

THE SON OF MAN

By Jim Seghers

Jesus described himself with the mysterious title “the Son of Man” eighty-eight times in the New Testament. No one else addressed him with this title. At one level “the Son of Man” captures Jesus’ human nature, because that expression was a Semitic way of identifying the numerous limitations of human nature: “How much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!” (Job 25:6). This title reminds us that in becoming fully human Jesus stripped himself of his glory and emptied himself to be one of us.

Indeed, Jesus goes beyond merely taking on human nature because he fully embraces our humiliation by identifying with sinful men and women. This is evident in the touching way Jesus connects his status as the Son of Man with his mission of redemptive suffering. I will only cite one example, but give you other citations for your reflection:

“The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day” (Mt 17:22-23; See also: Mt 12:40; 17:12; 20:18; Mk 9:31; 10:33; Lk 9:44; 18:31).

Jesus not only identified the Son of Man with “Anointed One” of Daniel 7:13 who is “cut off” [killed] in Daniel 9:26, but he also connected him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52-53. Humiliation, suffering and death were the necessary prelude to Jesus’ exaltation and enthronement in heaven. After he fully embraced that shame, abasement, and grief of his passion and death, the Risen Christ never again used that title because humanity was redeemed.

St. Paul eloquently captures these ideas in his moving exhortation that we should imitate Jesus’ self-sacrificing humility. Imagine how our marriages and families would be transformed if we followed the Apostle’s urgent counsel!

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5-8).

There is, however, another important dimension to the title, “Son of Man” that is worth exploring. It is found in Daniel’s vision:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and is kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14).

Here the Son of Man is presented as a Messianic figure possessing divine qualities. In the Jewish apocryphal writing of *1 Enoch* the Son of Man is presented as a powerful king

who will come at the end of time to judge humanity. His essential four roles are to judge, to be the Anointed One, to be a Light to the Gentiles, and to be the Righteous One.

Let's go back to the quotation from Daniel to consider another aspect of its message. It speaks of the Son of Man *coming*. Where is he coming? Does this passage refer to Jesus' first coming when he assumed human nature, or does it refer to Jesus' second coming when he will judge the living and the dead? The answer, I believe, is neither! Daniel makes it clear that the Son of man is coming *to* the Father, "the Ancient of Days" in paradise where he is "presented *before* him" (Dan 7:13). Clearly, this is a prophecy of Jesus' ascension to the Father in glory where he is recognized as the victor over sin and death. Then he is given what is rightfully his, God's Kingdom.

This understanding also fits Jesus' reply to the Caiaphas during his trial before the Sanhedrin:

"And the high priest said to him, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter *you will see* the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven (Mt 26:63-64).

The Sanhedrin certainly understood Jesus' meaning:

"Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, 'He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?' They answered, 'He deserves death'" (Mt 26:65-66).

Jesus' response raises an interesting question. When did Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin "see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven"? Jesus was citing Daniel 7:13-14. The Son of Man's coming took place in heaven, but Caiaphas is in Jerusalem. So while Christ's actual coming took place in Paradise, Jesus affirms that members of the Sanhedrin would witness convincing evidence of his coming in power in Jerusalem. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said something quite similar:

"Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Mt 16:28).

Clearly, the event Jesus is alluding to cannot be in the distant future. What we are looking for, then, is a dramatic public event when Jesus comes in judgment that shows his victorious rule. Daniel's vision gives us the interpretative clue we are searching.

The Son of Man's depiction as coming "with the clouds of heaven" (Dan 7:13) highlights the purpose of his advent. "The clouds" do not describe unique cloud formations, but the glory cloud, which is a sign of God's glory, power, and judgment. Isaiah declared:

"The Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence" (Isa 19:1-2).

So it happened that God came in the form of the Assyrian army to judge the false idols of Egypt (Isa 20:1-6). God's judgment against Egypt came in the form of killing, pillaging, and conquering.

The members of the Sanhedrin fancied themselves as Jesus' judge, but he will judge them and they will live to experience that judgment. The public event that vindicated the coming of Jesus in victory and judgment was the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Just as God judged Egypt with the Assyrian army and judged Babylon with the conquering Medo-Persians so, too, Christ judged Jerusalem and the Temple with Roman legions.

Jesus predicted that event:

“For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you . . . and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; *because you did not know the time of your visitation*” (Lk 19:42-44).

Christianity, however, is not a religion without a temple. On the contrary, Jesus is the Temple (Mt 12:6), which was destroyed in death and was gloriously raised in the Resurrection. St. Paul explained that incorporation into the Body of Christ means incorporation into this all holy Temple that is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22). This union is so unique that the bodies of Christians are also God's tabernacle (1 Cor 6:19).

The Son of Man has come in judgment many times as he did in 70 A.D. Civilizations come and go, so do men. The guaranteed way for any civilization to achieve mere footnote status in history is to reject God by defining good as evil and evil as good. Then a people have racing down the slippery slope of self-destruction. It's a wise practice to reflect on the wisdom of Psalm 127:1:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

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