves as a prime illustration of the limits of New Testament scholarship.

## 1

## GENEALOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The earliest interpreters of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου took υἱὸς (“son”) in a literal genealogical sense: for them it identified Jesus as the son of some particular parent. On the one hand, Gnostics interpreted the phrase as “the son of Anthropos (ἄνθρωπος),” Anthropos being a Gnostic god. On the other hand, early orthodox writers interpreted the phrase as “the son of the human,” identifying “the human” as Mary or Adam. After the Reformation, a few interpreters identified “the human” as Joseph.

**The son of Anthropos**

In certain Gnostic sects, such as the Ophites and Valentinians, “Anthropos” (“Man”) was the name of an “aeon” or god.<sup>1</sup> This designation apparently developed from speculation on Genesis 1.26: if “man” is made in the image of God, then God must in some sense be a primal “Man.”<sup>2</sup> In various Gnostic writings, a second god emanated from this first Man. This second god is identified as Christ and designated “son of Man” (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου), i.e. son of the god Anthropos. Some texts even refer to a third aeon called “son of son of Man”:

The first aeon, then, is that of Immortal Man. The second aeon is that of Son of Man, who is called “First Begetter” . . . The third is that of son of Son of Man, who is called “Savior.” (*Eugnostos the Blessed* III, 85.9–14; V, 13.12–13; J. M. Robinson 1990: 236)

Thus the Gnostics took “son” in a genealogical sense, identifying “Man” as a god rather than a human being.

<sup>1</sup> On the Gnostic usage, see Schenke 1962; Borsch 1970: 58–121; Colpe [1969] 1972: 474–76.

<sup>2</sup> Schenke 1962: 64–93; Borsch 1970: 117–19.

### The son of the human

While the Gnostic interpretation emphasized Christ's divine sonship, the orthodox interpretation emphasized his descent from a human parent. Patristic authors viewed "son of man" as a reference to Jesus' humanity. They related the phrase to the orthodox doctrine of Christ's two natures. Whereas "Son of God" referred to Jesus' divine nature, "son of man" referred to the human nature that he assumed in the incarnation. This contrast appears for the first time in Ignatius (d. c. 108):

you come together in one faith and in Jesus Christ, who was of the line of David according to the flesh, the son of man and Son of God (τῷ υἱῷ ἀνθρώπου καὶ υἱῷ θεοῦ).  
 (Ephesians 20.2)

The same contrast appears frequently in other patristic authors and has recurred down to modern times.<sup>3</sup>

When patristic interpreters sought to explain "son of (the) man" more explicitly, they took "son" in a genealogical sense and "the man" or "the human" as a reference to a particular person. Jesus was thus "the son of the human," with "the human" referring to either the Virgin Mary or Adam. Justin first posed these two alternatives in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 135):

He called himself "son of a human" (υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου), then, either because of his birth through a virgin (who was, as I said, of the line of David and Jacob and Isaac and Abraham) or because Adam<sup>4</sup> himself was the father of these who have been enumerated, these from whom Mary derives her descent.

(*Dialogue with Trypho* 100; MPG 6.709)

Isidore of Pelusium (d. c. 450) stated the same two alternatives,<sup>5</sup> while Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) accepted both: "It seems to me he is called . . . son of a human (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) both because of

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 2 (MPL 2.179); Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.19.1; Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio* at Luke 9.22 (CCL 120.202); Theophylactus 1631: 342 at Luke 6.5; Baeck 1937.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek text here has "Abraham," but this is generally emended to "Adam," since otherwise Abraham is said to be the father of himself.

<sup>5</sup> "Son of a human (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) – either of Adam or of the virgin, her from whom he received the flesh" (Isidore of Pelusium, *Catena* at Matt. 16.13; quoted by Appel 1896: 2).

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Adam and because of the virgin, those from whom he came – from him as from a forefather, from her as from a mother” (*Oratio* 30; MPG 36.132).

The son of Mary

Most patristic authors preferred the interpretation “son of Mary,” recognizing that *anthropos* (“human”) can refer to woman as well as man. As Irenaeus stated,

So he, the Son of God our Lord, being the Word of the Father, is also son of a human (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου), because he had his human generation from Mary – who descended from humans and who was herself a human (ἄνθρωπος) – thus becoming the son of a human (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου).

(*Adv. Haer.* 3.19.3)

Tertullian set out this position with the logic of a lawyer:

nor can he be constituted the son of a human (*filium hominis*), unless he be born from a human, either father or mother . . . Since he is from a divine Father, he is certainly not from a human one. If he is not from a human father, it follows that he must be from a human mother.<sup>6</sup>

The same interpretation appears frequently in the patristic period and through the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> In accord with this interpretation, some of the Bible translations of the Middle Ages rendered the phrase as “son of the Virgin” (N. Schmidt 1903: 4715).

The interpretation “son of Mary” continued into the Reformation period, for example in the work of Martin Luther ([1530–32] 1959: 14, 129, 161–62). Erasmus (d. 1536) was apparently the first to argue against it. He maintained that in the expression “the son of the man,” “the man” must be Adam. The reference cannot be to

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.10 (MPL 2.407). Cf. *De carne Christi* 5 (MPL 2.806–807).

<sup>7</sup> Ammonius Saccas, *Catena on John* 1.51 (J. Reuss 1966: 211, fragment 55); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1 (MPG 45.341D); Ambrose, *Ennarratio in Psalmum* 39 (MPL 14.1115D); Jerome, *Breviarium in Psalmos* on Ps. 8.4 (5) (MPL 26.888a); Augustine, *Sermo ad populum* 121.5 on John 1.14 (MPL 38.680); Cyril of Alexandria, in *Acta concilii Epheseni* (quoted by Scholten 1809: 147 and by Appel 1896: 2); Euthymius Zigabenus (c. 1100), *Evangelii secundum Matthaëum ennarratio*, on Matt. 8.20 (MPG 129.293).



