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THE SON OF MAN

ONE of the most enigmatical designations of the Person of the Saviour, and one which occurs with remarkable frequency in the Gospel narratives, is the descriptive phrase "the Son of Man". It has the force of a title or descriptive appellation, and is generally applied to Christ in the New Testament only by Himself,¹ involving the use for the first time of the definite article. The phrase finds a place in the Synoptic Gospels in some forty separate instances, and is used with considerable difference of meaning from time to time. The title is employed by Christ with reference to supremacy and power on the one hand, and also to weakness, humiliation and suffering in connection with His earthly labours.

The expression seems to be invested with no small amount of theological significance for the whole of His ministry, and appears to be particularly related to the thought of His status as the Messiah. In that sense it would seem to be employed by Christ to emphasise the uniqueness of His mission on earth, whilst at the same time being sufficiently symbolical to counteract any possibility of unwelcome literal connotations being imposed upon His conception of Messiahship.

The theological antecedents of the term are most probably to be found in the two parallel lines of prophecy pointing to the person of the Messiah in the Old Testament. One of these portrays for us the ideal king, whom the prophets invest with all the regal characteristics of the most notable of Hebrew princes, frequently ascribing to the Messiah the title of David,² who was, in the mind of Israel, the traditional and ideal kingly authority. The elegance and glory of the Messianic kingdom is appraised in similar language.³

The other, however, gives us the picture of the ideal prophet or suffering servant of Jehovah, having some relationship to Israel by whom he is rejected,⁴ and from whom he is to be distinguished.

¹ One exception to this is to be found in the last utterance of the martyr Stephen in Acts vii. 56. The voice of the multitude in John xii. 34 may be taken as echoing the use of the title by Christ on a previous occasion.

² Jer. xxx. 9; Hos. iii. 5.

³ Isa. lx. 15 ff.; lxii. 1 ff.; cf. lx. 6 f.; lxvi. 23.

⁴ Isa. liii. 3 ff.

A synthesis of these ideas results from the meeting of all prophetic, poetical and eschatological sources in the person of the King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who in order that He might be able to come in triumph as the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven with the angels, suffered as the Messiah for the sins of humanity. The current idea of the Messiah was that of a humanly born King of the house of David, who should redress ancient grievances and lord it over former enemies as the head of an earthly kingdom established by force of arms.

But this conception of Messiahship was subtly transformed by Christ through His emphasis on the aspect of suffering which was to be a necessary element in the establishing of His Kingdom and His supreme reign. On not a few occasions the phrase "the Son of Man" is used in direct connection with such suffering, but if one may judge from the way in which it was received, it served effectively to conceal the Messiahship of Christ until such times as He should desire to give plain teaching about His status and forthcoming sufferings. To proclaim Himself openly as the Messiah would be to invite a resurgence of popular Messianic ideas which in essence and content were the very antithesis of His kingdom to be founded on the compelling power of Divine Love. But by the mystical use of a title which in its personal application was new and distinctive, the Saviour was able to conceal effectively His true spiritual office and destiny, whilst at the same time remaining true to His consciousness of particular mission in the plan of God for human salvation. The public use of the title, therefore, would suggest that in the popular mind the phrase "the Son of Man" was not unduly associated with the personality of the Messiah as such, though its frequent occurrence in the teaching of Christ may well have caused His hearers to ponder on its significance, as for example in John xii. 34, "Who is this son of man?"

But even more interesting than the meaning which Christ attached to the title is the source from which it was derived. The retranslation of the phrase into Aramaic, in an attempt to reproduce the actual words in the language thought to have been spoken by our Lord, raises intriguing issues of considerable complexity. In the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament, the phrase "sons of man", or "sons of men", that is to say, without the definite article, is generally represented by *bnê 'ādhām* or *bnê hā'ādhām*, and as the noun *'ādhām* would suggest, it is used to

signify mankind as a whole. The expression *ben-'ādhām*, "son of man" in the sense of an individual of the genus *Homo* occurs occasionally in poetry, though predominantly in prose.¹

But *'ādhām* in this sense is not found in Aramaic, being replaced by *'ēnāsh* or simply *nāsh*, or, in the definite sense, *'ēnāshā* and *nāshā*. The Syriac expression *bar nashā* as a rendering of "man" is very common, and is paralleled by the decay of force in the Aramaic phrase, where the word *bar*, "son of", became weakened in process of time to the point of extinction, so that as an equivalent of *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*, the phrase *bar 'enāsh* merely signified *ἄνθρωπος* or *homo*, rather than *ἀνὴρ* or *vir*.

