

The Son of Man Debate

A History and Evaluation

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>

40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>

10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Times 10/12 pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Burkett, Delbert Royce.

The Son of Man debate: a history and evaluation / Delbert Burkett.

p. cm. – (Society for New Testament Studies. Monograph series; 107)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0 521 66306 7 (hb)

1. Son of Man – History of doctrines. I. Title. II. Series: Monograph series (Society for New Testament Studies); 107.

BT232.B87 1999

232'.1–dc21 99–19515 CIP

ISBN 0 521 66306 7 hardback

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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.¹ 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.”² 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.

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

² 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.³

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" (υἷὸν 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 Adam⁴ 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,⁵ while Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) accepted both: "It seems to me he is called . . . son of a human (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) both because of

³ 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.

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

⁵ "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).

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.⁶

The same interpretation appears frequently in the patristic period and through the Middle Ages.⁷ 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

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

⁷ 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 enarratio*, on Matt. 8.20 (MPG 129.293).

Mary since the article is masculine: τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, not τῆς ἀνθρώπου.⁸

Though noting Erasmus' objection, some commentators of the seventeenth century continued to interpret the phrase as "the son of Mary."⁹ Several lexicons of the eighteenth century gave the same definition.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

⁸ 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).

⁹ 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.

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

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

ἐξοχήν (*par excellence*), the second Adam mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 15.22, 45–49).¹² 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.¹³ This line of interpretation continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴

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

¹² E.g. Heinsius [1639] 1640: 34 at Matt. 8.20.

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ Cremer [1867] 1895: 559–60 s.v. υἱός; Gess 1870: 182–94; Wörner 1882: 39–51; Grau 1887: 178–218; Bard [1908] ²1915; Gottsched 1908: 22–24; Badham 1911.

even uses “son of Adam” to translate Daniel 7.13, where the Aramaic expression is not *adam* but *enash*.

The son of Joseph

With the Reformation, a new genealogical interpretation appeared. According to Pseudo-Justin (before 1583), when Jesus called himself “the son of the man,” he meant “the son of Joseph.” He identified himself as such not because Joseph was his true father, but because Joseph as his guardian was called his father (cited by Scholten 1809: 155–56).

Christoph August Heumann (1740) gave a more complex theory relating the phrase to Joseph. In Heumann’s view, Jesus’ enemies contemptuously referred to his low social standing by calling him “son of the man” in the sense “son of the plebeian.”¹⁵ By “the plebeian” they referred to Joseph, whom they did not consider worthy of naming. Jesus picked up their expression, using it as if to say “He whom you call *the son of the man* and despise because of the humility of his person.”

While these interpreters retained the idea of Jesus’ virgin birth, E. I. C. Walter (1791) took “son of the man” to mean that Jesus actually was the son of Joseph, a view previously held by certain Jewish writers.¹⁶

Evaluation

These genealogical interpretations have been justly criticized. If the expression meant “son of the human,” indicating descent from Mary or Joseph, why would Jesus so frequently emphasize that he was born of a human being when none of his hearers had any doubt of this (Scholten 1809: 149)? If the phrase meant “son of Adam,” it would have to indicate some special son of Adam to distinguish this son from all the rest. But such a particular son cannot be found in Genesis 3.15, which refers not to the seed of Adam but to the seed of woman. Furthermore, the New Testament never refers to Genesis 3.15 (Beyschlag 1894: 1.60–62).

¹⁵ Heumann 1740 (summarized by Köcher 1766: 191 and Scholten 1809: 157–58). This interpretation presupposes that *adam* in Hebrew refers to a man of the lower classes, an erroneous idea that will be discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁶ Walter 1791 (summarized by Scholten 1809: 158–60). Jewish authors cited by Münster 1537: 70.

Genealogical interpretations proceed from the Greek form of the expression, which very naturally yields a genealogical sense. The earliest interpreters, who spoke Greek as their native language, unanimously saw in the Greek phrase a filial relation between a son and a parent. What these interpreters did not recognize was the possibility that a Semitic expression underlay the Greek. As we shall see, it was this recognition more than anything else that caused the genealogical interpretation to fall out of favor.