Mary since the article is masculine: τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, not τῆς ἀνθρώπου.<sup>8</sup>

Though noting Erasmus' objection, some commentators of the seventeenth century continued to interpret the phrase as "the son of Mary."<sup>9</sup> Several lexicons of the eighteenth century gave the same definition.<sup>10</sup> Already dying out at the end of the eighteenth century, this interpretation practically disappeared in the nineteenth. It resurfaced in the twentieth century in the works of Clemens Henze and a few Catholic authors who followed him (Henze 1956: 73).

### The son of Adam

While most patristic authors favored "son of Mary" over "son of Adam," Athanasius opted for the latter. He equated "son of a man" with the "second Adam" of Paul:

For the Logos, crafter of the universe, appeared as son of a man (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου), not becoming some different (type of man), but a second Adam . . . So if on earth he became "son of a man" (though begotten not from the seed of a man but from the Holy Spirit), the meaning will be "son of one who is the first-formed, i.e. Adam."

(*Contra Apollinarium* 1.8; MPG 26.1105–1108)

Calvin likewise adopted the interpretation "son of Adam" (Calvin [1559] 1960: 1.477).

While patristic authors generally ignored the articles in the New Testament expression, Erasmus emphasized them. He argued that in "the son of the man," the second article indicates a particular man, Adam. Likewise, the first article points to a particular son of Adam: that exceptional son, the restorer of the human race.<sup>11</sup>

Following Erasmus, many interpreters stressed the first article: Jesus was not simply *a* son of Adam, but *the* son of Adam κατ'

<sup>8</sup> Erasmus 1705: at Matt. 8.20; 11.26 (11.19); 16.13; John 1.1. This argument from the article appears also in Pseudo-Justin (before 1583, cited by Scholten 1809: 155–56) and reappears in the commentary of Cornelius à Lapide ([1638] 1891–96: 1.338–40 at Matt. 8.20).

<sup>9</sup> Drusius 1612: at Matt. 8.20; 11.19; Del Rio 1614: pt. 1, 479–83; Mariana 1619: 927 at Matt. 8.20; 932 at Matt. 16.13.

<sup>10</sup> Rechenberg 1714: 605–606 s.v. *filii hominis*; Stock 1725: s.v. ἀνθρώπος, υἱός; J. Schwartz 1736: s.v. ἀνθρώπος, υἱός (cited by Scholten 1809: 150, 165); Schleusner [1792] 1824: 1.168–69 s.v. ἀνθρώπος, 2.909–10 s.v. υἱός.

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus (d. 1536) 1705: at Matt. 8.20; 11.26 (11.19); 16.13; John 1.1.

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ἐξοχήν (*par excellence*), the second Adam mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 15.22, 45–49).<sup>12</sup> Most inferred that the phrase identified Jesus with some particular son of Adam already mentioned in the Old Testament. They found this son of Adam especially in “the seed of the woman” who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3.15). They further identified this seed with the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12.7, 13.15), the seed promised to David (1 Sam. 7.12), the son predicted by Isaiah (Isa. 9.6), the human form seen by Ezekiel (Ezek. 1.26), and the “one like a son of man” seen by Daniel (Dan. 7.13). The “son of Adam” was thus the seed or son promised throughout the scriptures.<sup>13</sup> This line of interpretation continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>14</sup>

In the late twentieth century, the ancient patristic interpretation lived on. According to Olaf Moe, Jesus called himself “Son of the human” instead of “Son of Adam” directly, because he was thinking not only of the man Adam, but of the human being described in Genesis 1.27, created as man and woman (Moe 1960: 124). Like Erasmus, Cortés and Gatti stress the articles: “Jesus is the Son *par excellence* of the Man *par excellence*, namely the Son of Adam . . . the Descendant of Adam” (Cortés and Gatti 1968: 472).

Similarly, Ragnar Leivestad suggested that Paul’s expression “the second, the last Adam” gives the proper interpretation of Jesus’ self-designation. Jesus designated himself *ben adam* in contrast to *ben David* in order to indicate that his messiahship extended to humanity, not just Israel (Leivestad 1968: 102–103; 1971/72: 267). Later, Leivestad withdrew this suggestion, terming it “wishful thinking” (1982: 251).

Fritz Neugebauer (1974/75), John Bowman (1989), and Robert Funk (1996: 89–94) have also advocated the interpretation “Son of Adam.” Bowman suggests that Jesus may have called himself “Son of Adam” in order to identify himself as the Messiah, since in Jewish thought the spirit of Adam would be in the Messiah. Funk

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Heinsius [1639] 1640: 34 at Matt. 8.20.

<sup>13</sup> Lightfoot 1675: at Matt. 16.13; Gaillard 1684 (summarized by Köcher 1766: 191 and Scholten 1809: 202–203); Lampe 1724–26 (quoted by Scholten 1809: 204–205); Bengel [1742] 1893: 1.171–72 at Matt. 16.13; Lange 1743: 2.31 at Matt. 8.20; 2.32 at Matt. 9.6; 2.41 at Matt. 12.6; Elsner 1767–69: at Matt. 12.8; Michaelis [1773–90] 1790–92: 1.111 at Matt. 8.20; Morus 1796: at John 12.34 (summarized by Scholten 1809: 200).

<sup>14</sup> Cremer [1867] 1895: 559–60 s.v. υἱός; Gess 1870: 182–94; Wörner 1882: 39–51; Grau 1887: 178–218; Bard [1908] <sup>2</sup>1915; Gottsched 1908: 22–24; Badham 1911.