In such Aramaic fragments of that time as may possibly reflect the Galilean dialect used by Christ, the expression "the son of man" has not been preserved, so that any attempt to argue from the phrase as being equivalent to "the ordinary human being" is somewhat precarious. The meaning with which it was invested by Christ was, in fact, anything but this.

The title is found in the Old Testament in an interesting connection in Daniel vii. 13, where the Biblical Aramaic is *kē-bar 'ēnāsh*, whilst the LXX has *ὡς υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου*, and the R.V. translates, "like unto a son of man". The R.V. rendering is obviously correct in emphasising the "human being" as opposed to the brute forms mentioned earlier on in the chapter. According to the interpretation of the vision given to Daniel by "one of them that stood by",² the kingdom was to be received by "the saints of the Most High",³ rather than "one like unto a son of man", so that a Messianic interpretation is precluded by the understanding of "the saints of the Most High" as the idealised populace of Israel. Though Christ may have reflected the phraseology of the passage in Daniel when He spoke to the High Priest of "the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven",⁴ that is rather different from an assertion that the phrase "the Son of Man" was actually derived from that place.

In a first century B.C. work, the "Similitudes" (chapters xxxvii-lxxi) of Enoch (c. 94-79 B.C.), the author is described as being transported to the celestial sphere in a vision, where he sees

¹ Cf. Ezek. ii. 1 ff.; iii. 1 ff.; Dan. viii. 17.

² Dan. vii. 16.

³ Dan. vii. 18.

⁴ Mark xiv. 62; cf. Matt. xxvi. 64; Luke xxii. 69; and cf. Matt. xxiv. 30b; Mark xiii. 26; Luke xxi. 27.

the Almighty, who is described as the "Head of Days" in company with the Messiah, whom succeeding verses designate as "that son of man", "the son of man", and "this son of man".¹ This superhuman being, reflecting the content of Daniel vii, is chosen by the Lord of spirits, and will depose kings from their thrones.² He will further be the light of the Gentiles and a staff to the righteous. He was chosen and hidden before the Lord of spirits before the creation of the world, and for evermore. He is identical with the Messiah, and the Elect One who sits on the throne of God, which is also the throne of the Son of man from which He will judge the world.³

It is scarcely probable that Christ derived the term from the "Similitudes" of Enoch, though He may have known of the existence of the book if Jude did.⁴ In any case, the magnitude of the apocalyptic vision all accorded with one aspect of the claim as Son of Man who ". . . had not where to lay his head".⁵ It must also be remembered that despite early Messianic interpretations of the term, Christ could still use it with safety, since the implied contrast was too great to admit of the identification of Himself with the Messiah, a contingency which He was endeavouring to avoid continually. In addition, the "Similitudes" take no cognisance of the humiliation and suffering of the Son of man, merely concentrating upon His exalted position as ruler and judge.

In the Book of Ezekiel, however, we find the phrase "the son of man" used many times with reference to human weakness as contrasted with Divine strength, and also to glory and dominion. In Ezekiel i. 26 there is seated on the likeness of the throne, "a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above", who begins to converse with the prophet, addressing him as "son of man". By this Ezekiel is related as a man to his earthly mission, but also to his destiny in that he stands in intimate relationship to the "appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord".

It may well be that Christ was influenced by the standpoint of the Book of Ezekiel to the extent that His use of the term signified to His mind that He was a man, living in time as a creature does, and liable to suffering; but on the other hand holding an unparalleled position in relation to the Godhead which far transcended the associations of Ezekiel,⁶ and which included the

¹ 1 Enoch xlvii. 2 ff.

² Ibid. xlvi. 4.

³ Ibid. lxii. 2 ff.

⁴ Cf. Jude 14.

⁵ Matt. viii. 20 ; cf. Luke ix. 58.

offices of ruler and judge of men. The title appears to be at once non-committal, and yet highly significant in that when Christ used it the phrase served as a mere skeleton which became a living entity when used to express His glory consequent upon humiliation as an ideal and representative human being. He used the term to express the solidarity of the human race, and to demonstrate Himself as an accredited member thereof in regard to His perfect humanity. In Him human nature was realised to the full, and in glory after suffering was brought into direct relation with the Godhead. But as Westcott points out, "the expression which describes the self-humiliation of Christ raises Him at the same time immeasurably above all those whose nature He had assumed".¹

While it is evident that the disciples did not comprehend the meaning of the phrase nor the significance of its usage, it is equally true that they came to appreciate the depth of meaning it conveyed as a vehicle for expressing the idea of the human sufferer glorified after death. "He is in perfect sympathy with every man of every age and every nation. All that truly belongs to humanity, all therefore that truly belongs to every individual in the human race belongs also to Him."²

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¹ *Comm. on John*, p. 35.

² Westcott, *ibid.*, p. 35.